Forget Me Not: The Lives, Careers, and Legacies of Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the lives and careers of Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford and their contributions to Hollywood. Both actresses were popular in the golden age of Hollywood, but only one woman's career is remembered today. Joan Crawford is remembered for her roles in films like *Mildred Peirce* and *Whatever Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* While Shearer is rarely written about for her daring films of the early 1930s. Both contemporaries at the studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer these women had ambition and sex appeal and both brought in millions for the studio. By referencing film scholars such as Jeannine Basinger, Lawrence Quirk, and Gavin Lambert, this project looks into why some women are forgotten and why some become icons even with a checkered personal history. The personal history of Shearer and Crawford is explored for reasons that one is remembered and the other is not. In addition, the influence of the studio system at Metro Golden Meyer is explored as a determiner of women's careers. Magazines such as *Photoplay* and personal letters are used as primary sources to show how the studio shaped these women's careers, and how they themselves shaped and responded to studio influences.

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Introduction

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent." - Madeleine Albright.[1] Women today are having an important historical moment with the Me Too and Time's Up movements. Me Too is helping women and men speak out against their sexual abusers and making resources readily available to victims. Time's Up was started by women in Hollywood. According to the Time's up website, "TIME'S UP is an organization that insists on safe, fair and dignified work for women of all kinds."[2] This organization is fighting for fair rights for women in the workplace and has even set up a legal defense fund to help women in legal battles against unfair work situations. Time's Up was also created to encourage journalists to ask actresses more than what designers they are wearing during interviews. Women are fighting back and letting their voices be heard after centuries of being quieted. Me Too became the hashtag that swept social media with millions of women and men telling their stories about the sexual abuse they had endured. The most prolific of these stories were from the victims of Harvey Weinstein. Weinstein was a major film producer from the 1970's to 2017, he even started his own production company in 2005. The films he helped produce were big winners during awards season, with the actors and actresses in the films winning major awards as well. Then in 2017, accusations against Weinstein started coming out regarding his sexual abuse against women in the industry. Many actresses came forward with stories of him abusing his power, offering them roles in films in exchange for sexual favors. Often times if the woman rejected him, he would blacklist them from getting work again. It's hard not to look at Weinstein and not see a resemblance to Louis B. Mayer. Mayer was known to be harsh on his actors and

[1] Samantha Ettus, "Inspiring Quotes from 100 Extraordinary Women," Huffington Post, December 6, 2017, huffingtonpost.com.
[2] "About TIME'S UP," Time's Up, timesupnow.com.

especially on his actresses. If they did anything he did not like—on screen or in their personal lives--he would punish them by giving them bad roles or not even giving them work at all. Thus, it seems, the cycle of manipulative, abusive behavior has been going on since the creation of Hollywood, but it is only now becoming socially acceptable to speak up about. While women today are finding their voices, women in the golden age of Hollywood were not allowed to have their own.

Louis B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, ran his studio like the machine it was, bringing in young men and women with potential, chewing them up, and spitting them out if they did not measure up to his standards. They had to have a special spark and the perseverance to become a durable star. During this time in the studio's history, stars were created, and the actual people becoming them were often reborn through intensive physical transformations and name changes. The studio heads ruled over their contract players and controlled almost every aspect of their lives. Louis B. Mayer used his control to create an empire of stars, and his tough as nails attitude became his legacy. Why is the image of a tough businessman his legacy and not the brutal nature he possessed?

Mayer crushed dreams and did it with a smile; if someone got on his bad side, he would discipline them by destroying their career, or forcing them to do work they did not want to do. For example, Mayer would loan out stars to other studios if they had bad attitudes or were caught having affairs with an unfit or married partner.[3] Mayer had a hand in creating the legacies of all the actors and actresses that passed through his office. He also controlled, to some degree, whether audiences today remember them or not. Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford are two actresses that worked closely with Mayer in the early days at MGM. Both actresses started out in

[3] Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 61.

silent film and successfully transitioned into sound in the late 1920s/early 1930s. Because of the momentous transitions like sound and the Production Code that occurred in the film industry during their careers, their careers were two of the most interesting at MGM.

These two women are important and interesting to compare because they were contemporaries at MGM, both glamourous superstars. Shearer was the sexy, graceful, and honorable "first lady of film" while Crawford was the crass, beautiful, adaptable film star that audiences loved. Crawford's career spanned multiple decades while Shearer's lasted only two. These women are significant to understanding women's experiences not only in the film industry but also as it was portrayed in film. They both won an Academy Award, and both were wildly successful during their careers. For all the success and popularity both received, only one is remembered as an important actress of her day, Joan Crawford. Crawford had a tumultuous career and personal life and is often remembered for her diva like antics on set. Shearer on the other hand was married to MGM producer Irving Thalberg and had an easier time during her career. Rarely does one read about any diva behavior from Shearer, but that might be contributed to the lack of work written on her. She has been forgotten like many actresses of early Hollywood. It is baffling as to why. She had a robust career, was a leader in playing women who did not suffer fool-hearted men, and she was, debatably, a great actress. So how do women in Hollywood become forgotten in modern film history? This thesis will attempt to look at these two women's lives and careers, and the men around them who helped create and shape their legacies. It will attempt to show that no matter how independent these women seemed to be, there were men in their lives who affected their careers in some way.

Chapter One

A Literary Look at Two Actresses

Norma Shearer

"Don't run away from things. Don't hide. Get out in the middle of life, and if the wind blows you over - pick yourself up again. Make your own mistakes and learn by them."[1] – *A Free Soul.* This line comes from one of the numerous films of Norma Shearer, a wildly popular actress during the times of the Studio System in the 1930s-1940s. Her career started in the early 1920s in silent film, and she gracefully transitioned into film with sound or talkies. Shearer's films, before the Hays Code of 1934, were, at the time, considered scandalous. She portrayed sexually liberated, independent women who had no problem sleeping with other men to get back at an unfaithful husband, as in *The Divorcee* (1930).[2] The Hays Code (the Code) changed the way Hollywood created films. Studios could no longer make films that portrayed immoral subjects, such as adultery, in a favorable light. Films were to reinforce more traditional values which put women in roles that portrayed them as good wives, daughters, and mothers. Once the Code took effect, Norma Shearer's movie roles became much more conservative, and she retired from film in 1942. Today, when critics talk about the Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s-1960s) and the actresses that are often remembered for their work during this period, Norma Shearer typically doesn't make the list while actresses like Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Ginger Rogers are almost always listed. The legacy of Norma Shearer has been written about through the decades, but from the 1990s onward, as third wave feminism focused on the power of female sexual

[1] *A Free Soul*, directed by Clarence Brown (Burbank: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1931), DVD.
[2] *The Divorcee*, directed by Robert Z. Leonard (Burbank: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1930), DVD.

liberation, scholars became more focused on the significance of her pre-Hays-Code career and the reasons this code was a cause in the demise of her career.

In the 1970s there was little scholarship written about Norma Shearer possibly because she was still alive. David Shipman, a British film historian, wrote numerous books over the course of his career including the trilogy of *The Great Movie Stars.* The first volume was *The Golden Years,* followed by *The International Years,* and the trilogy concluded with *The Independent Years*.[3] Because of his knowledge of movies and celebrities, Shipman has become a notable and very important author in film scholarship. In *Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years* (1970), Shipman chronicles the lives and careers of many actors and actresses who were at the height of their careers before World War II. In Shipman's 576-page book, he offers just four pages on Norma Shearer's career and discusses it in a rather unfavorable light. The other actors and actress' receive either the same amount of pages or more depending on popularity. He quotes Robert Morley as saying, "Her voice wasn't particularly pleasing, and she was by no means a good actress but her determination was, if anything, the greater."[4] Shipman adds, "This is an assessment considerably at odds with the contemporary image of Shearer: the epitome of glamor, of femininity, of beauty."[5] He mentions her lack of talent and beauty twice during his assessment, which shows his bias because she was a very popular actress in her day. Her films routinely brought in large returns for the studio and she was frequently written about in fan magazines. While he briefly writes on the roles Shearer took, he also writes about her marriage to MGM's head producer Irving Thalberg as a boost to her career. While her marriage may have

[3] "David Shipman, 63, A Movie Historian with Reels of Love," *The New York Times,* May 5, 1996, http://nytimes.com/.
[4] Robert Morley, *Robert Morley: A Reluctant Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1967), quoted in David Shipman, *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1970), 488.
[5] Ibid.

helped her career, Shipman implies that she had a career only because of Thalberg instead of crediting Shearer with talent and beauty. Shipman states that *A Free Soul* was successful because audiences wanted to see her co-star Clark Gable "knock her around."[6] His criticism focuses on her relationships with her husband and her co-stars and doesn't address her body of work. While he does cite biographies and autobiographies as well as numerous magazines and newspapers from the time, he lacks concrete sources from Shearer herself. Instead, it seems that he just expands on what Robert Morley had written in his biography. Shipman may treat Shearer's career in this way because society was not yet ready to accept her powerful sexuality.

Another book from the 1970s is *The Films of Norma Shearer* (1976) by Jack Jacobs and Myron Braum. Unlike Shipman, Jacobs and Braum focuses solely on Norma Shearer and her career. The book begins with a short biography and then becomes a filmography complete with contemporary magazine and newspaper reviews of her films. The difference between this book and Shipman's is that Jacobs and Braum credit Shearer's success to her talent rather than her marriage. In fact, a story in the biography section says that while Shearer was auditioning for a part in the film *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1929), her husband, Thalberg, as well as other heads of the studio needed to be convinced of her ability to star in what would be her first talkie film. A screen test was set up in secret. "Seven executives, including Thalberg," Jacobs and Braum state, "saw the test in the projection room and were pleasantly surprised at the results."[7] This story gives credit to Norma Shearer's acting ability and shows that even her husband was skeptical at times in casting her in films and shows that Shearer could get roles based on her acting ability. The authors also touch on her pre-Code sexual liberation stating:

[6] David Shipman, *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1970), 490.
[7] Jack Jacobs and Myron Braum, *The Films of Norma Shearer* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1976), 29.

> It was also Brown [Clarence Brown, director of *A Free Soul]* who had Shearer disrobe for the first time in her film career in *A Free Soul.* He wanted to achieve a certain eroticism in a scene that takes place in Gabel's lavish apartment where she has been living as his mistress and had her seated on a sofa with her thighs and legs fully exposed. It was a slight form of nudity then, but Miss Shearer projected a sexuality that raised the temperature of audiences.[8]

This is an important observation because Shearer's career was most popular pre-Code, before 1934, where she could take scandalous roles and portray powerful women. It is also important because after the Code went into effect, Shearer's popularity, while still high, would never reach the same height again as it was pre-Code. This book is an important work when studying Norma Shearer because it appears to be the first book written solely on Shearer and her career. Sources are citied within the text and seem to be primarily first-hand accounts taken from fan magazines and newspapers. These sources could have been primarily used for the film marketing and audience reviews of her films. Jacobs and Braum may paint Shearer's work in a more attractive light because the authors were not constrained by academic preconceptions of what a female star's career should be.

The 1980s, like the 1970s, provided little scholarship on Norma Shearer. There seems to only be one book written where she is mentioned, which is Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era.* This book focuses solely on the different movie studios such as MGM, Universal, and Warner Bros., from the 1920s through the 1940s. Schatz seems to focus on the men running the studio systems and not the stars; thus, Norma Shearer is mentioned just a handful of times. He focuses on the marriage of Irving Thalberg and

[8] Ibid., 32.

Shearer, saying, "By the early 1930s, Irving Thalberg's marriage to Norma Shearer was consuming an increasing amount of his time and energy."[9] This comment portrays Shearer negatively (she takes up Thalberg's time). Schatz fails to go into detail about why she was taking up his time (she was staring in movies he was producing). He also talks negatively about Shearer's career choices, writing, "…Shearer was becoming more selective and difficult to cast."[10] Schatz also comments on the decline of other actresses' careers such as Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford. Schatz casted them as "difficult" because they wouldn't take the roles the studios offered them when these women were top earners and deserved to pick what roles they wanted. With a focus on the studios rather than celebrities, this work reflects male biased culture against women. *The Genius of the System* shows a shift towards a focus on just the industry and studio heads and little focus on the female stars that were impacted by them.

In the 1990s scholars started to show more interest in Norma Shearer and her career. There was another biography written about her as well as other books about the studio system and at least one book dedicated to pre-Code Hollywood films which mention Shearer. In 1990, Gavin Lambert published his biography, *Norma Shearer: A Life.* His biography on Shearer is the first and only full-length biography written from the perspective of a Hollywood insider, not a critical academic. Shearer passed away six years before this book was published, so the author might have felt freer to write critically of her life. The biography details Shearer's early life in Canada to her final days in California. Lambert writes about Shearer's career pre-Code in the same way that Jacobs and Braum did saying "The instant success of *The Divorcee* had established her as a star on the crest of a new and powerful sexual wave."[11] This quote

[9] Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 101.
[10] Ibid., 362.
[11] Gavin Lambert, *Norma Shearer: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 133.

acknowledges how Shearer used her sexuality to drive her career before the Hays Code. Her characters had agency and were able to choose to have sex with men without becoming a sexual object. Lambert writes about Shearer differently than the previous three authors. He writes about her marriage to Thalberg saying, "For nine years the most important choices of her life had been dictated by a quietly compulsive manufacturer of illusions with one foot in the grave. Since his heart attack at the end of 1932 she had spent much of her time in Irving's shadow, and he clearly expected Norma Shearer to remain there after his death."[12] Lambert portrays Thalberg as a controlling man who decided her every move. This version of her marriage is different from the one portrayed in earlier books because Shearer is shown as a woman who didn't have a choice and almost as a victim of her domineering husband where others portrayed her as the controlling one. This book is a great addition to the works on Norma Shearer because it is the most in-depth work on her life and career. It differs from previous works because it is more focused on her life unlike *The Films of Norma Shearer* that focused more on her film career and different from the books that focus on the studios. This book also shows a shift in how a female star can be talked about. Shearer is seen as a victim of her husband rather than as a hindrance to him. This work might be influenced by Lambert's friendship with Shearer. He writes glowingly about the first time he ever met her in a Hollywood restaurant.

Ronald L. Davis's *The Glamour Factory* (1993) is another 1990s text to discuss Shearer. This book is reminiscent of the previous books which focused on the studio system, but while the other books focused on the major players in the studios, this book goes more in depth into the music, costuming, film editing, and other aspects of film making by focusing on the supporting players in the film industry. Shearer is only mentioned a handful of times in this work, and when

[12] Ibid., 242.

she is mentioned, it is in reference to different aspects of film making and how she worked with different departments in the Hollywood system. This text does not go in depth about the actors and actresses. When writing about the head costumer at MGM, Adrian (no last name given), Davis says, "At Metro he gowned Garbo, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Jeanette MacDonald, and Kathrine Hepburn."[13] Although her name is mentioned in a quick reference, the sentence still holds importance because being paired with actresses that contemporary audiences still remember, like Hepburn and Crawford, shows that Shearer was a popular actress in her day, and places her in the same categories as well-known stars of the 1930s.

In 1998, Andrew Sarris wrote *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet.* Sarris was an American film critic who promoted auteur theory in the United States—the French theory that only one person controls all aspects of a work, specifically the director.[14] His book focuses on film and television from 1927, the birth of the talkies, to 1949, the beginning of the decline of the studio system. His section on Shearer is incredibly enlightening as it shows Sarris' patriarchal stance. Discussing why Shearer could be such an overlooked star, he writes, about her looks and her marriage to Thalberg instead of her acting abilities. He seems to conflate a physical flaw, her eyes, with what he sees as Thalberg's care taking of her career, which also seems to be her flaw, reducing her to a body to be manipulated—a typical patriarchal stance. He then goes on to write "And so Norma Shearer represents something that is gone forever, and no one is particularly interested in reviving it. Even if one were to develop a taste for such dated sentiment, there would be much more interesting people to remember even on the second line of soulful icons…"[15] Sarris' evaluation of Shearer resembles the patriarchal manipulation that MGM did to all its female

[13] Ibid., 214.
[14] Richard Brody, "Andrew Sarris and the "A" Word," *The New York Times,* June 20, 2012, http://nytimes.com/.
[15] Ibid., 422.

stars. These women were valued through their looks first and talent second. Throughout his assessment of Shearer, he criticizes everything from her performance in films to her looks. This is not an objective review of Shearer but is still an important work in her historiography. It shows the author's patriarchal bias towards Shearer because of her marriage. This patriarchal lens may be a reason so few film historians wrote on her during this time period.

The last book to be written that includes Shearer in the 1990s was Mark A. Vieira's *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* published in 1999. This book would be the start of a new wave of interest in Norma Shearer and her pre-Code career. Vieira is a photographer who has written many books on classic Hollywood; he also helped guest-curate the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences exhibition on Irving Thalberg.[16] *Sin in Soft Focus* is all about pre-Code Hollywood. It looks into films from 1930-1935 and discusses the careers of many actors and actresses, focusing quite a bit on Shearer and career. Vieira writes, "Another critic wrote: 'Norma Shearer's success was only mediocre until she came along as the reckless girl in 'Divorcee.' In every film since then…she has been ravishing and revealing, almost a torchbearer for the [single] standard. And the fans have flocked into her camp.'"[17] Vieira reinforces the fact that after Shearer started acting in the scandalous roles of sexually liberated women, like in *The Divorcee*, she became more popular with audiences. Vieira is focused on Shearer's breakout role and begins the process of remaking the reputation of *The Divorcee.* This was an important film at the time it was made and Vieira shows it is still important in pre-Code scholarship. Vieira also writes about the decline of Shearer's career saying:

[16] Mark Vieira, *Mark A. Vieira: The Starlight Studio*, No Date, http://www.markavieira.com.
[17] Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 55.

> Irving Thalberg had purchased the play [*forsaking all others*] for Norma Shearer, but she passed on it because of a pregnancy—and the Code. Because of its restrictions, there would be no more daring roles for her. The First Lady of M-G-M now shopped for more conventional plays…This sharp right turn and the disappearance of her pre-Code films would dim the memory of her sexy persona. Both she and Harlow lost a great deal to the Code.[18]

Vieira makes an important point because after the Code was enacted, Shearer's career never recovered. This book is also an important addition to Shearer's historiography because it shows a change in how her career is viewed in scholarship. Vieira explores how Shearer's career was an important one for pre-Code Hollywood. He is typical of the scholarly shift toward thinking about the films of pre-Code Hollywood and the liberation they seemed to give women. Vicki Callahan in *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History,* writes, "The early years of cinema history have proven to be a particularly rich area for feminist study…"[19] Third-wave feminism was sparking an interest in early film and consequently Norma Shearer.

In the twenty-first century, scholarship on Norma Shearer significantly increases with the scholarship and research becoming deeper and shifts from a focus on her personal life to a focus on her career and her possible feminist impact. Mick LaSalle continues scholarship on Pre-Code Hollywood with his book *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* published in 2000. This book, like Vieira's focuses on pre-Code Hollywood, but focuses specifically on the women working within it. Mick LaSalle is a film critic for *The San Francisco*

[18] Ibid., 203.
[19] Vicki Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 259.

Chronicle, and also teaches a class on pre-Code Hollywood at the University of California.[20] LaSalle builds on Vieira's research, using *Sin in Soft Focus* as a source in his own research. His book is an essential work on Norma Shearer because it specifically works to refocus the scholarship on her career. He writes. "Shearer's films carried a social implication, suggesting that the stories they told were emblematic of larger truths. That consciousness of social purpose makes Shearer's movies especially satisfying to modern viewers searching for something racy and unexpected."[21] Shearer's films were symbolic of the flapper lifestyle. *The New York Times* review of this book states that pre-Code actresses rejected the virgin or the tramp dichotomies and "introduced a new female sensibility—ambitious, actively employed, self-reliant, and sexually experienced."[22] As LaSalle digs deeper into Shearer's films, he explicates audience response of the period and why her films are popular among audiences today. He theorizes that female audiences relate to the roles and situations she found herself in. He also goes into why Shearer's career has become increasingly popular among scholars, writing,

> Fortunately, in the nineties things began to turn around. One previously insurmountable obstacle — the unavailability of her [Shearer] best movies —lifted with the release of most of her pictures on video and with the launching, in 1994, of Turner Classic Movies. In the course of its first few months, the cable station resurrected all the Shearer talkies…which no one had seen for decades.[23]

Besides her films being available to scholars, third wave feminism beginning in the 1990s, which encourages women to reclaim their sexuality, contributed to scholars becoming interested in

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[20] Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), back cover.
[21]Ibid., 12-13.
[22]Andy Webster, "Books in Brief: Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2000, http://nytimes.com/.
[23] Ibid., 228.

Shearer. The *Britannica Encyclopedia* notes this about third wave feminism and sexuality: "In reaction and opposition to images of women as passive, weak, virginal, and faithful, the third wave redefined women and girls as assertive, powerful, and sometimes promiscuous."[24] This list parallels those explored in LaSalle's book. Shearer's character in the film *The Divorcee*, is the epitome of a powerful and promiscuous woman. Because Shearer's films express some of the values of third wave feminism, it is possible that her popularity will continue to rise in the 21st century as the decade continues with scholars writing about her impact on and reflection of society through her films.

Maria Elena Buszek focuses on pin-up girls, early feminism, film, and post-modern feminism in her 2006 book, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture.*[25] She discusses the creation of fan culture through pin-up pictures of actors and actresses as well as through fan magazines in the late 1920s-1950s. Buszek writes about Shearer's public image in photospreads and interviews in the fan magazine, *Photoplay.* She writes about Shearer's pin-up photos by George Hurrell, saying,

> Hurrell's pin-ups of Shearer speak not only to what would become their long collaborative relationship, but also to an oft-told story of Hollywood history in which the genre figures prominently—and in which we find the pin-up's value acknowledged and exploited by one of the period's most successful actresses, toward one of the period's most feminist films.[26]

[24] Laura Brunell, "Feminism Reimagined: The Third Wave: Year in Review 2007," Britannica, http://brittannica.com/.
[25] Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Girrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 444.
[26] Ibid., 189.

Through Shearer's pin-up photos, she could show her sexuality in a new way. She was able to connect with fans through these photos that were usually accompanied with interviews. This media outlet is important to note, because scholars have not yet explored *Photoplay'*s role in Shearer's popularity. Buszek goes on to expand on *The Divorcee* which she sees as a feminist film. She writes about the actresses of the time who were taking on daring roles, saying, "…the women they portrayed enjoyed both the same sexual rights and the same professional aims as their male counterparts… But it was Shearer's precedent in *The Divorcee* that was given credit for ushering in this bold new era."[27] Before LaSalle, modern film historians had not given *The Divorcee* the credit it was due. Most scholars overlooked the important feminist themes and also overlook the fact that Zelda Sears wrote the screenplay for the film. Buszek was influenced by LaSalle, using his *Complicated Women* book her in her own work. Buszek's work points to the fact that academics are beginning to consider the portrayal of women's sexuality through genres that are generally not considered scholarly—such as the pin-up photo. She uses the careers of actresses, such as Shearer, to prove her point. By focusing on pin-ups, Buszek seems to be influenced by the third-wave feminist issues because her work focuses on influential women, such as Shearer, who used their sexuality to overcome patriarchal restraints.

Jeanine Basinger's book, *The Star Machine,* can be considered one of the most important works on early movie stars and the studio system. Basinger is the Chair of Film Studies at Wesleyan University and the curator of the cinema archives there. She has written numerous books on film, many focusing on early film history.[28] *The Star Machine,* published in 2007, is about the studio system and focuses on the way the actors and actresses were made into "stars." Basinger writes about Shearer in the context of a forgotten star, describing her career in depth, as

[27] Ibid., 191.
[28] Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), back cover.

well as her private life. She says, "The common notion about Shearer is that she's dated, and that if her films were revived, they'd be hooted off the screen…The remarkable thing about her is that when her films are seen, it's astonishing how she turned all her characters into independent creatures."[29] Basinger theorizes that Shearer's films were forgotten because she portrayed "modern woman" who was struggling with sex, adultery, and divorce and "Since none of Shearer's types are of much interest or of any use to general audiences today, no one focuses on how good she was at presenting all of them."[30] However, because of third wave feminism, which broadens the issues with which feminism is concerned, Shearer's struggles with sexuality become important touchstones in understanding the feminine experience during the time period. Basinger's analysis of Shearer's career is important because many film critics, such as Sarris, do not give Shearer credit for her acting abilities. Basinger expands on the idea that it is not Shearer but her roles that were dated, writing, "Norma Shearer in the 1930s was the movie explanation about what had happened to the women's world during the 1920s. The first thing to be observed is that she's astonishingly vivacious. And versatile. It's not she herself, but the roles she plays that are out of date."[31] Basinger shows that by seeing Shearer's roles in relation to the women's world of the 1920s, her career takes on more importance because film and cultural historians can look back on these films and see how women were feeling and acting in the late 20s and early 30s. Basinger's work is significant to Shearer's historiography because she does not just focus on her pre-Code Hollywood career but also her post-Code private life, and she analyzes why Shearer has been forgotten in modern film history.

[29] Ibid., 357.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 362.

The most recent work to mention Shearer is Andi Zeisler's book, *Feminism and Pop Culture* written in 2008. Zeisler is the cofounder and creative director of *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* magazine which she started in 1996 and which is still in print today.[32] Zeisler's book draws attention to women and how they have been presented throughout pop culture from the 1930s to modern day. Zeisler focuses on pre-Code Hollywood and quotes LaSalle in her book. She writes about Shearer's film *The Divorcee*, "The movie was a ferocious attack on the double standard of sexual behavior, and it earned Shearer an Academy Award—but had it been made just five years later, its plotline might never have been approved, since the Hays Code demanded that the sanctity of marriage be upheld onscreen…"[33] Zeisler's argument that the movie was an attack on the double standard for women and men's sexuality is a bold idea that no other scholar has explored. Zeisler's whole book focuses on feminism, and she writes about third wave feminism in her book. The fact that she is writing about Shearer and the Code in relationship to feminism shows that Shearer's popularity has increased with third wave feminist scholars and their efforts to reclaim sexuality.

Shearer's career, pre-Code, is one of the most innovative of the time for commercial cinema in the U.S. She was a pioneer for women showing their sexuality on screen. After the Code was enforced, her star faded and she quietly retired in 1942. While she has been forgotten in modern film history, her peers, such as, Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, and Barbara Stanwick are considered great actresses of their time. Without the surge of popularity that third wave feminism brought, Shearer could have been left to only minor mentions in film history books, Shearer now has multiple contemporary books remembering her strikingly feminist career. The work on

[32] Andi Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture* (California: Seal Studies, 2008), 181.
[33] Ibid., 30.

Shearer is not done though; there is still much to be researched about her career and private life, and it is time that Shearer is truly recognized for the importance of her work.

Although there is not much scholarship on Shearer, her contemporary, Joan Crawford, has numerous books dedicated to telling her story. Crawford, who worked at M-G-M with Shearer, is undoubtedly the bigger star even though both shared equal box office success. Crawford's histography is filled with books written exclusively on her while Shearer only has a few. Crawford's legacy is much more complicated than Shearers. She lived her life in the public eye all her life, and she would not want it any other way.

Joan Crawford

"I love playing bitches. There's a lot of bitch in every woman—a lot in every man."[34] -Joan Crawford. Joan Crawford is one of the most memorable actresses from the studio era of film. Crawford's career began in 1925 with minor character roles in silent movies. Crawford, whose real name was Lucille LeSueur, originally wanted to become a famous dancer.[35] She started her career as a chorus girl until she ultimately caught the eye of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, MGM, executives who changed her identity to Joan Crawford. While working for MGM, Crawford's fame would steadily rise, and her star power would eventually rival that of Greta Garbo, Katherine Hepburn, and the woman she considered her professional adversary, Norma Shearer. While Shearer's career waned after the Hays Code took effect in Hollywood, Crawford's career remained steady. Unlike Shearer, Crawford had no problem covering up and desexualizing herself for film roles, and she made a name for herself playing bitchy characters.

In the 1970s, scholarship about actors and actresses from the 30s and 40s became more prevalent. However, the books that were written tended to be just informational about these stars

[34] "Joan Crawford," International Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/
[35] Bob Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), page number.

rather than in-depth, scholarly biographies. One book that was written in 1973 was *The MGM Stock Company: The Golden Era* by James Robert Parish and Ronald L. Bowers. In this work, many of MGM's great movie stars, such as Crawford, are briefly discussed. In this 862-page book, 13 pages are dedicated to Crawford and her film history. The first line of the chapter gives the readers a sense of how the authors felt about her, "Joan Crawford – Superstar!"[36] The authors spend the next pages writing about Crawford's life and career, even glossing over the more sensational gossip that surrounded Crawford at the time, such as her relationship with her eldest adoptive daughter, Christina; "Her relationship with her oldest daughter, actress Christina, was strained for years, but recently has been reconciled."[37] Crawford was still alive when this book was published so the authors may have been trying to spare her feelings when they wrote her chapter in the book.

David Shipman's *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years*, as mentioned in Shearer's historiography, seems to be one of the first books written on Crawford that she was not a part of. Crawford up until her death had written a biography and gave interviews to many of the books that has been written on her. Shipman's portrayal of Crawford comes across as honest but a bit brutal in his observations. He writes "The length of Crawford's career is awesome, especially as she was never considered much of an actress—nor did she make a habit of appearing in good films."[38] Shipman takes the reader through the filmography of Crawford while not exaggerating her status as "box office poison" in the newspapers in the late 1930s when her films were failing. Shipman makes Crawford seem like she was a horror to work with and an alcoholic. "[She] had to have three vodkas before she would leave the dressing-room—and this was nine in the

[36] James Robert Parish and Ronald L. Bowers, *The MGM Stock Company: The Golden Era* (New York: Arlington House, 1973), 140.
[37] Ibid., 146.
[38] David Shipman, *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years* (Hill and Wang, 1970), 131.

morning."[39] While Crawford admittedly did like to drink, Shipman makes it seem like she could not function without one. This book is a great source of information and filmography of early Hollywood actors and actresses, but Shipman writes with a biased view that readers should take with a grain of salt.

In 1978, a year after Crawford passed away, Bob Thomas' book, *Joan Crawford: A Biography,* was published. "Thomas' career began in 1944, when Hollywood was still a small, centralized community, tightly controlled by a handful of studios, and continued well into the 21st century."[40] Thomas made a career reporting on the stars of Hollywood and writing multiple books on people such as Walt Disney, Marlon Brando, and of course, Joan Crawford. The fact that Thomas' book was published so soon after Crawford's death shows that Crawford's star power was in full force. This work seems to be the first full biography written, other than Crawford's autobiography that was published in 1971. Thomas portrays Crawford in a very realistic way, not sugar coating some major issues Crawford had. Thomas writes "Crawford's consumption of vodka had become prodigious…an unfortunate result of Joan's drinking was her giving way to certain obsessive fears, including her fear of coemption from younger women."[41] While Crawford was alive, authors may not have wanted to write such personal and scandalous things in their books out of fear of retribution from the star. After she had passed, Thomas could write truthfully about Crawford's diva like actions. Thomas writes about a particular incident where Crawford lost out on a movie role in *From Here to Eternity* because of her demands: "Joan objected to the wardrobe and insisted on her own designer…Cohn (the casting director) would not be dictated by Crawford. 'Fuck her,' he said, and cast Deborah Kerr as Karen

[39] Ibid., 134.
[40] "Hollywood Journalist Bob Thomas Dead at 92," Hollywood Reporter, March 14, 2014, hollywoodreporter.com.
[41] Bob Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 244.

Holmes."[42] Crawford was well known later in her career for making many demands when she played a movie role. In her mind, she had earned the right to such demands and perhaps she did, but authors, such as Thomas, would not be kind to her because of it.

The 1980's seem to be a sparse time for scholarship on Crawford. There are only two books to come out of that decade. A reason for so few writings on Crawford in the 1980s could be because in 1978, just a year after her mother died, Christina Crawford, the adoptive daughter of Joan Crawford, wrote and published the damming book *Mommy Dearest*. Christina accused her mother of abusing her mentally and physically and of being an alcoholic. The first is Alexander Walker's *Joan Crawford: The Ultimate Star*. Alexander Walker was a film critic in London for the *New Standard* and columnist for British *Vogue.* He also lectured at the University of Michigan on political philosophy. Walker used Bob Thomas' work in this book but seems to take another approach when writing about the star. Walker's attitude towards Crawford in his book is one of admiration; he writes:

> It is not a full-length biography, but a portrait of a person seen from the angle of her driving will and the way it interacted with a film studio's power to create the image of a certain kind of American womanhood. No, I correct myself: certain *kinds*…for there is not *one* Joan but *many* Joans, each unveiled as her personal needs and career moves, her successes and set-backs dictated its necessary appearances to herself or her employers.[43]

Walker's biography casts a sympathetic light on Crawford and her career at a time when she possibly needed it the most because of Christina's damning book. Walker addresses Christina's story in a brief one-page blurb. Walker says, "There is no point in rehashing the painful life story presented by Christina, who certainly did not apologize for anything she had to say about her

[42] Ibid., 184.
[43] Alexander Walker, *Joan Crawford: The Ultimate Star* (New York: Haper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 6.

adoptive mother in *Mommie Dearest."*[44] While Walker does address the allegations, he makes it seem almost okay by saying that Crawford did not keep it hidden that she punished her children in some strict fashion and many of her contemporaries knew what went on as well. Walker's book is an enjoyable contribution to the historiography of Crawford, even if he lightly addresses her less than favorable aspects.

The second book written was *Crawford's Men* by Jane Ellen Wayne which focuses on Crawford's love life. and was published in 1988. Little can be found about Wayne except that she has written multiple books on Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, and Clark Gable. Wayne's book is interesting because it reads more like a novel than a biography; she takes readers through all four of Crawford's marriages as well as affairs with costars. Wayne paints Crawford as an ambitious woman who puts her career before any man, writing: "Joan was willing to live with an empty marriage until her career improved…"[45] In 1938, after a string of bad movies, Crawford was labeled as "box office poison"[46] and was stuck in her second marriage to Franchot Tone. To keep negative publicity away she stayed in a loveless marriage to Tone until he cheated on her, according to Wayne. The author also seems to have been influenced by *Mommy Dearest* because her portrayal of Crawford in her book is that of a sexually deviant monster.

> When Christina was ten years old, Joan sent her away to school…Joan complained bitterly that she could not handle her two oldest children….Christina said she and her brother were sent away because their mother wanted more privacy to entertain her boyfriends. A former servant said, 'There was a steady flow of men. They came and went

[44] Ibid., 149.
[45] Jane Ellen Wayne, "*Crawford's Men*" (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1988), 154.
[46] Ibid., 149.

> at all hours. If she had a date, I used to see her take him by the hand at the end of the evening and lead him upstairs.[47]

Wayne's book, in modern society, seems outdated, sexist, and cruel. She does not seem to focus on Crawford's talent or films, but on her love life and how domineering she was off screen. The author's intention might have been to create an unflattering but possibly true depiction of the star, but her writing comes off as someone who is giving Crawford an unfair critique on her personal life.*

The 1990s are similar to the 1980s in that not much is written about Crawford. This could be because backlash from *Mommy Dearest*, which was still present in scholars' minds and being written about. Instead of Crawford-centric books there are two that focus on multiple people but write about Crawford at length. In 1993, Charles Higham wrote *Merchant of Dreams: Louis B. Mayer, M.G.M. and the Secret Hollywood.* Higham was a celebrity biographer, writing many works on stars with the stature of Errol Flynn, Lucille Ball, and Katherine Hepburn. His work was a hit with readers, but he battled with his critics: "while they were taking Mr. Higham to task for sins from pedestrian prose to a heavy reliance on anonymous sources, reviewers sometimes admitted that the undiluted juiciness of his narratives made them hard to put down."[48] Higham's work on Mayer is no different. He writes about Crawford being a diva prone to dramatic outbursts and tantrums. He also writes on the feud between Crawford and Shearer, saying:

> A topic of the studio gossip mill was Joan Crawford's jealous outbursts against Norma Shearer. She hated Miss Shearer, complaining that her only virtue was 'screwing the

[47] Jane Ellen Wayne, "*Crawford's Men*" (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1988), 191.
* While the accusations of child abuse should be taken seriously it is a loaded topic that will not be discussed in length, but perhaps briefly later in this thesis.
[48] Margalit Fox, "Charles Higham, Celebrity Biographer, Dies at 81," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2012, http://nytimes.com/.

> boss.' Miss Crawford was arguably the more talented of the two, more exciting and more impressive on the screen. Crawford's agent forced her salary up to $2,000 a week; it was still $8,000 a week less than Mrs. Thalberg's.[49]

Many books that were written on Crawford and Shearer focused on the varying degrees of hostility they had towards each other. While the truth of how deep the hatred was between the two cannot be known, there is no doubt that Crawford was jealous of Shearer's "reign" at MGM while her husband was a producer there. Higman also writes about an episode Mayer had with Crawford about her salary, saying, "Mayer had an impossible Joan Crawford on his hands"[50] while going on to write she had burst into Mayer's office demanding $1,000 a week or she would not continue on with her current picture. Higman says that Mayer told her to get lost, and that she did not show up for work the next day until she finally got a $500 pay raise.[51] This story is a frustrating one because this makes Crawford out to be a demanding movie star, but really she was just asking for what she thought she deserved to make. It could be that Higman was sensationalizing the story of Crawford because she already had a reputation as a difficult star. From what is written about Crawford in later scholarship, this story is unbelievable because most authors agree that Crawford always had the utmost professional work standards, so for her to just not show up to work because she did not get what she wanted seems out of character.

Another book to mention Crawford is Mark Viera's book *Sin in Soft Focus* that was published in 1999. This book has already been mentioned in Norma Shearer's historiography. Viera approaches Crawford with an unbiased view, writing about her career pre-code and never delving into her personal life. While writing about the popularity of her films, Viera writes "Film

[49] Charles Higman, *Louis B. Mayer, M.G.M. and the Secret Hollywood* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1993), 167.
[50] Ibid., 211.
[51] Ibid.

critic Creighton Peet singled out Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer, laying at their feet the responsibility for "all modern thought in matters of morals and marriage."[52] With Shearer and Crawford being arguably the two most famous actresses at M-G-M in the early 1930s, this statement by the film critic is important because it shows how much influence the two stars had on audiences of women. Viera also says that because of Crawford's popularity, she was an easy target to criticize. Viera says, "Joan Crawford was the most popular actress at M-G-M in 1934, but the Legion of Decency condemned *Sadie McKee* (one of her films)."[53] Crawford's star would continue to rise over the next few years, and she would continue to be at the center of criticism. While her roles were more demure because of the code, she would find loopholes in which to flaunt her sexuality like other movie stars did. The 1990s provided fans little insight into Crawford's life, and the books that were published did little to advance Crawford's legacy.

While the past two decades saw little scholarship on Crawford, the 2000s saw a resurgence of her popularity and *Joan Crawford: the Essential Biography* by Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell was published in 2002. This book seems to be the first book that truly gives readers an objective view of the life and career of Joan Crawford. The authors write of Crawford's attitude late in her life saying:

> Joan alienated many people because of her drinking, her late-night phone calls, and her temperament, which by 1976 seemed to be out of control. This was simply seen as a movie star being bitchy or demanding, but it was also true that Joan had simply taken on the cranky personality that many old people who are not physically healthy develop. She

[52] Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 55.
[53] Ibid., 179.

> wasn't a bitch or a monster, she was just an elderly woman annoyed by the demands of users and non-friends…[54]

This rationalizes Crawford's behavior later in life. Many previous authors want to write sensationalized stories, but Quirk and Schoell seem to want to portray Crawford on a more human level. They also write about her talent and star power compared to other leading ladies at M-G-G, stating, "So far Joan had taken on Greta Garbo, Margaret Sullivan, Norma Shearer, and even Bette Davis…and triumphed over all of them, as if she really were the mythical gorgon whose stare could turn people into stone."[55]

Peter Cowie published his book, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star* in 2009. Cowie is a film historian who founded the International Film Guide. He has written more than 30 books about Hollywood and its stars.[56] The forward is by Mick LaSalle, who is mentioned in Shearer's historiography. Cowie's book is a beautiful compilation of photographs of Crawford at her most glamorous with stories tucked in-between. Cowie, like previous scholars, addresses Crawford's life fairly and objectively. He writes about Crawford's enduring star power, noting that even after she appeared in a musical with Doris Day in the 1940s, "She had outlasted the sexy young stars from the 1930s and early 1940s. Even Bette Davis, for so long the queen of the Warner lot, had begun her inevitable decline."[57] He notes that Crawford had many loyal fans who stuck with her even during her "box office poison" films. She knew how to adapt to ever changing audience demands. Cowie also theorizes that new audiences found Crawford: "The 1950s marked the

[54] Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell, *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 250.
[55] Ibid., 113.
[56] Mick LaSalle, "Peter Cowie, an Ingmar Bergman expert," SFGATE, November 28, 2008, sfgate.com.
[57] Peter Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2009), 190.

consecration of Crawford as a gay icon."[58] Crawford's bold look and iconic movie characters helped make her an icon for the LGBTQ community.

Another book, *Possessed: The Life of Joan Crawford*, by Donald Spoto, was published in 2010. According to the Penguin Random House website, Spoto earned his PhD from Fordham University in New York. He has written 25 books on multiple actors and actresses including Marlene Dietrich and Alfred Hitchcock. In this book he references Peter Cowie's book.[59] Spoto's book, right from the introduction, seems takes an admiring tone. He recounts a letter he received from Crawford when he was eleven and how he watched her in movies in awe when she was well past her Hollywood expiration date. Spoto writes "In many ways, Joan was a jumble of contradictions, but the contradictions provide clues to what has been mostly discounted or denied –specifically, that she was much more than just a movie star: she was demonstrably one of the screen's most talented actresses."[60] Spoto carries this fascination with Crawford into his writing and writes as if Crawford were the ultimate star to have graced the big screen. "Among people who acted in movies, it is difficult to name anyone who worked more diligently than Joan Crawford."[61] Spoto goes through and examines a few claims that Christina has made and tries to debunk them; he also spends a few pages addressing Christina's book and how false it was. Spoto's biography is a great read for fans of Crawford but it does not portray her in the realistic and fair way that other biographers have.

Joan Crawford is one of the most enduring film stars of 20th century. Her career spanned over five decades, and she will always be remembered for her sultry, dramatic, and bitchy characters. Crawford knew how to play the game when it came to the studio system; she was a

[58] Ibid., 190.
[59] "Donald Spoto," Penguin Random House, penguinrandomhouse.com
[60] Donald Spoto, *Possessed: The Life of Joan Crawford* (New York: William Morrow, 2010), xiv.
[61] Ibid., 215.

no-nonsense kind of worker and demanded the best. While her outer persona was one of a cool, collected, and glamorous movie star, on the inside Crawford suffered from anxiety. She became anxious about her aging face and career, but she pushed forward, despite her critics saying she should not.

While one actress is remembered as an icon, the other has been left to be remembered in only a few books on old Hollywood. Crawford and Shearer were both considered great actresses in their day, both receiving enormous amounts of fame. Shearer had a leg up in the business because of her marriage to Irving Thalberg, while Crawford is well known for being a self-made star. Shearer was arguably, at one time, even more famous than Crawford, so why is she forgotten? Is it because of Shearer's early retirement or because she did not want to play mother roles as she grew older? Did Crawford play the Hollywood game better and adapt as she grew older? Or was she more successful because the public's attitude towards free and loose women shifted with the Great Depression? How did the men in each woman's life shape their careers and legacies? These are the questions that will be answered in the next few chapters of this thesis.

While this chapter looked at the historiography of both actresses, chapter two of my thesis will cover the history of MGM as well as examine the control studios had over their artists. It will look into the Motion Picture Production Code and how it affected studios as well as the careers of actors and actresses. Chapter three will take a look at the life and career of Joan Crawford, how she became an icon, and reasons why her memory lives on. Chapter four will look at the life and career of Norma Shearer and will look at the reasons why she is not a more recognized actress of early Hollywood. Both chapter three and four will be inspecting the public perception of both actresses and the cultural milieu of the time period

Chapter 2

The Lion Who Roared: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Controlling History

"There's only one way to succeed in this business. Step on those guys. Gouge their eyes out. Trample on them. Kick them in the balls. You'll be a smash."[1] -Louis B. Mayer. Mayer was the head of the studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, or MGM. Early film studios, and even present film companies, were generally male dominated. The studio system (1920s-1950s)[2] is the process that film creation, production, and distribution by one certain studio, such as Paramount or MGM. Studios, while having small differences, basically operated in the same way: controlling everything from writing scripts to distributing the films. While this is a very simplified description, the studios themselves were very complex. They had thousands of people working behind the scenes doing a multitude of different jobs. The studio system produced some of the greatest movies of all time, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and while an outsider looking in on the studio might see a glamourous, star-studded life for the stars and may dream to one day be a part of it, for those that were actually working in Hollywood, it was much different. The studios were generally a brutal environment, even for high profile stars. The men who ran these companies wielded a tremendous amount of power. They alone decided who would have the chance to become famous and who would remain on the sidelines. This chapter will explore the beginnings of MGM; how their star system contributed to the cult of celebrity; and how MGM controlled the public's perception of their stars through fan magazines and public personas.

[1] "Louis B. Mayer," International Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/
[2] Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

MGM was one of the largest studios of old Hollywood. It was considered one of the big five along with Warner Brothers, Paramount, RKO, and 20th Century Fox. These five studios dominated the film industry and gave the world the entertainment it so desperately wanted. While all five studios have rich histories, MGM stands out as an excellent example of how the studio systems worked not only because of its meteoric rise to the top, but also for its long fall into destitution.

When researching the "Golden Age" of Hollywood (1930-1950), it becomes clear that there was a dark internal system that was hidden from the public. Three books that are essential for scholars of the period uncover the inner workings of the studio system. One of the most important books about the studio system is Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (1988). This book focuses on three of the biggest studios from 1920-1960. The three studios are Universal, MGM, and Warner Brothers. It also focuses on a major player within the system, producer, David Selznick. Schatz is not necessarily arguing anything in his book, but he shows readers an insider's view of the filmmaking process. Schatz writes, "Hollywood left its legacy not only on celluloid but also on paper, and that documentation provides a comprehensive and reliable account of the studio system at work."[3] This is an important book for film scholars because it is a brief but comprehensive look at popular studios and also a film producer who worked within these studios. This book is referenced in the next two sources.

Another important book is Jeanine Basinger's *The Star Machine* (2007). This book is different from Schatz's in that it focuses primarily on the movie stars that were "churned out" from the studio factory. This book takes an important look at the process of "Star Making" in old

[3] Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 9.

Hollywood and how, despite a studios best efforts, these actors and actresses just don't make it in the industry. Basinger also writes about well established stars in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, such as Loretta Young and Norma Shearer and why they may have been forgotten. Basinger paints a vivid picture for her audience about how suffocating and controlling studio life was for its stars. Basinger writes, "It's a book about the star business: it's failures and malfunctions, its successes, its unexpected bonuses, its astonishing ability to change course and adjust to social and cultural shifts, and its incredible longevity."[4] Basinger is arguing how these film stars careers ended and why.

A third book that is important to film scholars is Peter Hay's *MGM: When the Lion Roars* (1991). While this book is not a broad compilation of different studios, it is a complete history of one of the major studios. This book is critical for anyone wanting to research the MGM studio. This book, like Schatz's, takes the reader from the creation of MGM to the end of the 1950s. Hays writes:

> There have been film factories before MGM and since, and yet there was something special about the studio, with its own style and way of making films, which made it preeminent. There was no formula, or else it might be more easily articulated and imitated. But we hope that this book might come to defining the essence of what was once MGM.[5]

Hay's book, while providing an accurate historical account, weaves in the folklore surrounding the studio and wild stories about actors and actress as well as the people surrounding them. Hay may not be making an outright argument; it is clear in his writing that he is promoting MGM as

[4] Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), xiii.
[5] Peter Hay, *MGM: When the Lion Roars* (Georgia: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1991), 9.

the greatest studio of the era. He writes in an almost idyllic way about the studio and glosses over the darker sides of the studio system.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer did not start out as the MGM of today: it was the result of a corporate merger. At the beginning of indoor entertainment, Marcus Loew decided to capitalize on this new commodity. "Loew's empire began with The People's Vaudeville Company, which Loew founded in November 1904 to manage his first penny arcade in New York City; within a year he controlled twenty."[6] A penny arcade was a place where customers would spend only a penny on games, or short picture shows. Men and women also went to vaudevilles (a mixed entertainment show) in large numbers because they were a cheap escape from everyday life. After penny arcades and vaudeville shows declined in popularity around 1910, nickelodeons became a main source of entertainment. The Theatre Historical Society of America states on their website that nickelodeons were the beginning of movie theaters as we know them; they were the first indoor spaces that featured only moving pictures (around 15 minutes each) all day long.[7] Since each film cost only a nickel, hence the name "nickelodeon," the public would get to enjoy a short movie in an air conditioned building for a very low price. Loew opened up nickelodeons across New York and "by 1910 Marcus Loew's theatrical circuit covered all five of New York's boroughs…he constantly tinkered with the formula: positioning his theatrical entertainment combination at a price lower than high-class vaudeville and slightly higher than the motion picture shows."[8] It would prove a successful model, and Loew made millions of dollars. However, Loew was not the only one monopolizing on building and owning movie theaters.

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[6] Hay, *MGM*, 10.
[7] "Behind the Curtain at the Nickelodeon: America's First Movie Theatre," Theatre Historical Society of America, no date, http://historictheaters.org/.
[8] Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2005), 28.

In New England, Louis B. Mayer was following Loew's lead and purchasing multiple theaters, but he was not making the kind of money he needed to fund his ambitious plans of creating films. In 1915 Metro Pictures Corporation was founded "by a group of distributers to provide financing for independent films…the most important promise of Metro lay in its announcement that it would start releasing films at the rate of one every week."[9] Mayer joined the Corporation and was elected secretary of the of the distributing group. Mayer was unhappy with the quality of work that Metro was distributing and was continually looking for more refined pictures, so, he took a chance and purchased the distribution rights to the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) for an outstanding $50,000.[10] The return on the film, from his movie theaters, was large enough for Mayer to leave the Metro group in 1916 and start creating his own work. While Mayer was succeeding in the industry, Loew was having trouble. As only a distributer, Loew was at a disadvantage:

> …With [Adolf] Zukor (Paramount Pictures Creator) vertically integrating, Loew was forced to pay higher and higher prices to rent top films. In addition, motion pictures were gradually forcing vaudeville from the top of the marquee. Patrons would come to see and hear first-line vaudeville talent, but no longer Loew's cheaper acts. In January 1920 he announces Loew's was vertically integrating by purchasing Metro Pictures…"[11]

Vertical integration, according to balance.com is ". . .when a company controls more than one stage of the supply chain."[12] With the purchase of Metro Pictures, Loew was trying to even the playing field between him and Zukor, but he was still behind.

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[9] Hay, *MGM*,11.
[10] Gary Carey, *All the Stars in Heaven* (New York: Elsevier-Dutton Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 27-28.
[11] Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 30.
[12] Kimberly Amadeo, "Vertical Integration, Its Pros and Cons with Examples," *The Balance*, May 23, 2018, http://thebalance.com/.

Unfortunately for Loew, producing the amount of quality pictures needed to turn a profit was unrealistic. His strength was in theater chains. The first few years of the merger were rough, and Loew was ready to sell Metro pictures until another opportunity arose in 1924. "Joel Godsol offered to sell him Goldwyn Pictures. The strength of Goldwyn pictures was its massive production facility…thus a merger would result in a perfect fit: Loew's theater chain, Metro's distribution network, and the Goldwyn studio."[13] Now that Loew had a studio to create quality work, he began the search for someone who could help produce the type of films that were making money.

Louis B. Mayer having become captivated by the movie industry and producing his own films, created Louis B. Mayer Productions in 1920. While he was successful, he did not have the resources to make as many films as the big studios were putting out. Mayer wanted to create as many films as Paramount as well as films of the same quality, but he needed help, so in February of 1923, Mayer hired Irving Thalberg as vice president and assistant of production. Hiring Thalberg would prove to be one of Mayer's best decisions. Thalberg, who was only twenty-four when Mayer hired him, was already somewhat of a legend in the industry. "He was the 'wonder boy,' 'the baby-genius,' the kid who had stolen some of the spotlight from the middle-aged moguls who ruled the industry."[14] Thalberg had previously worked at Universal but left because of creative differences. Mayer and Thalberg were a perfect match, Mayer was the business minded man who had big dreams while Thalberg was the man to bring those dreams to life and make them even bigger. Although the business partners produced top notch films, they were still behind the big studios in production numbers and quality. If they wanted to be on the level of Paramount or Universal they would need more power. They needed more money, but they also

[13] Schatz, *The Genius of the System,* 30.
[14] Carey, *All the Stars in Heaven,* 54.

needed a studio as large as the others to create and produce the films they wanted. This opportunity would come just a year later in 1924 when Mayer was given the chance to merge with Metro-Goldwyn.

After the merger of Metro-Goldwyn, Thomas Schatz writes in *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era,* that neither Marcus Loew nor Sam Goldwyn were interested in running the Goldwyn studio in California. Loew enlisted Nick Schenck, a top executive who worked for Loew, to begin finding someone who could run the offices on the West Coast.[15] Louis B. Mayer was one of the top contenders, and he was up for the challenge. During the spring of 1924, Schenck had hammered out the details of the merger, which was essentially a "paper deal." The only cash transaction involved the purchase of Sam Goldwyn's remaining stock. Loew's Incorporated bought Goldwyn Pictures for $5 million and Louis B. Mayer Production for $75,000, indicating the difference in market value between the two companies….Mayer was named Vice President and General Manager of Metro-Goldwyn…Thalberg was Second Vice President and "Supervisor of Production.[16]
With this merger, Mayer could finally make the amount of films that was on par with the other big studios, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) was born. This merger would be the beginning of one of the most powerful studio systems.

When Mayer and Thalberg took over the West Coast operations, films were still silent. Gary Cary in his book, *All the Stars in Heaven* writes, that in the merger Mayer brought along some of the best talent he had discovered such as, Renée Adorée, Norma Shearer, and Huntly Gordon.[17] These actors and actresses were put to work immediately along with the stars that

[15] Schatz, *The Genius of the System,* 30.
[16] Ibid., 31.
[17] Carey, *All the Stars in Heaven,* 63.

were already with Goldwyn before the merger. The silent era for MGM was a successful one. They produced one of the biggest films of the era, *Ben-Hur* (1925) a film which is still shown and appreciated today. The studio would also create films that would turn a profit, but not be remembered such as *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) which starred Norma Shearer. "It had cost around $170,000 to make but showed a profit of $350,000—a result that Mayer and Thalberg were to repeat many times more."[18] Schatz writes, that in only its second year, MGM proved to be the most successful studio in the industry when it cleared $6.4 million dollars.[19] What made MGM so successful? Mayer would say it was the star power the studio possessed, during the silent era his studio had contracts with Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Lillian Gish, John Gilbert, Will Rogers, and Lon Chaney.

Actors and actresses were essentially "owned" by the studio and contractually obligated to turn out a set number of films per year, the number was based on the star's popularity and if he or she had good negotiating skills. Judy Garland is a great example of an actress who developed problems with alcohol, drugs, and in her marriages because of the pressures of the studio system such as the need to complete a certain number of pictures per year as well as the promotional tours that the studio placed on her. Ronald L. Davis in *The Glamour Factory* states, "Eventually performers realized that working for a Hollywood studio was not unlike going to a factory for other employees."[20] The studio system production machine was hardest on women. If actresses happened to get pregnant, especially if they were unwed, they would be encouraged to get abortions (Judy Garland was one); women were expected to keep their waists thin and faces looking young. However, men could get away with fathering multiple children from different

[18] Hay, *MGM,* 37.
[19] Schatz, *The Genius of the System*), 37.
[20] Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 93.

women, and age did not seem to affect their careers like it did women's. In her book *The Star Machine,* Jeanine Basinger says "It was tough for a woman to last…longevity for a woman was tricky…The standards of beauty for a woman were stricter for a woman, and society's attitude toward romantic pairings of older women and younger men was less accepting."[21] Actresses who lasted were rare, and those who lasted and had successful careers became icons. These men and women were essentially not allowed to be their own person; they were what the studio wanted them to be.

Through careful creation and meticulous management, MGM would control the lives and publicity for its stars. For example Greta Garbo was a mysterious and exotic beauty that drew large audiences to her films. This persona was created for her in part because Garbo hated the publicity, "Her early experiences with photographers who shot her in revealing clothes, and with reporters who garbled her interviews, made Garbo rebel against the Hollywood publicity machine."[22] This created persona allowed MGM to work around the solitary star's eccentricities and manipulate the press about her to their advantage. Two of the tools the studios used to promote their films and their stars were fan magazines and the creation of celebrities through what scholars call a factory system.

The route to becoming movie star was long and often, for women, involved changing their looks, sometimes entirely, to fit into the mold of what the studio wanted them to be. How did studios find their potential actor or actress? Scouting. Talent scouts went out across America to try and find someone who could be tested. Scouts were searching for men and women who could become the next big star for their respective studios. "In conducting their searches, the studios were usually highly astute and far more sensible than anyone might think. They wanted

[21] Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 320.
[22] Hay, *MGM*, 53.

young people who were beautiful and talented of course, but also pliant, flexible, and above all, obedient."[23] Studios were looking for someone that had talent, was beautiful, but also someone who could become someone completely different. One case that Jeanine Basinger writes about in her book, *The Star Machine*, is about Eleanor Powell and how MGM overhauled her image. The process was extensive. Her hair was grown out from its short haircut and extensions were put in as well as given a permanent wave to soften the waves around her face. Her hair was also lightened and highlighted. She had freckles so they had her endure violet-ray treatments to rid her face of them. Her eyebrows were plucked to the point they drew them on to give a better shape, they overlined her lips to make them fuller. The studio also had her whiten her teeth and put porcelain caps on her crooked teeth.[24] Changes weren't only physical. Stars were often given new names, for example Lucille La Sueur became Joan Crawford. After the makeover, stars would be thrust into the public and it was up to audiences if the investment that the studios had made would pay off.

Unfortunately, even with a studios best efforts, sometimes a star would just not click with audiences and the actor or actress would not be signed or their contract would not be renewed. The machine, however, was only a machine. It *could* locate, shape, cut, paste, and sell an actor as a star with great success. It *could* respond to the public's own discoveries—"Who's that guy in the tuxedo, let me see more of him, please" –with great alacrity… It could do a lot of things. Sometimes it worked perfectly, but other ties it malfunctioned. A star would not be made.[25] The studio used the same formula to promote each star. Although different personalities would be promoted differently. For example, Jean Harlow was shown as a pin-up platinum blonde

[23] Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 37.
[24] Ibid., 26-27.
[25] Ibid., 100.

bomb shell, while Judy Garland was often marketed as the girl next door. These personas were disseminated to the public through fan magazines.

One of the most impactful and lasting things to come out of early film culture is fan magazines such as *Photoplay, Motion Picture, Silver Screen*, and *Movie Classic.* These magazines would showcase the most popular actresses and actors of their day in various articles about such topics as current fashions, current projects, personal life stories, and recipes. *Photoplay* was the most popular magazine of the era and was under the studios' control. Ann Helen Peterson in her article, "Those Glorious Fan Magazines" says "*Photoplay* was only able to play this role [of being the "queen of fan magazines] with the complete cooperation of the studios. In exchange for publicizing their stars—and publicizing them in a very precise way, almost wholly dictated by the studio's publicity department—the studios agreed to massive ad buys."[26] Actors and actresses would grace the front covers and pages of magazines, and the public would follow their favorites' lives, trying copy hair styles, purchase the same clothes, and trying to emulate their personalities. Studios exploited their stars through fan magazines, and they controlled what was printed and suppressed unsavory stories, one of the most notable is the story of Loretta Young's love child.

Loretta Young had a squeaky-clean public image, but that was threatened after the making of the film *Call of the Wild* (1935) with Clark Gable. While on the set of the movie, Clark and Young had an affair resulting in a pregnancy. Young's Catholic faith forbade her from getting an abortion, so she gave birth, but she did not want to give up the child. The pregnancy was covered up and was not reported on by major magazines--though there was speculation. Ann Helen Peterson in her article, "Those Glorious Fan Magazines" says, "But when real scandal did

[26] Anne Helen Peterson, "Those Glorious Fan Magazines," VQR: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion, last modified January 31, 2013, http://vqronline.org/.

go down, *Photoplay* avoided it: print no evil, see no evil. Indeed, the fan magazines in general were complicit in the studio-headed cover up of all untoward behavior of the stars…"[27] The pregnancy was swept under the rug, and to explain Youngs absence from the social circles and films, audiences were told she was worn down. In the January 1936 issue of *Photoplay,* there was an interview with Young about her disappearance from the public titled "Fame, Fortune, and Fatigue: The real truth about the mysterious illness of Loretta Young."[28] In this article Dorothy Manners went to Young's home to interview her. Young is described by Manners as "looking very small" and "surprisingly lucky in not losing too much of her preciously acquired poundage put on during her vacation trip to Europe."[29] Manners, focusing on her size deflected readers from knowing the truth, that she had given birth not two months prior. Young's career did not suffer because of her unwed pregnancy; she made a big return to film in February of 1936 in *The Unguarded Hour* and continued as a studio star. Young's public image, created by MGM, as a "good girl" saved her from public scorn and helped her continue her career.

Another example of magazines being controlled by studios is the story of William Randolph Hurst and Marion Davies. Hearst was a newspaper and magazine mogul who owned multiple publications, such as *Cosmopolitan*. He met Davies in 1917 and was smitten. They began an affair, and Hearst wanted the best for his mistress. Thus, the publicity published in

> …*Cosmopolitan* became an important factor in the MGM merger. It was agreed that Davies would be paid $10,000 a week, the most of any star on the MGM payroll, and that Hearst would be given complete control over her projects. Though these terms seemed

[27] Ibid.
[28] Dorothy Manners, "Fame, Fortune, and Fatigue: The real truth about the mysterious illness of Loretta Young," *Photoplay,* January 1936, 32.
[29] Ibid., 32-33.

steep, in return, Louis B. Mayer and MGM would be receiving the invaluable support of Hearst's media empire.[30]

Davies films were not always well received, and in general, she was a flop as an actress, but her name was constantly in the spotlight, because of Hearst. Excessive publicity may have contributed to her unpopularity with the public. Hearst put good money into Davies' films and she did have a few successful films when she tried comedy, but eventually her career ended in 1937 with her retirement from acting.

Films were, and still are, a favorite pass-time of the masses. As a result, actors' lives have become a point of fascination. There is a certain ownership the public feels they have over their favorite actor or actresses' lives. While stars now may be able to be genuine while being in the public eye, this was not the case in early Hollywood. A star was created by the studio, then positioned as a certain personality type in the public eye, and either he or she became a star or were forgotten. In the beginning of fan magazines, stars who were pictured were unnamed, articles were mostly about movie scenes, but that all changed in 1913. "The covers no longer featured stills from movie scenes, but now focused on pictures of the actors and actresses as people—as celebrities. The emphasis no longer on the studios or the film plots, but the stars themselves."[31] The cult of celebrity was born, but becoming a celebrity was a grueling process. Celebrities personas changed drastically in the early 1930s with the enforcement of Motion Picture Production Code, or the Hays Code.

The Hays Code, which was nicknamed after William Hays who was president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America. The MPPDA would make sure that

[30] Hay, *MGM*, 48.
[31] David P. Warren, "The Rumor Mill: How Fan Magazines Portrayed Hollywood, 1911-1959." (M.A. thesis., University of Southern California, 1999), 33, ProQuest (EP61040).

studios were abiding to the code and that films were staying morally uncorrupt. Films of early Hollywood are often divided up into two groups, pre-Code Hollywood and post-Code Hollywood. In his book, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood*, Mark Vieira says that the term "pre-Code" is slightly misleading because the dates of when the Code was established is very confusing. In 1927, films were still risqué, but there was a form of self-regulation, but the Production Code was adopted in 1930, but wasn't enforced until 1934.[32] Once it began to be enforced, it meant no sex, unless the couple was married, and even then it was only implied, no more gangsters like the ones that ruled early film, no moral corruption and no more divorce. Before 1934, films could get away with showing these things as long as it did not cross the line into certain depravity. Most films that toed the line of moral/immoral would usually still end with a happy ending, single women would get married, gangsters would go to jail, and families would end up happy. Although audiences got a happy ending there was still pushback by the Catholic Church against these sinful films.

The Catholic Church began its crusade against the film studios in the early 1920's, but there was a lack of uniformity within the church to really go after the big studios. Church goers would receive stern lectures on why they should not go see certain films because they were not up to standards. In *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry*, Frank Walsh describes an uproar against the film *The Callahans and Murphys.* Walsh says that although MGM had de-catholicized the film through cuts, people were still angry that it seemed to portray the Catholics against the Irish. The backlash against the film was fierce, and many theater chains withdrew it from exhibition which lead to the eventual recall of the film all

[32] Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus; Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 6.

together.[33] The church would continue to protest films for the next seven years using different tactics to get their point across including "boycotts of local theaters, letters to local film exchanges, and letters to the studios. [Father Daniel] Lord published a pamphlet, *The Movies Betray America,* that accused the industry of 'faking observance of the Code."[34] Films started being blacklisted by the heads of the Catholic church, and in 1934, they formed the Legion of Decency. "The Legion of Decency was not so much an organization as it was a manifestation of Catholic will. By joining it, American Catholics showed their support for the Episcopal Committee."[35] All members had to do was sign a pledge to never watch films that were continuing to corrupt America.

As the Code was beginning to be fully enforced, studios were beginning to feel the pressure from Will Hays and Joseph Breen, the head of the Studio Relations Committee and censorship boards across the country. If studios tried to skirt the code, they would be attacked by the censor boards and the films would be blacklisted by the Legion of Decency. Breen as head of the SRC (which would also be known as the Production Code Administration) would look over scripts for the major studios and have final say on which ones would be put through for production. He took his job seriously and strictly enforced the Code, he would reject films and have them edited until they were able to have the SRC's "Certificate of Approval" from the committee. The studios would find ways around the Code guidelines by finding loopholes or reinterpreting certain rules. They could suggest things such as sexual or criminal activities as long as it wasn't too obvious. Actress May West, who wrote her own scripts, had figured out a way around Breen, "In future scripts, she adopted a ploy: 'I wrote scenes for them to cut! These

[33] Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 44.
[34] Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus*, 162.
[35] Ibid., 172.

scenes were so rough that I'd never have used them. But they worked as a decoy. They cut them and left the stuff I wanted."[36] While the Hays Code is named after William Hays, Joseph Breen was really the one doing the work behind the scenes. The Code was enforced until the early 1960s when the Code could no longer be sustained because of cultural changes. Studios began releasing films without the Administrations seal of approval and studios were releasing more and more scandalous films, such as *La Dolce Vita* (1960) that portrayed an orgy scene. In 1968, The Motion Picture Association of America created a new form of censorship, film ratings, which allowed films that didn't meet the old standards could still be released. These ratings are still used today, G, P-G, P-G 13, and R. These ratings are the lasting result of the decades of censorship against Hollywood.

MGM flourished in spite of censorship. The studio created films that made hundreds of thousands of dollars. The 1930s were a success for MGM, with Schenck at the helm and the studio creating films debt free, MGM was essentially unstoppable.[37] They created sweeping dramas, slapstick comedies, and romances and audiences kept coming back for more. MGM was a force to be reckoned with because they had the star power, the money, and the publicity to create films that would have a large return. Even during WWII MGM could not be stopped, "During the war…MGM profits hit new highs in 1940-1 and 1941-2, with an all-time high of $23,245,000 reached in 1942-3."[38] To insure the studio's success, Louis B. Mayer ran the studio with an iron fist and controlled his stars lives like he controlled the film production at his studio. For him movie making was a machine. Nick Schenck, who had taken MGM after Loews death

[36] Ibid., 195.
[37] Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System,* 102.
[38] Ibid., 107.

in 1927, guided MGM into a prosperous golden age. He allowed Mayer just enough freedom to create the films that would become the iconic films audiences know and love today.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, Hollywood would experience what many film critics and scholars consider the golden age of Hollywood. It's called the golden age because the film plots were fresh and techniques for filming, producing, and directing were constantly changing as well as the large amounts of money that was being invested in the films. There was a constant stream of glamorous actors and actresses gracing the screen and audiences were enamored with them. The film industry was still developing and the demand for good films was high. The films to come out this era are some of the most beloved films ever such as, *Singin in the Rain* (1952), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and *All About Eve* (1950) along with those mentioned earlier. Many films today are retellings of these classics or remakes like the most recent *A Star Is Born* (2018) that has been remade four times now. The studio was a machine that produced constant content for viewers. Unfortunately for the men in charge of the studios, it could not last forever. "The Golden Age of Hollywood ended with the fall of the Studio System, ballooning budgets and the emergence of television that resulted in diminishing returns and decline in profits."[39]

[39] Linda Alchin, "Golden Age of Hollywood," American-Historama, January 9, 2018, http://american-historama.org/.

Chapter 3

Joan Crawford: An Everlasting Icon

"… l loved being a star—all the hard work and big money and glamour and bullshit that went with being a star."[1] At the mention of Joan Crawford's name, many words come to a person's mind, "glamorous," "diva," "movie star," "sexy," and "bitch." While these words may describe Crawford, there is so much more to her. Crawford's persona, like many stars from the studio system era, were created and shaped by the studio system of which they were a part. These personas were on full display in the magazines of the time, swaying the public's opinion of them. Crawford was one of the most talked about and written about star of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. She was a self-made woman in an industry run by men. She did what she had to do, according to some sources, to get where she wanted to go, even if that meant sitting on the "casting couch."

Crawford is one of the most remembered actresses of her time, easily recognizable by her full lips, broad shoulders, and the sharp angles that made up her body. What makes Crawford memorable? Was it her good looks? Her great acting? Or was it the rumors of her hard to work with attitude? No matter what it is, Crawford remains an interesting figure for film historians, with her diverse film credits, she still remains, arguably, of the most popular film actresses ever. This chapter will look at Crawford's personal life, public persona, and film career, and how these three things contributed to Crawford's seeming immortality after death. While Crawford played cool, confident, successful women in her films, her early life was a far cry from her characters.

[1] Roy Newquist, *Conversations with Joan Crawford* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1980), 167.

On March 23, 1904, or possibly anytime from then to 1908,[2] Lucille Fay LeSueur was born in San Antonio, Texas. This girl had no idea that she would one day become Joan Crawford. Crawford had a rough childhood, her father abandoned her and her mother and brother when she was still a small girl. After the abandonment, her mother moved them to Lawton, Oklahoma, where she met and married Henry Cassian.[3] What happens next is of some debate to different Crawford scholars. Authors Quirk and Schoell, write in their book, *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography,* that Crawford had started having an affair with her mom's new husband when she was eleven, and even fooled around with her half-brother.[4] This claim was a bold one, and completely different from the other biographical books on Crawford. In his book, *Joan Crawford: A Biography,* Bob Thomas never even hints at something close to sex between "daddy Cassian" and Crawford, instead writing that he was nothing more than a strong father figure in her life.[5] One thing biographers do agree on is that Crawford wanted to be a famous dancer. After two failed attempts at boarding school, Crawford tried her hand at professional dancing, she moved to Chicago to meet with an agent and got a job as a chorus girl in a night club. She was able to quickly move up in the business because of her hard work and dedication, and soon she was being scouted for MGM. Quirk and Schoell write, that MGM producer, Harry Rapf took a trip to New York to do some talent scouting. The authors suggest that in order to receive a screen test, the 21-year-old Lucille slept with Rapf. If she slept with him or not, he liked what he saw and bought her a train ticket to California in January 1925.[6] After arriving in Hollywood, it was clear to Crawford that if she wanted to become a movie star, she would need

[2] Sources vary on when she was born. Some say 1904 some have said 1905-06, while some have even said as late as 1908.
[3] Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell, *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 1.
[4] Ibid., 2-3.
[5] Bob Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).
[6] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford,* 8.

to do more than just dance. Crawford, who did not have any formal acting education, would begin observing actresses and watch what they did. She began refining herself, coaching herself to lose her accent, to stand a certain way, and to dress more like a star.[7] Crawford had the self-discipline and the drive to do what it took to become an actress. While she was changing her physical appearance, there was still the matter of her name. Lucille La Sueur was not a name that the executives at MGM thought was star material, so they held a fan magazine contest to rename Lucille.[8] Unfortunately she hated the name. In the book, *Conversations with Joan Crawford*, she says "I hated the name, as I've explained too damned often, but I liked the security that went with it."[9] So Joan Crawford was created in September of 1925, forever changing the life of Lucille.

The early film career of Crawford was nothing exciting. She starred in numerous silent films, mostly in small supporting roles, but she longed to do something more than be a throw-away actress once the higher-ups no longer found her beautiful. Crawford knew she needed to be noticed so she began going out every night and making a name for herself as a dancer, winning many awards for her efforts. Then finally a chance came with the film *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928).[10] *Our Dancing Daughters* is a fluff movie that portrayed Crawford as party girl Diana, who is secretly a good girl and her friend, Ann, who is secretly a selfish gold digger. They both fall for the same man but he marries Ann and soon realized his mistake. The movie showcased Crawford's dancing abilities and portrayed her as the perfect flapper. Gary Carey, in his book *All the Stars in Heaven* writes "Her big break came in the 1928 *Our Dancing Daughters*, in which she did for the Charleston what John Travolta was to do for the Hustle in *Saturday Night*

[7] Donald Spoto, *Possessed: The Life of Joan Crawford* (New York: William Morrow, 2010), 20-21.
[8] Ibid., 29-30.
[9] Newquist, *Conversations with Joan Crawford*, 31.
[10] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 66-67.

Fever."[11] Her success in this film was so huge because her character was so relatable to the women who were watching the film at the time. Flappers were popular and would be for at least another year until the crash of Wall Street. Crawford's character resonated with the women who wanted to have the free spirited life that flappers seemed to live. "Largely due to Crawford's self-exhilaration, *Our Dancing Daughters* made a deep impression on audiences who identified with, and sometimes applauded Diana [Crawford's character]…"[12] Although Diana was a flapper, it is important to note in the end her character does still marry the man she had confessed her love to earlier in the film . This marriage happened because there was a morality that needed to be kept up in films.

The early silent films of Crawford's were similar to those of her era; they were sexy and pushed the envelope, but they never overstepped a boundary that could not be righted with marriage. This seemed to mirror Crawford's personal life as well. For Crawford, her image so far had been that of the free-wheeling flapper, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that "Joan Crawford is doubtless the best example of the flapper…,"[13]and her personal life soon seemed to reflect some of the characters she played. After the release of *Our Dancing Daughters*, Crawford was gaining popularity and fans. By March of 1929, the fan magazine *Photoplay*, mentioned her in an article called "Questions and Answers." Although it is only one line, "Next in the Seven Most Persistent Questions of the Month is Joan Crawford. Joan has red-brown hair and blue eyes," [14] it was a start. Her star was growing, but like the characters in her films, Crawford needed a man to tame her wild spirit. While Joan was still a budding star, she met Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in 1928, son of Douglas Fairbanks and step-son to Mary Pickford. The two quickly fell in love and were married

[11] Gary Carey, *All The Stars In Heaven: Louis B. Mayer's M-G-M* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), 99.
[12] Ibid., 99.
[13] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 9.
[14] "Questions and Answers," *Photoplay*, January 1929, 85.

in 1929. In a *Photoplay* article, "Close-Ups *and* Long-Shots," James R. Quirk says, "And now they are married—Joan Crawford and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. They have a new home of their own and Joan will roam no more, except in pictures."[15] Fairbanks' parents were opposed to the union and showed it by not inviting the newlyweds to their house, "Pickfair," for almost a year afterwards. This only fed into the secret insecurity that Crawford had in her life. However, the public was infatuated with the new couple which only served to heighten Crawford's status.

Once the 1930s came around, Crawford was fully statused actress at MGM, but she wasn't their top star.

> One rival stood in her path. Norma Shearer was two years older than Joan, and her husband was Irving Thalberg, the head of MGM production. Shearer embodied the refinement that Joan could only aspire to, and could only acquire by dint of application during the 1930s. "I resented the hell out of Norma Shearer," exclaimed Joan in old age.[16]

Many of the sources on both Crawford and Shearer write about a rivalry between the two actresses. It all started on Crawford's very first movie, when she played the body double to Shearer. Crawford remembers Shearer as not being very friendly to her, and from that point she saw Shearer as her biggest competition, with good reason. Shearer's connection to Thalberg did ensure she received the roles she wanted most, but more importantly, she was a wonderful and popular actress. Her films made huge returns for MGM. But Crawford only saw Shearer's success as superficial—gained because of who her husband was. "How can I compete with Norma…she sleeps with the boss.' This has gone into history as perhaps the most well-known quote about Shearer. The image it conjures is of the entitled "First Lady of MGM" pushing aside

[15] James R. Quirk, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots," *Photoplay*, March 1929, 25.
[16] Peter Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2009), 26.

the more worthy, scrappy, hardworking Joan." [17] Crawford remained bitter towards supposed "leg up" Shearer received because of her marriage.

Although Crawford felt she was competing with Shearer, in reality she was almost as successful as her competition. After the stock-market crash in 1929 and with the beginning of the 1930s, the free-wheeling life style of the 1920s was quickly becoming a thing of the past. MGM and Crawford decided to distance herself from the flapper image. "…she decided to focus on maturing as an actress, and thus prepared the way for a durable career—one that would survive the stock-market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression, and World War II."[18]

With a new decade came new personas for Crawford: the shop girl, the socialite, and jilted lover. The 1930s solidified that Crawford was a bonafide star, with her new personas came a new look courtesy of Gilbert Adrian. After the stock-market crash, women were turning away from the flapper to something more sensible, and Crawford was doing the same:

> Although a sequel to *Our Dancing Daughters* [*Our Modern Maidens* (1929)], the film marked a watershed moment in Joan's career—her last silent picture, and the last salute to the joyous, devil-may-care mood of the flapper age. The pace of studio production may not have been impaired by the stock market crash, but from now on Joan would be cast in roles that accentuated her capacity for hard work and coping with a slim budget.[19]

Now instead of dancing and wearing skin-bearing dresses, Adrian dressed Crawford in dark outfits that complimented her figure, and her popularity soared. Around this time is when Crawford would become a regular at the box office. *Grand Hotel* (1931) was Crawford's "making it" film where she plays a stenographer who offers herself to her boss in order to

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[17] Mick Lasalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 120.
[18] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star*, 26.
[19] Ibid., 51.

advance her career. Her co-stars were Garbo, Lionel and John Barrymore, and, although her part was small, she stole every scene she was in. "*Grand Hotel* had elevated Joan Crawford to the level of Garbo, Shearer, and Dressler…"[20] Even though her career was reaching new highs, her personal life was far from it.

One thing many people do not know about Joan Crawford is that she suffered from anxiety all her life. One place that gave Crawford severe anxiety was her in-laws house, Pickfair. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were not welcoming to Crawford early in their marriage. The humiliation that came with not being invited to her husband's home would be something that Crawford would carry with her during her marriage and throughout her life. "In numerous film roles over the years…she would call on her memories of her treatment at Pickfair to fuel portrayals of characters who had finally been let into certain vaunted settings, only to discover that they would never be truly accepted."[21] While Crawford eventually developed a relationship with Fairbanks Sr., Mary Pickford never warmed up to the actress, believing Crawford was a rival in the movie industry. Crawford was often left alone with Pickford when her husband and father-in-law went golfing on Sundays. Pickford would then ignore Crawford until she went to her room for long naps. Many scholars write about Crawford taking knitting with her to entertain herself while by herself. Being left alone so much, these Sunday trips were a weekly meeting with the family, was a contributing factor into the demise of the Crawford-Fairbanks marriage. The main factor was Crawford's ambition. Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell in their book, *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography,* wrote that Crawford was much more ambitious in her career than Fairbanks and both were frustrated with each other for it. Crawford wanted a man

[20] Mark Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince* (California: University of California Press, 2010), 185.
[21] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford,* 51.

who shared her passion for work and Fairbanks wanted a women who would be a more stay at home wife who let him shine as the star in the house. Crawford realized early on that the marriage was based on sexual attraction and not much else and she wanted out.[22] It was during this rough patch with her first husband that she met Clark Gable on the set of *Dance, Fools, Dance!*(1931). Crawford and Gable would star in eight films together and their chemistry was palpable. They quickly started an affair that would span decades, even though she was married Crawford fell for Gable. "Whether or not Joan had fallen in love with Clark Gable, her marriage to Douglas Fairbanks Jr. was probably doomed from the start."[23] Although Crawford was unhappy in her marriage, she stayed in it at the encouragement of her boss, Louis B. Mayer who would actively work to control his stars' lives and public personas.

In the early 1930s, the Hays Film Code had not yet taken full effect, and Crawford and her fellow major actresses were playing women who were pushing envelopes. One of those characters was Marion in the film *Possessed* (1931). In this film Crawford plays a factory girl who wants more in life and moves to New York to pursue wealthy men. She soon takes up with Mike (played by Clark Gable) and becomes his mistress. He does not want to marry her, so things become complicated when a man from Marion's past shows up, and Mike decides to run for a political office. Marion is faced with the tough decision of having to break things off with Mike so their relationship won't ruin his political career. Since she makes the "good girl" decision and sacrifices her own happiness so that Mike can have the career he wants, she is rewarded, in the end, with a marriage proposal from Mike. These types of women, who play at being a "bad girl" but are really a "good girl," would be all over the movie screen until 1934 when the Code would start being enforced. But these women were not just sexually free women,

[22] Ibid., 52.
[23] Ibid., 67.

they were sophisticated, or would be made over to become sophisticated. Glamourous, sophisticated sexually liberated women became so popular in films that *Variety* noted the development in its year-end review in 1931:

> Important ladies of the screen, those whose names mean drawing power, found smash films in the wages of cinematic sin. The Misses Chatterton, Dietrich, Garbo, Crawford, Bennett and Shearer chose their films on the premise that audiences had tired of heroines on pedestals. Public taste had switched to glamourous, shameful ladies…Not too long ago, playing an unpunished fallen heroine would have jeopardized the career of a film actress. In 1931, it became her ticket to box office supremacy.[24]

Crawford would excel as this type of woman: women who the world tried to keep down because she herself had to claw her way to the top much like these characters. It's with these women that Crawford connected. She played them tough which is much like Crawford herself. "That toughness had worth…Crawford portrayed the desperation and the aspiration of the underdog woman on her own in the world. In many of her films, there's a moment in which her manner falls away, and she suddenly reveals a core of scalding bitterness. In those moments, she never rings false."[25] Crawford was coming into her own as an actress, and audiences were flocking to her films. With her popularity as high as ever, tensions grew in her marriage until in early 1933, Crawford and Fairbanks divorced, much to Louis B. Mayer's objections. Crawford was ready to be with someone who shared her ambition and supported her career.

Crawford was not heartbroken over her divorce with Fairbanks. Her career was flourishing in spite of her divorce. "Even when the columnists reported, in 1933, that Joan and Doug were divorcing, it still meant publicity – plus sympathy for Joan, the working-class heroine

[24] Lasalle, *Complicated Women*, 95.
[25] Ibid., 124.

whose Cinderella marriage had failed."[26] However, Crawford would spin her divorce as something positive in an interview with *Photoplay*; "Some people may think our marriage was a failure," Joan explained… "I don't, personally. I don't think it was a failure for we both Douglas and myself gained something from it."[27] Soon after her divorce she met a man who would become her second husband, Franchot Tone. Tone was also an actor, and the pair met on the set of *Today We Live* (1933). Crawford took it slow in the beginning with Tone, wanting to make sure not to make the same mistake twice. In late 1935 the two were married, and Crawford was over the moon. Tone's career much resembled her first husband's as he was in a few movies, but there wasn't anything dazzling about him. He had more drive than Fairbanks, but Tone, who was a Broadway actor, struggled in film. "Tone became acutely aware that his Hollywood career would always have certain limitations. This dawning frustration eventually grew into resentment. His wife's far greater fame galled him; he hated being second fiddle."[28] Crawford would try to help her husband by getting him supporting roles in films, some in her own films, but Tone just could not break into the realm of superstardom that his wife occupied. Crawford even went to Louis B. Mayer for help "the sum of Mayer's advice was: Franchot is a fine actor, but when it comes to major stardom, there was something lacking. Tone knew it too. He became increasingly bitter."[29] Even though her second marriage was not working out the way she hoped, Crawford was determined to make it work. Crawford once again found herself in a position where her personal life was not mirroring the success of her career. Crawford, at this point in her career, had a major fan base who were loyal to her.

[26] Ibid., 68.
[27] William F. French, "Joan Looks Forward: What will she do with her future? How about that "new romance?" *Photoplay,* July 1933, 30.
[28] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford*, 76.
[29] Ibid.

The Great Depression was impacting more American lives every day, people were struggling to make money or even eat daily meal. Long gone were the days of the flapper and careless days of the 20s. However, audiences were filling seats at movie theaters to watch their favorite actors and actresses in dramas as an escape from the real world, but three years into the 1930s, viewers were beginning to cry out against the immorality they were seeing in films. They did not want women having sex outside of marriage; they did not want to see gangsters go free after multiple murders. Morals were shifting and the film studios had no choice but to follow suit. The Hays Code officially took effect in 1934 and with the moral regulation of the studios came a new persona for Crawford. "…She needed to adapt to changing circumstances. She could no longer take ingénue parts, and fresh faces were surging up through the studio ranks."[30] Crawford would take roles such as glamourous heiresses that had men chasing after her, she starred in one of her few comedies, and also in a rare period costume drama.

In Peter Cowie's book, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star*, Cowie writes that in 1935 Crawford would be turning thirty-one, although official biographies and press releases from MGM state she was just twenty-seven; this is common with early actresses. Audiences never knew their true age. She would be entering her tenth year at MGM, and in the decade she was there, she had completed thirty-eight films that made more than $35 million all together. This success would earn Crawford top-billing above the title where it would stay for the rest of her career.[31] She was finally the mega star she had dreamed of since she was a small girl. She was routinely mentioned in fan magazines and had articles galore about her personal life and career. One thing that helped Crawford be the star that she was, was her fanbase:

[30] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Sta*r, 133.
[31] Ibid.

> Crawford was also regimented when it came to her fans—blocking off hours of the day to respond to each and every fan letter in the order they were received. It was such a routine for her that she had cotton dresses she preferred wearing for the daily task, explaining, "Sometimes people question why I love my public so. It's because the studio didn't make me a star. They gave me the chance to *be* one. It's the audiences that made me a star. I never forget them or what I owe them."[32]

Crawford made sure her fans knew how much they meant to her. In 1938 "The press department at MGM…issued a release state that Joan had received her 900,000th fan letter."[33] One well documented fact about Crawford was how well organized she was, to the point of OCD tendencies. In a 1951 *Cosmopolitan* article, they write about how Crawford kept and organized fan letters. "The filing cabinet contained some fifteen hundred names of Joan Crawford letter-writing fans. No other modern motion-picture star would have bothered to look at them let alone file them and dote on them…"[34] Crawford was adamant about writing anyone who wrote her a letter back even if it was just a quick note during the holidays. A typed letter from 1972 that is in The Library of Congress' archives from Crawford reads: "Dear Frank, Merry Christmas, and may you be blessed with God's gentle touch throughout the New Year. Love Joan."[35] Her fans were important to her especially during the next phase of her career when she would be labeled "Box Office Poison."

In 1938, Harry Brandt, president of the Independent Theater Owners of America, wrote an article for the *Independent Film Journal.* The article, "Box Office Poison," stated that "Joan's

[32] Julie Miller, "Fact-Checking *Feud*: The 5 Most Incredibly Bizarre Joan Crawford Details," Vanity Fair, March 5, 2017, vanityfair.com.
[33] Cowie, *Joan Crawford*, 145.
[34] Cameron Shipp, "The Last of the Movie Queens," Cosmopolitan, April 1941, cosmopolitan.com.
[35] Joan Crawford, letter to Frank Farrel, December 1972, Library of Congress.

films, along with those featuring Marlene Dietrich, Fred Astaire, Greta Garbo, and Katharine Hepburn, were no longer delivering the goods."[36] This article came after a few films that did not make a return at the movie theaters. Countering this, MGM had Crawford sign a new contract "…offering her up to $330,000 per annum for the next five years…"[37] However, the damage had been done to Crawford's ego. As mentioned previously, Crawford suffered from anxiety and had a desperate need to be liked. This article came during what was probably one of the worst times of her career, but she powered through, still making films afraid her popularity would take a nose-dive. In the middle of 1938, Crawford took another hit, she and Tone divorced, because he could not reconcile the fact that his wife was more famous than him. Alone once more after her divorce, Crawford craved loved; she wanted to be loved by someone who wouldn't leave her, and she wanted to be a mother. Bob Thomas in his book *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography*, wrote that Joan began searching agencies in the East that would let a single mother adopt a child. She would soon become a mother to a blond, blue-eyed girl who she named Christina. The next year, she would adopt a baby boy but the birth mother found out who Crawford was and harassed her for money. Crawford eventually returned the little boy to his mother.[38] She would adopt another little boy in the next few years who she would name Christopher. Crawford ended the 1930s with the only film that starred both her and her rival, Norma Shearer.

The Women (1939) is a film about a proper woman whose husband steps out on her for a more free-spirited woman. A unique aspect of this film is that it starred all women, not once does a man appear on screen, even the dogs were female. In the film Norma Shearer plays the wife

[36] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star*, 144.
[37] Ibid., 145.
[38] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 129.

who debates leaving her cheating husband while Crawford plays the bitch trying to steal the husband for his money. “She didn’t steal the picture from Shearer, but she did get a lot of attention, and she didn’t alienate any of her fans or the critics…Joan got higher marks from some of the critics than Shearer did, because she was trying something different…”[39] Even though both women were professional on set, MGM would advertise the film as “the catfight of the century”[40] There was only one unpleasant episode on set between the two actresses. In *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography* Bob Thomas writes that one night on set, Shearer was filming close-ups for a scene between her and Crawford. Crawford had stayed to read her lines to Shearer, and while she said her lines she loudly knitted a blanket. The sound of the needles distracted Shearer, so she asked Crawford to stop her knitting, but Crawford either did not hear or pretended not hear and continued. Shearer told George Cuckor, the director of the film, that Crawford could go home, and he could read the lines to her. Cuckor angrily sent Crawford home and told her to apologize to Shearer. Crawford sent a telegram to Shearer that night. It was never again addressed on set.[41] This film is an interesting indicator for what was to come for these women’s careers. With Shearer playing mothers and housewives--something she did not like to do--she would retire in just a few years. With Crawford playing saucy women who like to have a good time and not losing any fans or critical acclaim over it, she would continue acting for the next four decades. Little did Crawford know her career was about to take a turn that she did not see coming.

With the beginning of the 1940s, Crawford was getting older, and the characters she portrayed were becoming dated. She was unhappy with the movies MGM was giving her, and

[39] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford*, 101.
[40] Ibid., 102.
[41] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 132-133.

audiences were becoming bored with her. America was once again at war. People were looking for distractions. "Wartime audiences were seeking new female stars, all-American girls who combined vitality with virtue—like Betty Grable, Ann Sheridan, and Betty Hutton. Joan Crawford seemed hopelessly tied to the 1930's "woman's picture," which appeared as dated as an NRA poster."[42] In 1941 the heavy weight actresses such as Shearer and Garbo, that had once rivaled Crawford were now retired. Judy Garland, Lana Turner, and Greer Garson were all fresh faces that were new to the movies and audiences loved them. Crawford was feeling the pressure from these young beauties. "Her fans dreaded the aging of Joan Crawford. They kept abreast of every detail of her private existence."[43] Although her fan base was standing by her, she was becoming scarce in magazines, such as *Photoplay.* Searching through magazines of the early 1940s shows readers that her name was mentioned occasionally when talking about her films or in passing in articles on the lives of celebrities. She rarely had articles done solely on her anymore. One article from September 1940 in *Photoplay* called "Photoplay's own Beauty Shop" by Carolyn Van Wyck, still recognizes the hard work of Crawford, even if it about superficial things such as looks:

> Joan Crawford is one of the most startling examples of what persistence can do for you. When she first came to Hollywood her eyebrows were badly shaped, her hairdress and make-up concealed rather than emphasized the really beautiful bone structure of her face. She transformed herself into the exquisite creature she is today through her own unceasing efforts…[44]

[42] Ibid., 143.
[43] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring* Star,154.
[44] Carolyn Van Wyck, "Photoplays Own Beauty Shop," *Photoplay*, September 1940, 8.

Within this same article the author writes about Norma Shearer, Carole Lombard, and Mary Astore. By not putting Crawford with younger actresses, Wyck is signaling the stark age difference between Crawford, who was now in her late 30s and the young, sometimes teenage, new actresses.

Although Crawford was beginning to feel her age in 1942, she met a man who would become her third husband. Phillip Terry was another small bit actor from MGM, they married in 1942 after only dating for six weeks. Crawford was desperate for a father for her two adopted children and was suffering from a waning career. On the set of one her final films with MGM, *Reunion in France* (1942) with John Wayne he remembers "I knew what kind of marriage it was going to be when I saw her walk on set. First came Joan, then her secretary, then her makeup man, then her wardrobe woman, finally Phil Terry, carrying the dog."[45] Crawford was a star and perhaps now she needed a man who wouldn't try to become as famous as her. While she was basking in the glow of her third marriage, Crawford was growing increasingly frustrated with MGM, and it shows in her work. They were not giving her the parts she felt she deserved as one of the top actresses of the studio. The acting in the last few films that she made was uninspiring, and repetitive--as if she was on autopilot. So in 1943, after seventeen years, Crawford departed MGM but she would land on her feet. "Just two days after she quit MGM, Crawford signed…an exclusive deal with Warner Bros. She agreed to make three films for a total fee of $500,000."[46] Little did Crawford know that this deal would change the trajectory of her career in the next few years.

For the two years Crawford did not star in any films. She was finally able to be more selective about the movie roles she accepted. She would act in short advertisements for the war

[45] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star*, 175.
[46] Ibid., 178.

effort but Crawford was waiting for the right picture. "…With World War II raging in Europe and the Far East, Warners prospered with its relentless flow of melodramas, gangster pictures, and war movies."[47] With the current social climate being caught up in war, it makes sense that audiences were drawn to films that would make it seem the drama of their everyday lives were nothing compared to those on screen. *Mildred Pierce* (1945) is Crawford's best and most iconic film. This was the first film that Crawford filmed with her new studio. She stars as a mother, Mildred Pierce, something that was relatable to film goers at the time. The opening of the film shows a man being shot and saying the name Mildred. We then see Crawford walking along a pier alone and at night. She stares at the ocean in a way that lets audiences know she wants to jump in. She is stopped by a police officer before she does. She then meets up with her friend Wally at his nightclub, and the way they interact indicates that Wally wants to be more than just friends, but Mildred has repeatedly denied him. It is clear that Mildred is disturbed during this meeting. She seems distracted, and her voice is monotone. On this night though she invites him back to her house. The next scene shows them at the same house as the dead body, but Wally is oblivious to it as they go downstairs to have a drink. Wally attempts to make a move on Mildred, but she rebuffs him; Mildred then leaves the room to change. She slips out of the house, and Wally is caught at the house with the dead body. Mildred is brought in by the police for questioning, and she sees her ex-husband has been arrested for her current husband's murder. Mildred then begins to explain how her ex-husband could never have murdered Monte.

Mildred's story begins when her and her husband, Bert, split up because he accuses her of putting their two daughters before their marriage; she accuses him of cheating on her. During this exchange it is revealed that Mildred bakes to make money, and any money she makes she

[47] Ibid., 180.

spends on her daughters, mostly Veda. Veda is a social-climber who never thinks what she has is enough. She wants the best and she lets her mother know this. After her break-up Mildred gets a job as a waitress in a restaurant. This was very relatable for women in the 1940s who were going to work in factories and other places while their husbands were at war. Mildred proves herself to be a very good worker and works her way up eventually deciding to open her own restaurant. She goes to Wally, a real estate agent, to help her obtain a property. Mildred has a place in mind and Wally takes her to the property where she meets its owner, Monte. Monte is from a family that was once very wealthy but are now having to sell their properties due to running out of money. They make a deal, and Mildred begins renovations. One day Monte stops by and asks her to join him at his house by the ocean. She agrees, and they go. While there they are sitting by a fire and Monte confesses his love to her. They begin kissing and the camera slowly pans to the record player, indicated that they have sex. This is a major plot point because it shows that Crawford as a sexual woman having sex outside of marriage. It also shows that her character is not a typical film noir woman. She is not a femme fatal. She is just an ordinary woman having sex. After the wonderful night with Monte, Mildred is brought back to reality when one of her daughters dies from pneumonia. Mildred vows to do everything in her power to keep Veda safe. The next scene shows the opening of Mildred's restaurant, and it is very successful. Veda is there chatting with Monte, mentioning she has seen him before in the socialite section of the paper with the "most beautiful debutants."[48] Mildred makes plenty of money to support Veda's expensive lifestyle and Monte's gambling, but Mildred soon parts ways with Monte. Veda then marries a young socialite and his family strongly disapproves, so they begin divorce proceedings where Veda announces she wants $10,000 because she is pregnant. When Mildred and Veda

[48] *Mildred Pierce*, directed by Michael Curtiz (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945).

return home Veda makes it clear she is not pregnant, she only wanted the money, so she could get away from her mom. Mildred kicks Veda out and goes on vacation, so she could forget about her. When she returns, she goes searching for Veda only to find her as a performer at Wally's night club. Mildred begs Veda to return home, but Veda refuses saying Mildred could never give her the kind of life she wants. Mildred then goes to Monte suggesting marriage to get Veda back. Monte wants a 1/3 share in Mildred's business in return for marrying her. She agrees, and they marry.

The marriage is an unhappy one with Veda and Monte spending all of Mildred's money. Soon audiences see that Mildred has gone bankrupt and must sell her share of the restaurant, but Monte has schemed his way into keeping his; when this is revealed to Mildred, she goes to confront Monte. She arrives at the beach house only to find Veda and Monte locked in a kiss. Veda then states that they began their affair a while ago, before they were even married. She tells her mom that Monte doesn't love her, and he will leave her and marry her. Mildred pulls a gun but drops it and leaves. Once she is out of the room, Monte tells Veda she is nothing but a silly girl, and he would never love or marry her. While Mildred is in her car, she hears gunshots, so she runs back into the house and sees Veda holding the gun and Monte dead on the floor. Veda begs Mildred to help her because she will change, and it's her mother's fault she is the way she is. Audiences are transported back to the police station with Mildred saying she was the one who shot Monte. The police officer informs her they do not believe her and have captured the true murderer and Veda is escorted in. Mildred tries to comfort her, but Veda rebuffs her. Mildred then walks outside meeting up with her ex-husband, signaling they will get back together.

This film was unique because it is one of the first film noir that is told from a woman's perspective. There is no male hero. Mildred is able to save herself because that is what her

character has continued to do throughout the film. This character was relatable to women who were essentially single mothers during the war and it also provided a much-needed distraction while their men were gone. This film also seems to be a cautionary tale about mothers putting their children before their marriages: they end up with nothing. Crawford's ability to adapt to the changing times, like during the war, were a reason why she was able to have career longevity.

Mildred Pierce was Crawford's comeback from the "Box Office Poison" title that had been given to her eight years earlier. The film was a hit with audiences and made a lot of money. Crawford would go on to win the Academy Award for her performance. In true Crawford fashion and dramatics, she was not at the ceremony due to being sick with the flu, but as soon as she had won, a party began at her house. Her award was presented to her by Michael Curtiz, the director of the film who had accepted the award on her behalf at the ceremony, while she was still in bed with cameras catching the exchange. Crawford was back on top, and the same person that had made her famous had re-started her career as well--herself. She was a self-made star, and she would endure whatever was thrown her way.

Unfortunately for Crawford, she was stuck in a pattern. While her career had reached its peak, her personal life was once again in shambles. She divorced Terry in 1946 after only four years of marriage. Her husband spoke of their marriage as if it was dreadful existence, "her household [was run] like a dictator, drawing up a schedule divided into fifteen minute blocks—and allotting him one hour for sex each afternoon."[49] According to multiple sources, Crawford's third marriage is when she developed her problem with drinking which helped with her anxiety and self-confidence, but could not help with the loneliness. In 1947 Crawford adopted twin baby girls, bringing her household number to five, including her. Her children would be the distraction

[49] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring* Star, 183.

when she was not filming movies, and, unfortunately, she was not filming much after she won the Academy Award. "Joan Crawford would make only four more films during the 1940s, despite the acclaims for *Mildred Peirce.* Advised by her agent Lew Wasserman, she was increasingly selective about her projects." [50] She wanted roles that featured her as the strong, dominate female while the men were compliant. Her last four movies of the 1940s were the type of roles she wanted, but she could not remake the magic of *Mildred Peirce.* The 1940s ended and she was happy with where her career was. "She had outlasted the sexy young stars from the 1930s and early 1940s. Even Bette Davis, for so long the queen of the Warner lot, had begun her inevitable decline. As Jack Warner took personal charge of Crawford's career at the studio, she braced herself for change."[51]

Entering the 1950s, Crawford was worried about her career. On March 1st, 1950, Charles Brackett, a screen writer, wrote in his journal about a lunch that he had with Joan Crawford and Cole Porter, he noted that Crawford was worried her career was over.[52] Crawford was beginning to feel like she was not going to be back on top again, and the movies she was being given at Warners were not helping. She wanted more challenging roles and RKO Studios had one for her. "Joan wanted to end her association with Warner Brothers so that she could get the lead in *Sudden Fear.* Jack Warner thought Joan's days as a star were coming to an end, and he wanted to end her contract."[53] In 1952, Crawford filmed her last movie for Warners and went to RKO to film *Sudden Fear* (1952). *Sudden Fear* is about a successful woman, Myra Hudson, who marries a man who only wants her money, so he plots her murder. She finds out about it and plots his murder and plans to pin it on his ex-girlfriend who he was still seeing. *Sudden Fear,* brought

[50] Ibid., 185.
[51] Ibid., 190.
[52] Charles Brackett, diary entry, March 1, 1950, Academy of Motion Pictures.
[53] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford*, 159.

Crawford success once again, and she received her final Oscar nomination for her role as Myra Hudson. Crawford, who was now without a studio, was receiving many different offers for movie roles. "Most of the screenplays presented to Crawford now featured female characters of some accomplishment—as befitted her "certain age."[54] Crawford was nearing her late 40s (or she was already in them by some sources), and her roles were becoming older, such as Mildred where she played a mother or Myra where she was a playwright heiress. With Crawford's increasing age also came her "diva attitude." While on the set of *Sudden Fear,* Jack Palance who plays her husband "hated the way Joan showed up with an entourage each morning."[55] But was it really that Crawford showed up with an entourage every day that bothered her male costar? Perhaps it went deeper than that. "Palance's main problem toward Joan was that she was a much bigger name than he was, and he thought he was much more talented. A lot of Joan's male costars didn't like strong women."[56] The men of Hollywood were threatened by Crawford, as evidence by her three failed marriages. She proved she was still a successful movie star and she would not be quitting anytime soon.

The 1950s were also a time that "marked the consecration of Crawford as a gay icon. The image was everything: baleful eyebrows arching in disdain, the mannish, close-cropped coiffure, the predatory smile, and above all the glare of the gaze, sufficient to send quailing men to their knees in submission."[57] One film that sticks out is *Johnny Guitar* (1954). In this western, she plays Vienna, a saloon owner who wants the railroad to be built. She battles with the locals, who do not want the rail road, with the help of her old lover, Johnny Guitar. Vienna is accused of robbery by her once rival Emma, and Emma wants Vienna to be hanged for her crimes. Vienna

[54] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star,* 192.
[55] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 162.
[56] Ibid., 162.
[57] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star,* 190-191.

is saved by Johnny, and soon a showdown occurs. Emma ends up dead, shot by Vienna. In this film Crawford appears "domineering and androgynous" she wears pants and appears mannish in her looks, and it suits her. "Crawford knew that she had joined the ranks of those female stars—Barbara Stanwyck, Judy Garland, Greta Garbo—who appealed to the gay community. Crawford embraced this, and even began wearing her hair shorter, but even finding a new audience to appeal to couldn't help Crawford's career. She was aging, and the film industry did not favor older women. Men are usually paired with much younger women, but older women are never paired with younger men:

> As a women alone in the world's most competitive business, she was forced to compete as a man, and as an aging star her only hope for survival was to find roles that stressed her invincibility. She had defied time longer than most stars, but now it was catching up to her. Male stars dominated the film world, and they wanted their masculinity enhanced by appearing with young, sexually attractive actresses.[58]

Audience values were also shifting. After the end of WWII, strong women's roles were becoming fewer as women were to be subservient to their husbands. Women needed to be the perfect housewife and women in film were being relegated to just be the beautiful woman who needed a man to take care of her. While Crawford was in limbo with her career, she met a man whom she would soon marry.

At the end of 1954, Crawford met Alfred Steele, president of Pepsi-Cola. The two would marry in May of 1955. Crawford continued acting, but also went with her husband on business trips. Crawford also continued to drink heavily as her family problems continued. Her two oldest children, in her eyes, were misbehaving. She was struggling with how to be a mother to four

[58]Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 193.

children. She sent them to various boarding schools through the year so that she wouldn't have to deal with raising them. To distract herself from her family problems and career troubles--she was not being offered parts she thought she deserved--she began to take more of an interest in her husband's job. "Crawford took her role as Steele's wife just as seriously as any movie role—ensuring that Pepsi bottles were in full display for every photo op, dispensing the cola on her film sets, and traveling with Steele all over the world for Pepsi, treating each bottling plant ceremony as though it were a red-carpet movie premiere."[59] Crawford's affiliation with Pepsi is one of the many funny quirks about her later life. Many sources write about how she would demand to have Pepsi-Cola machines at every film studio where she was filming. However, in 1959, Alfred Steele died and left the 54-year-old Crawford a widow; however, she would still be involved with Pepsi. "Pepsi paid her $50,000 a year to make promotional appearances on behalf of the company, until she turned 65."[60] Crawford continued to act, and her remaining years on screen has only one memorable role in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962).

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane "is a macabre, rancid, and cut-rate *Psycho*, and alongside *Johnny Guitar* remains the campiest in Crawford's career."[61] *Baby Jane* stars Crawford as Blanche Hudson and Bette Davis as Jane, Blanche's sister. Jane was a successful child stare while Blanche was a famous film actress. Blanche becomes paralyzed one night in a car accident, and Jane is blamed for it. In their old age the sisters are living together in a mansion that limits Blanche's mobility because she is in a wheelchair. Jane is an alcoholic who treats Blanche terribly by denying her food and isolating her by taking away the phone in her room. Jane, even though in old age, has been dressing up like her former persona 'baby Jane' to relive

[59] Julie Miller, "Fact-Checking *Feud*: The 5 Most Incredibly Bizarre Joan Crawford Details," Vanity Fair, March 5, 2017, vanityfair.com.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star*, 205.

her former glory. One day when Blanche tries to call someone to help her escape, Jane comes home to find her on the phone and beats her until Blanche falls unconscious. Their maid comes one day while Jane is gone, suspicious and finds Blanche tied up. Jane comes home, sneaks up on the maid, and kills her with a hammer. While Jane flees with Blanche, Blanche confesses that it is her own fault she is paralyzed. She was angry at Jane because she was making fun of her and she wanted to run her over, but she let Jane believe it was her fault she was paralyzed so she would have to be her full time care-giver. Jane then mentally reverts back to 'Baby Jane." The police find them and Blanche is saved from her sister. The making of this film was publicized so much because Crawford and Davis were known rivals. There are countless stories of both actresses being mean and vindictive towards each other. One that is written about many times is the story of the Academy Awards. Davis had been nominated for best actress for her role in *Baby Jane,* while Crawford had not been nominated for hers. Davis wanted to win badly, and Crawford knew this, so she offered to accept the award for the winner if they were absent. "Joan took over the largest dressing room and installed two Pepsi-Cola coolers filled with liquor….Bette paced nervously backstage awaiting the designation of the winner for best actress…"[62] Bette did not win, Anne Bancroft did. "Bette felt a hand on her arm. "Excuse me," said Crawford as she strode past Better and crossed the stage amid heavy applause."[63] Crawford continued acting after *Baby Jane*, even starting a sequel to the film, but a comeback did not pan out. She was becoming frequently more demanding and losing out on roles.

In 1963, Crawford lost on the role of Fran Cabrell in the Hal Wallis produced film, *Wives and Lovers.* In letters between Crawford and Wallis, Crawford apologizes to Wallis for it not working out. Wallis responds in a letter dated January 9, 1963:

[62] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*, 229.
[63] Ibid., 229.

> …may I give you a little gratuitous advice. In the future if you find something you really want to do, don't try to win all the arguments through lawyers and lose the part. The things they were fighting for were unrealistic and concessions could easily have been made by you and them. I made every effort to meet these demands, but there is a breaking point. In the end result, nobody won and you lost the part and $100,00. I know you don't need the money, but I also know that you have a fondness for the business and that you occasionally enjoy doing something that appeals to you. So have a good year and don't play so rough in the future.[64]

Crawford responds in a letter dated January 12, 1963:

> Thank you for your letter. And, honey, I wasn't being "tough". I was only asking for things that thirty years in the picture business have given me right to. Me tough? All I asked for was a separate card with my name on it; and Edith Head who is under contract to you. I intended to wear my own shorts and things which would not be costly to you. Edith and I discussed that. It was too bad it had go through the East Coast rather than you and me before we discussed those things…[65]

These letters are interesting because they show just how condescending a man can be towards a powerful woman in the industry. Although we do not know if she was asking for more than what she stated, she has a point that she has been in the industry for thirty years. Would a man who has put in the same years be called tough? Probably not. Crawford continued to act despite the demands she would make.

Crawford's final movies seem to only have been made because perhaps she needed the money or perhaps, they were the only roles being offered to a woman her age, but she would

[64] Hal Wallis, letter to Joan Crawford, January 9, 1963, Academy of Motion Pictures.
[65] Joan Crawford, letter to Hal Wallis, January 12, 1963, Academy of Motion Pictures.

eventually decide to retire. “For the last few years of her life, Crawford withdrew from the implacable gaze of the klieg lights. Gradually closing her windows, so to speak, she continued to run her daily life with the discipline that had seen her survive four marriages and forty-five years of stardom.”[66] Crawford passed away May 10th 1977 alone at her home. The great Joan Crawford even after her death would continue to, as Peter Cowie says in the title of his book, endure.

Crawford’s legacy as a woman and an actress has been hotly debated since her death in 1977. One reason is that the year after her death, her oldest daughter, Christina, published her book *Mommie Dearest.* This book accused Crawford of abusing her children emotionally and physically. One horrifying memory told by Christina is when her mother beat her with a wire hanger because Crawford did not approve of them. But many sources debate these stories. While she was notoriously hard on her children, perhaps she was just a product of her time. “It was perhaps natural that Crawford, the most disciplined of movie stars, sought to have the most disciplined of children, especially when she had to assume the roles of both father and mother.”[67] Crawford had grown up with nothing and became something and wanted her children to be grateful for all things she never had as a kid. Lawrence J. Quirk and William Schoell in *Joan Crawford: The Essential Biography* accuse Christina of being like her daughter in *Mildred Pierce,* always wanting more and that Crawford never lived up to her expectations. They write that Christina had wanted to break into the movie industry as an actress, and Crawford would frequently try to help her, but the young woman did not have the abilities her mother did. Since she could not become a star like her mother, she turned on her and published her book for

[66] Cowie, *Joan Crawford: The Enduring Star,* 206.
[67] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography,*168.

revenge.[68] It is interesting that Christina, who says in interviews for the book, that she wrote it as catharsis after her mother died and never intended for anyone to read it, has gone on to capitalize on what she portrays as a very traumatizing time in her life. Currently she is in the midst of turning her book into a musical.[69] After the book was released, many people came to her defense such as ex-husbands, her two other twin daughters, and even her rival, Bette Davis. While this thesis is to debate whether or not Crawford was abusive, *Mommie Dearest* remains one of the things Crawford is most remembered for. Despite the negative implications that surround her legacy, Crawford's legacy could also be so strong because she knew how to adapt within the studio and she listened to what the men told her to do.

Crawford was a self-made star no doubt, but only to a certain degree. Unlike Norma Shearer, Crawford arrived in California alone. Once married, Crawford could not lean on her husband for guidance like Shearer could; she needed to look elsewhere for support. However, while at MGM, she relied heavily on the guidance of Louis B. Mayer, a man she considered a father figure. Multiple sources make note of how Crawford affectionately called Mayer L.B. and went to him when she was having troubles with work. Thomas even says she referred to him as "papa Mayer."[70] Thomas also writes that Louis B. Mayer fulfilled the father figure role that had been missing from Crawford's life since the early abandonment she suffered with both her biological father and step-father; but she was wary of the judgements he made for her career, not sure if they were in her best interest or MGM's.[71] Mayer tried to guide Crawford's career, and she listened to him fully although she did push back once she grew tired of the socialite/shop girl

[68] Quirk and Schoell, *Joan Crawford*, 259-261.
[69] Christopher Rudolph, "Mommie Dearest' Musical Scrubs Its Way Closer to Broadway," Logo, new now next, September 22, 2017, newnownext.com
[70] Thomas, *Joan Crawford: A Biography*.
[71] Ibid., 88-89.

roles she found herself repeatedly cast in. Cary writes that, she wanted meatier roles. Mayer threw more complex roles her way every now and then, such as *The Gorgeous Hussy* (1936), but this film did not return a large profit, so Mayer kept her in her comfort zone of characters.[72] Crawford might not have enjoyed these roles, but they kept he in the good favors of Mayer which meant that Crawford did not have to face retaliation from him that some actors and actresses experienced. She continued to be featured in top films that added to her larger body of work. This could what kept Crawford relevant in the audience's mind, while Shearer was beginning to star in fewer films as the years passed. Another possible reason Crawford is remembered is her open relationship with her fans.

Crawford proudly lived like the star she was. Her fans had a near personal relationship with her because she let them know so much about herself and her life. "Joan Crawford's obsession with order and cleanliness is *very* well documented…from the custom-ordered plastic slipcovers that perfectly fit each piece of her Billy Haines furniture to the plastic encasing each item in her fanatically organized closet."[73] There are pictures of Crawford lounging on her plastic covered furniture and surely this made audiences curious about her life and lifestyle.[74] Although she wrapped her house in plastic, she still lived as glamorously as one would imagine a movie star would. Crawford worked hard to share parts of her personal life this could be because it helped keep them interested in her or maybe she was genuinely thankful for them. As mentioned before, Crawford also had a separate outfit when she would write fan letters, but it was not just for writing that she had different outfits. She had different outfits for different activities throughout the day, cooking, receiving guests, cleaning, etc. These quirks are still

[72] Cary, *All the Stars in Heaven*, 231.
[73] Julie Miller, "Fact-Checking *Feud*: The 5 Most Incredibly Bizarre Joan Crawford Details," *Vanity Fair*, March 5, 2017, vanityfair.com.
[74] Ibid.

frequently written about and are some of the most well known facts about Crawford. She was also a heavy drinker and did not hide this fact. As mentioned in the historiography earlier, Crawford would drink and make late night phone calls, but she also lived in the past and watched her old films:

> There were frequent nights when Crawford could be found at home, alone, drinking and talking back to her television set. When her old movies were shown, if the movie was real bad she would yell at the TV and say, "Joan Crawford, you stink, you really stink." If the film was good she cut telephone callers short. "Hang up," she told her daughter Cindy. "I'm watching *Flamingo Road* and it's enchanting…[75]

Crawford's love for vodka is in almost every book and article written about her. She did eventually stop drinking once she learned she had developed stomach cancer, but her drinking habit adds to the sadness that surrounded Crawford's final years. These stories certainly add an interesting quality to Crawford's story; those having to choose between Crawford and Shearer would certainly say Crawford had a more curious life. While both women were important to old Hollywood, Crawford's attention-grabbing tales would certainly be a reason why she is remembered.

What stands out the most about Crawford is her resiliency. Crawford knew she was born to be a star, and she made it happen despite her childhood being terrible she did not let it hold her back. Crawford was a self-proclaimed "self-made star," and she was proud of it. When there were shifts in social climates, Crawford adapted and constantly recreated herself to become what audiences wanted to see and relate too. Her career surprisingly never suffered from any of her divorces; they almost made her even more popular than before. She outlasted almost all of the

[75] Julie Miller, "Fact-Checking *Feud*: Inside Joan Crawford's Sad Final Years," *Vanity Fair*, April 23, 2017, vanityfair.com.

actresses of her time to have a career that would span over four decades. Her acting was nothing special until she reached *Mildred Peirce,* but in that film, she really became the Joan Crawford the world knows. So what made her so iconic? Why is she remembered today? It could be in part because of *Mommie Dearest*, it could also be because a few of her films were great, such as *Mildred Peirce* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* These films are the two most well-known films she starred in but *Johnny Guitar* has a cult following due to its kitschy script. It could also be because of relationship with Mayer and the men who helped advance her career. Crawford knew how to play the studio game and adapted with the changing times and this undoubtedly is a key reason why her career was so long. She is remembered as a bitch, but Crawford was one of the most generous movie stars of her time. She was routinely donating money to hospitals and charities. Crawford's legacy is an interesting one to discuss because she is fascinating person. Perhaps Crawford is so well remembered because of how long her career was and how glamourous she was on and off screen. She exuded beauty, sex, and confidence and that is something that resonates with women in the audience even today. Her films are still shown on channels such as Turner Classic Movies, and she is written about in nearly all books written about old Hollywood. Perhaps it just the persona Crawford created or the idea of such a glamorous movie star that makes her so memorable. Audiences are captivated by the idea of a great and somewhat tragic later in life star. One thing is for sure about Crawford, her legacy will continue to live on even as some of her contemporaries are forgotten.

Chapter Four

Norma Shearer: A Forgotten Movie Star

"So look for me in the future where the primroses grow and pack your man's pride with the rest. From now on, you're the only man in the world that my door is closed to."[1] This line is delivered by Norma Shearer's character, Jerry Martin, from the film *The Divorcee* (1930). The movie featured Shearer in a role that, at the time, was very bold; her character, after learning of her husband's infidelity, decides to even the score by having an affair of her own. While the movie has a happy ending, the rest of the plot involves partying, alcoholism and sex. Multiple films starring Shearer have a similar plot, women owning their sexuality without remorse. Shearer was a sex bombshell without the title, she was no Jean Harlow, but she did have sex appeal, on screen at least.

Shearer's best-known films are *The Divorcee, A Free Soul* (1931), *Marie Antoinette* (1938), and *The Women* (1939). Three out of the four films feature Shearer in roles that she loved to play, a woman who uses her body for revenge or pleasure, but she always has control over her choices and does not seek the opinions of men. The fourth film, *The Women*, has Shearer in a motherly role where she is trying to decide to leave her cheating husband or not, but she is still in control of her own fate and body. She doesn't do what her mother tells her, "be still, it will pass." She doesn't do what society says she should. She is in control.

Shearer was married to Irving Thalberg, a producer at MGM, and she benefited from having her husband in a leading role at MGM. She often had her pick of film roles, but after his death in 1936, Shearer struggled to continue in acting. She tried to adapt to the changing times at MGM but she resisted playing older, motherly roles; she much preferred playing the young love

[1] *The Divorcee*, directed by Robert Z. Leonard (1930; Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

interest. For example, Shearer was thirty-five years old when she was cast to play Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936). Shearer's story is an interesting one, and yet she is rarely remembered in modern film history. Her films are fun and enjoyable to watch so where is her recognition? Why are her films not on repeat on Turner Classic Films like Joan Crawford's? This chapter will look at Shearers personal life, career, and media persona to try and find out why women in Hollywood, particularly very popular women, are forgotten. This chapter will also compare and contrast the lives of Shearer and Crawford and how their differences as well as the men in their lives contributed to their legacies.

Edith Norma Shearer was born August 10, 1900, in Montreal. Of course, like many old Hollywood stars, her true birthdate is not definitively known, but this date was given in at least three different sources. Not much is known about Shearer's childhood except that it seems to have been a pleasant one, a far cry from Crawford's turbulent childhood. Shearer's mother, Edith Shearer, it seems, was a stage mom, who often controlled her children and husband with an iron fist. She wanted both of her daughters, Norma and her older sister Athole, to be famous either modeling or as actresses.

In 1920, after her husband lost a great deal of money in bad investments, Mrs. Shearer moved herself and her two daughters to New York, leaving her husband behind. According to Lawrence J. Quirk, the Shearer sisters went on rounds throughout New York, introducing themselves to men who they thought could help them break into the business, such as the editor of *Photoplay.*[2] One man she visited was Florenz Ziegfeld, the creator of *Ziegfeld's Follies* on Broadway, but their meeting was brief. "He told her that her legs were not quite up to the requirements of a show girl, that her teeth needed straightening, and that her eye, in which she

[2] Lawrence J. Quirk, *Norma: The Story of Norma Shearer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 25-26.

had a cast, where her eye would drift and at times make her look cross-eyed, mar her appearance."[3] This did not stop Shearer's determination to become an actress, she had her teeth capped and started working out to lose weight.

Soon Norma Shearer's hard work paid off, and she and her sister were being hired as extras in silent films such as *The Flapper* (1920) and *The Restless Sex* (1920). One particular experience on D.W. Griffith's film *Way Down East* (1920) struck a blow to Shearer's confidence. According to Gavin Lambert in his book *Norma Shearer: A Life*, the young and naïve Shearer confidently went up to Griffith to introduce herself to him, and he coldly told her that her blue eyes would always looked blank during closeups and that she would never make it as movie star.[4] After multiple men mentioned a problem with her eye, she decided to try to correct it. Lambert writes that Shearer went to see Dr. William Horatio Bates. Dr. Bates specialized the treatment of incorrectly aligned eyes, and he believed in retraining eye muscles instead of using surgery or glasses. He gave Shearer exercises to work on to help with the cast in her eye.[5] Her exercises could not rid her of the cast but could help her control it better. In that same year, she met Edward Small, a talent agent, who took her on as one of his clients.

Small believed in Shearer's ability and helped her first movie role in *The Stealers* (1920). Unfortunately for Shearer, this film didn't launch her career. She was not offered more roles, so she, her sister, and mother all packed up moved back to Montreal. Athole soon met a man who she would marry, having already decided that making movies were not for her. The Shearer matriarch wanted more than marriage for her younger daughter, so they returned to New York

[3] Jack Jacobs and Myron Braum, *The Films of Norma Shearer.* New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1976), 17.
[4] Gavin Lambert, *Norma Shearer: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 21.
[5] Ibid., 22-23.

with the hopes of returning to a film set. Shearer returned to working and continued to receive small roles and made a few films, but in 1922, but soon her luck would change.

In 1923 Irving Thalberg and Louis B. Mayer were in the beginning stages of their partnership and needed contract stars. In *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince,* Mark A. Vieira writes that Thalberg suggested they offer a contract to Shearer. Thalberg had seen two of her films, and while he thought she needed some coaching, he liked what he saw and believed she could be great star. Mayer agreed and sent a contract over to Small. Shearer and her mother both eagerly agreed to the 5-year contract as long as Edith could join her daughter in her trip to California. In March 1923, both Shearer women arrived in Los Angeles to meet with Mayer and Thalberg.[6] This was to be a new beginning for all four and all were eager to get to work.

It was not immediately obvious that Shearer was going to be a star. Shearer began her work, screen testing for a film called *The Wanters* (1923). It did not go well for Shearer. "…in fact Thalberg was very disappointed. Mayer and Stahl [MGM studio head] thought it was a fiasco, and Norma came close to being put on the company shelf."[7] Because of Shearer's inexperience as an actress and the way her eye looked in the lighting, her career almost ended before it began. Luckily, another cameraman offered to reshoot her screen test, and this time he helped her find her good angles. Mayer and Thalberg were more pleased with this test, but still did not cast her in the lead role. These men controlled if Shearer was going to last at the studio or not and she needed to show them her talent. After completing *The Wanters,* her next movie, *A Clouded Name* was almost a disaster as well, the director worked too quickly and would yell at her and she could hardly emote any emotions around him. She had to have a long talk with

[6] Mark A. Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 21.
[7] Lambert, *Norma Shearer*, 43.

Mayer and Thalberg but when she returned to set, she returned a changed woman; she was fighting for her job, she had to prove she deserved to remain on set. Shearer gave everything to the performance, determined to prove these men wrong and was now able give herself over completely to emotional scenes. Shearer's early career failure could have been from fright, she was transplanted into this new city with barely any experience. In the film *A Clouded Name* it becomes clear that Shearer needed strong guidance from her directors, someone who would help her find her good angles to help hide the cast in her eye. She also needed good costumes to flatter her figure, instead of highlighting the parts she detested."[8] The early failure could also be attributed to the men around her, no one was guiding her and while Mayer's talk seemed to help, her status was still shaky. If Shearer was going to make it, she needed to make sure she looked good on screen. It is documented in many sources that Shearer would sit in front of a mirror for hours a day working on control over her eye as well as finding angles that best suited her. This is similar to what Crawford did as well, both working hard to find their most flattering angles because the men in charge wanted beautiful women to be on the screen. From that point on Shearer became dedicated to making herself better and putting everything she had into her performances. She, like Crawford, never took acting classes, they just decided to become actresses and then became them. She finished 1923 having completed seven films, not having been the main star for any of them and in early 1924 MGM was created.

Shearer's popularity began to climb in 1924. She was being mentioned more frequently in fan magazines and even had her picture featured in them. For example, there is a photo of her in *Photoplay* from the October 1924 edition. This picture shows a very rare long-haired Shearer. Underneath her photo it reads: "Norma Shearer is rapidly advancing to the forefront of young

[8] Ibid., 45.

cinema actresses, for she has beauty and unusual promise…she has been in pictures just three years and she already has several pleasant hits to her credit."[9] She was also beginning to take notice of her boss, Thalberg. Mark A. Vieira writes that Thalberg's secretary noted that Shearer had been out to get Thalberg since the first day she walked into the studio. She would sit in the secretary's office for long periods of time making idle chit chat just for the chance to see Thalberg, and for him to see her.[10] Thalberg denied having any feelings towards Shearer, but he did begin to notice her more because of the progress she was making and rewarded her leading roles. One of these was Consuelo in *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924). This film was about a clown who falls in love with Shearer's character and tries to save her from a Count who had betrayed him earlier in life. It was a hit. On November 15th an article in the *Los Angeles Times* reported: "This immense theater is literally jammed at every performance, with standing room only at even the opening and dinner-hour shows. It would surely play a second week."[11] Even with the success of *He Who Gets Slapped*, Shearer felt like she was not receiving the roles she deserved, but when she complained to Thalberg about her grievances, he would tell her to trust him and Mayer and the system. Then entered Greta Garbo, "the newest star at MGM now became the focus of Thalberg's professional interest."[12] Garbo was the alluring, magnetic actress from Europe that everyone at the studio seemed to become enamored with. Shearer was frustrated with the lack of attention her career was getting especially since she "…had improved her looks, sharpened her talent, and emerged as confident, demanding star."[13] Shearer had proven herself to be a star. Her films brought a lot of money into the studio, but Shearer was feeling insecure not

[9] Photo by Edwin Bower Hesser, *Photoplay*, October 1924, 19.
[10] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg*, 42.
[11] Ibid., 43.
[12] Lambert, *Norma Shearer*, 59.
[13] Ibid., 60.

only in her professional life but also in her personal life. She did not have anyone to protect and guide her like other women in the studio, she was beginning to yearn for someone to lean on:

> While Norma came home to mother, Marion was fervently "protected" by Hearst; Eleanor Boardman and Vidor were about to get married; on and off screen, Garbo and Gilbert had become famous lovers; Joan Crawford, sexually manipulative in a way that went against Norma's grain, had induced Paul Bern to launch her in a major success, *Our Dancing Daughters.*[14]

These women had a man to help them, even Crawford who reportedly used sex to advance her career. She wanted someone who could help guide her in the chaos of the studio. Shearer, while still a popular silent film star, felt her career did not come as easily as Garbo's had, and neither had love. Shearer had a few very discreet love affairs but none of them lasted. She was wanting someone to be with for the long haul and she had a certain someone in mind.

The controversy surrounding Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg's relationship is very polarized. Thalberg suffered from congenital heart disease from childhood, and because of this, he was often described looking frail and sickly, so many questioned why Shearer would want to marry him knowing he would be in poor health. It also seemed almost suspect at the timing of their relationship. In 1927 "Shearer had now reached a pinnacle of success that placed her in the star category, though she was still considered second grade."[15] Shearer wanted more, and she continually let Thalberg know how she felt about wanting better roles. Little did she know that he had big plans for her. Thalberg recognized her talent and was wanting to turn her into a super

[14] Ibid., 61.
[15] Jacobs and Braum, *The Films of Norma Shearer*, 25.

star. She had all the qualities that befitted a someone worthy of the title "first lady of MGM."[16] Thalberg was very interested in her, but it seems it took a while for him to commit fully to her.

In *Norma Shearer: A Life* Gavin Lambert states that Thalberg and Shearer had started going on dates in 1926, but they weren't consistently dating each other. Thalberg had another woman he was in love with, Constance Talmadge, but she wouldn't even consider marrying him. Often times when Thalberg and Shearer went out together it was as a group of three with Shearer being the "spare tire." Although Shearer and Thalberg dated off and on for two and half years, he always remained personally interested in her career and soon, maybe realizing her true talent as an actress his interest turned more personal.[17] Their relationship from the outside does seem to be a bit impersonal and perhaps cold. Even the way Thalberg proposed to Shearer seems off, "As Norma left the set [after a day of work], she was called into Irving's office. She found him sitting behind his desk, gazing at a tray of diamond engagement rings. He looked up with a faint smile and asked her to choose the ring she liked best."[18] They were married September 9, 1927. There is much debate on whether she married him just for career advancement or if it was really love. Based on what few sources we have of Shearer, it would seem it was for love, if not Shearer played a long waiting game. Shearer's marriage to Thalberg brought along a new kind of control over her career that few other women would ever have during the studio system.

The first year of marriage seemed to be all about "social performances."[19] She and Thalberg attended many Hollywood elite parties and social functions. Shearer attended all of these events with grace and confidence never once letting anyone know if she was anxious or uncomfortable, which made many women jealous, like Joan Crawford. Crawford led the pack at

[16] Quirk, *Norma: The Story of Norma Shearer*, 87.
[17] Lambert, *Norma Shearer*, 65, 90.
[18] Ibid., 91.
[19] Ibid., 106.

MGM of women who disliked Shearer. Shearer was Crawford's complete opposite; Shearer was class while many saw Crawford as crass. Shearer had an easier time breaking into films while Crawford "had run away from home and worked in New York as a shop girl, chorus girl, and soft-porn dancer in private clubs."[20] Crawford resented Shearer for marrying Thalberg and having an even easier time getting roles that Crawford wanted. One of these roles was Mary Dugan in the film *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1929). This film is about a woman on trial for the murder of her lover. This was Shearer's first talkie film and even the press commented on Thalberg's favoritism for his wife. In a November 1928 issue of *Photoplay*, in an article called "Gossip of All the Studios" reads,

> To continue with the geniuses: Since her marriage to Irving Thalberg, Norma Shearer, is the prima donna of the M-G-M studio. This is fine for Norma but not so good for the other girls on the lot…Naturally, Thalberg is more ambitious for his wife than for any of the other stars on the premises.[21]

However, the film was a success, and the *New York Times* wrote "For Norma Shearer this picture is a vindication and a triumph, the former because it validates her claim to stardom…and the later because she…emerges as a compelling actress of greater individuality than she ever revealed in silent pictures."[22] Although her marriage to Thalberg was seen as self-serving, in reality he made her earn her roles, he made Shearer audition, do screen tests, and often refused Shearer roles because he felt she would not fit the part. Basinger says, "But Thalberg was tough with her, loaning her out to other companies for indifferent properties, making her work hard to learn her craft. She was willing, and it was her own talent that made his support bear fruit."[23] If

[20] Ibid. 106.
[21] "Gossip of all the Studios," *Photoplay*, November 1928,
[22] Norbert, Lusk, "*Mary Dugan* Brilliant Hit," *New York Times*, April 7, 1929, C14.
[23] Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 360.

Thalberg told her she wasn't right for a role that she felt she was, she would set out to prove him wrong.

Women in early film had roles they were expected to play: the wife, the temptress, the single girl, and the virginal good girl, but Shearer only wanted to play the bad girl. In 1929, Shearer learned of a new project called *The Divorcee* that MGM would be producing the next year, and Shearer wanted the lead role. Shearer's husband however did not think this would be a good fit and told her no, so she found a way to convince him. She decided to have herself photographed by a new photographer, George E. Hurrell to show off her sensual side. "Norma planned her campaign carefully, said Thalberg. She bought herself just about the goldest and most brocaded negligée she could find. Then she had portraits made wearing this gorgeous thing…"[24] The photos were enough to convince Thalberg that she could play the sexual woman in his new film.

The Divorcee movie would be unlike anything previously shot in Hollywood; it was shocking and truthful. Mick LaSalle, in his book *Complicated Women* discusses how Shearer wanted to play her character, Jerry Martin, as a strong woman saying "Shearer went to the limit of what an actress could get away with in 1930 and kept going. *The Divorcee* was unchartered territory."[25] This film was bold for the 1930s and it completely changed how Hollywood handled women, in her book *Pin-Up Girrrls*, Maria Buszek says,

> The film is still referenced as not only a turning point in Shearer's career – transforming her from a big hearted, virginal ingénue to a dangerous playgirl whose goodness,

[24] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg*, 110.
[25] Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), 68.

> amazingly, carried over from the actress's original star image – but as turning point in Hollywood's representation of the sexualized woman. [26]

Shearer played Jerry to be a sympathetic character, someone strong and cold rather than a bitter and vindictive woman. The film was a massive success for MGM and for Shearer; she won an academy award for her portrayal of Jerry. This would be her only award, but certainly not her only nomination. Shearer's career skyrocketed after *The Divorcee,* and she was finally at the level of superstardom she had been craving, "…she transcended stardom and became a regal entity. She had first call on the best plays, novels, and original stories.[27] Shearer continued to pick roles that featured her as the strong female lead that was sexually free.

Shearer's next film, *Let Us Be Gay* (1930) had the same formula as *The Divorcee.* A wife who leaves her wandering husband, and in this role, she gets a makeover to get back at her husband after their divorce. This film was another hit for the studio, but after filming, Shearer had to take a break to give birth to her and Thalberg's first child. They had a little boy who they named Irving Jr. Shearer was hesitant to have children. Because of her new-found success from *The Divorcee,* she was now a glamourous movie star, and motherhood was not something she had wanted. Even MGM was concerned about her image, "it [MGM] feared that motherhood would conflict with Norma's new image; no star had ever played such opposing roles in life and on camera before…"[28] As it turned out, the audiences loved that Shearer was a mother, as Lambert writes, thousands of fans wrote in congratulating Shearer on her "double triumph."[29] Although she was reserved about her pregnancy before, Shearer adored being a mother, but she

[26] Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Girrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 190.
[27] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg,* 128.
[28] Lambert, *Norma Shearer,* 134.
[29] Ibid., 134.

was ready to return to the big screen. Now that she had won an Oscar, and her films were bringing major dollars to the studio, Shearer decided to re-negotiate her salary. "…for $6,000 per week, a phenomenal sum for the time, and had a number of perks built into it."[30] After pouring over numerous scripts trying to find the perfect one she would use to return to work, she found it; *Strangers May Kiss* (1931) was about a woman, scorned by the man she loves, goes on a wild sexcapade in Europe until she is finally reunited with her lover to be married. Shearer felt like this was a winning formula for her: women experiencing a sexual emancipation in their own way. A quote from Shearer in Mark A. Vieira's book *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer* states, "Audiences like to see me as the girl who doesn't wither under a blow…they like to see me go to hell, but they want me to come back. Women have been smarting for years under the passive role they were called on to play, and at last they are getting the courage to fight back…."[31] These stories may have seemed like they were repetitive, but Thalberg did not like typecasting actors and even if it was the same kind of story, it was always told with a new angle. "Five characteristics held firm for Norma Shearer throughout her pre-Codes, no matter whom she played: 1) personal integrity (it was never really in doubt) 2) an intense and driven life force 3) intelligence 4) sexual ardor 5) a sex life."[32] These characteristics are important to note because after the Code was enacted, Shearer's career changed considerably.

A Free Soul (1931) would be Shearer's next film which starred Clark Gable opposite of her. Norma Shearer's *A Free Soul* (1931) is a film about a bad, good girl. This movie was filmed during the pre-code era in Hollywood and modern audiences can understand it is pre-code by the way Shearer uses sex for pleasure. The plot follows Shearer's character, Jan Ashe who is right

[30] Quirk, *Norma*, 20.
[31] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg*, 155.
[32] LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex*, 241.

from the beginning, established as a woman who does as she pleases. The opening of the film shows her and a man in a luxurious hotel suite. We first see Shearer's nude silhouette in the bathroom while asking a man to bring her some undergarments. Their relationship is ambiguous at first. The audience is not sure if this man is her lover or husband because of how casual and flirtatious they are with each other. The man is revealed to be her father, Stephen Ashe, played by Lionel Barrymore. From their conversation together, the audience learns that Stephen has raised Jan after her mother passed; because she does not have mother to guide her, Jan lives her life guided by her own willful free-spirit. In addition, Jan is being raised in this luxary hotel suite instead of a proper home. Jan is reminiscent of the flappers, who were free-wheeling and lived their life in the same kind of fashion. This image is further underscored by the cloche hat and form fitting dress Shearer puts on. Later in their conversation, it is discovered that Stephen is a very successful lawyer who is an alcoholic, and Jan does not do much to stop his habit. The two seem very close for a father and daughter, but they only have each other, and soon their relationship will be tested.

Stephen is getting ready for court, and he is set to defend Ace Wilfong, a gangster played by Clark Gable who is on trial for murder. Jan shows up before court and is introduced to Ace, and her physical attraction to him is immediate and obvious to the audience. This interaction is important because the audience sees a mutual attraction from both Jan and Ace which will become the basis of their relationship. Ace also wants to wear her colors, which shows he is gallant, but he is the furthest thing from a gentleman. Stephen exonerates Ace much to Jan's relief.

That night Jan is at her grandmother's house celebrating her grandmother's birthday with other family members. The audience sees Jan's family and how high class they are, it is also

announced that after seventy-four attempts, Jan has accepted the proposal of Dwight Winthrop, played by Leslie Howard. When this is announced it is clear on Jan's face that she is not too excited about her engagement. Her father then shows up, clearly drunk, with Ace. Except for her grandmother, Jan's family shuns Ace as he below them socially. Jan who is embarrassed by her family, leaves them and Dwight with the much more exciting Ace. This is a significant moment in the film because it shows Jan is in control of her life and makes her own decisions even if her family, except for her father, opposes them.

Jan and Ace go on their first date and are almost killed by another gang out for Ace. Instead of frightening Jan, this moment excites her, and she says that Ace is "A new kind of man in a new kind of world."[33] This sentiment could also be applied to Jan, as she is a new kind of woman in a new kind of world. She is an independent woman that is stepping outside of socially accepted behavior and is in control of making her own choices unlike many other women who do what society expects of them, like the women in her family. Jan then makes the choice to begin an affair with Ace, but she needs to break things off with Dwight.

While breaking up with her fiancé, Jan makes it clear that she does not want to get married saying, "I don't want life to settle down around me like a pan of sourdough."[34] This shows that Jan views marriage as boring and perhaps even as a cage that she does not want to be in. Dwight takes it in stride, even consoling Jan who says he is a "thoroughbred."[35] The audience is given the impression that some time has passed, and Jan and Ace are still continuing their sexual relationship in secret, often meeting in his secret hideout. Ace soon states he wants to marry Jan and wants to talk about their relationship, but Jan has no interest in doing that. She

[33] *A Free Soul*, directed by Clarence Brown (Burbank: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1931).
[34] *Free Soul*.
[35] *Free Soul*.

mocks him during their conversation showing just how disinterested she is in talking, not wanting to discuss her feelings towards him. It is clear she is only there for one reason when she lays on the couch in her slinky dress, her arms stretched out to Ace and states, "come put them around me" and Ace complies.

When her father, who has been drinking has continued to get worse, in search of bootleg alcohol, he wanders into Ace's speakeasy and discovers their relationship, he is furious. In spite of saying Jan should live her own life and make her own mistakes, her father, when face the actuality of those decisions, states that Ace is below them and that Jan is too good for him. He tells Ace "the only time I hate democracy is when one of you mongrels forget where you belong."[36] This shows that despite Stephen trying to distance himself and Jan from his conservative, old money family, he is not so different from them on issues like this. He knows who Ace truly is, a social-climbing mobster crook. He seems to understand what this decision will mean for Jan's future, and they leave together.

Jan makes him a deal, if he quits drinking and goes out to the wilderness with her, she will stop her affair with Ace. He agrees, and three-months later, the audience sees the pair camping in the mountains. Stephen is looking worse for wear, and it is clear they both are struggling to give up their vices. While at a stop, he goes into a drug store and buys a large bottle of alcohol. The last we see of him, he is stumbling on the other side of a train that is passing through, Jan is on the other side, and then he is gone. The audience is left to believe he drunkenly hopped on the train.

After her father disappears, Jan returns to the City and tries to go stay with her ailing grandmother only to be stopped by her aunt who turns her out, claiming Jan is too wild for them

[36] *Free Soul*.

and they cannot control her. She returns to Ace and their reunion turns physical, but not in a good way. Ace demands marriage once more of Jan who still is not wanting to marry. He pushes and shoves her and threatens her. She slips out and returns to the hotel suite we saw earlier. The next day she is dressed more respectably, and the suite even seems homier than before. Soon Ace is at her door threatening her once again that if she does not marry him there will be serious consequences. He threatens to spread the knowledge of their affair around, which in the 1930s was so scandalous it would have ruined a woman's reputation and life. Jan tells him "the rest of my life can't wash the filthy stain of you off my soul." This line shows us that Jan has finally realized what kind of man Ace really is and that she understands the impact of her actions.

It is at this moment that Dwight walks in and saves her from Ace, who walks out stating they will be married no matter what. Dwight, ever the hero, comes to Jan's rescue and shoots Ace and promptly turns himself in to the police. This action shows the difference between Dwight and Ace, Dwight turned himself in for murder while Ace got off of his murder charge at the beginning. Jan is remorseful for her actions with Ace and for Dwight's actions in her defense. She is now shown to have even more passion for Dwight than she did for Ace, even admitting her love for him. His trial date is upon them and he is ready to accept his fate, but Jan is determined to find her dad to help Dwight. She finds him on the floor of an opium den, drunk out of his mind. She gets him up and sober and the next day is walks into the courtroom to defend Dwight, he calls a witness, Jan Ashe. While on the stand Jan tells of her affair with Ace, effectively destroying her reputation. This shows how much love she has for Dwight but also that she has ownership of her actions and how much she has grown from her bad decisions. Dwight is found not guilty, but Jan's father ends up collapsing and dying on the courtroom floor signaling the end of Jan's wild and free soul. The end shows that Jan is packing up to move, Dwight is

with her and they are not married. This seems to be because she wants to prove herself before marrying him, as she is getting ready to leave Dwight states that he will follow her and the film ends.

Is this film a quiet feminist film about women's sexuality in a world where they suffer by almost always being viewed as possessions? Or is this supposed to be a warning to women who are seeking sexual fulfillment outside of marriage? It seems to be both. It is a product of early Hollywood, and sex outside of marriage was not approved of by society. The more important theme to focus on would be the openness of a woman's sexuality. Shearer plays Jan as a woman who is in full control of her actions and enjoys having sex. She has complete agency and uses Ace as her play toy. This is a role reversal, as we usually see women in the position of wanting marriage.

Another indicator for the audience that Jan is in control is her clothing choices, she wears thin, slinky dresses that leave little to the imagination. However, she is not a sex object because of what she wears, she is empowered by it; she uses clothing as a means to get what she wants out of Ace. Although Shearer puts her body on display for the audience's gaze, it is not as a sexualize woman being used by a man, but a woman who is enjoying her sexuality—like a man would.

Because of the time period, Jan could not get away with having pre-marital sex without consequences, but the consequences are only that her reputation is ruined. In a post-code film, she would probably have to die. There is hope at the end of the film as Dwight, a good man, is still willing to marry her. So a hidden message here to women is that you can have a sexually active life, and still end up married to a "good guy."

A Free Soul was ahead of its time, and its plot could work in a film today. It showed a woman who lived her life the way she wanted, had casual sex without wanting to get married, and a woman who was strong enough to admit her wrongs in the end. Shearer's role in this film spoke to audiences because her character was not a good girl, she got knocked off her pedestal and still got back up and kept going. This film was important because of the options it showed women. They could be sexual outside the confines of marriage or serious relationships. The relationship between Jan and Ace closely resembles the relationships we see in film frequently today. "Even today, when uncensored sexuality on the screen has become a convention, the way Norma projects it between the lines is still almost shockingly powerful."[37] This story raised the bar even for Shearer. The scene where Shearer is pushed by Gable shocked audiences. Of course, studios were trying to play nice with the Production Code, and crime could never win, so Gable's character was killed off. Shearer was nominated for another Academy Award for her acting in *A Free Soul*, it also shot Gable into stardom.

This scandalous film was very different from Shearer's personal life. Since Thalberg had his heart condition and could not please Shearer the way a husband should, many scholars write about the sexual frustration Shearer must have experienced. "Norma had to disguise inner tension…to conceal what she wasn't getting. Too loyal and prudent to risk an affair in life, she could at least escape into the illusion of sexual adventure on the screen…that happened to satisfy thousands of wives in the audience…"[38] However, this is just speculation, and there is no proof to say Shearer was feeling sexually frustrated. It seems that because Shearer led such a normal life and was happy with her husband that perhaps authors are creating sensational gossip to try and create a more sensational life for her. Crawford, on the other hand, had many marriages and

[37] Lambert, *Norma Shearer,* 158.
[38] Ibid.,140.

had many high-profile affairs. Shearer's husband decided that Shearer wasn't just a lead actress; she was a star, and she needed more serious roles to prove it. According to Lawrence J. Quirk in his book *Norma: The Story of Norma Shearer,* in early 1932, Thalberg decided to shift Shearer's screen persona. From now on she would only have star roles, not just leading lady roles. She would have prestigious roles that fitted her refined personality, and he would personally pick roles that were lavish and had quality.[39] It was around this time that there were shifts in at the studio were beginning. Mayer and Thalberg were beginning to argue about the types of films that were being produced. Mayer wanted quality films but on a cheaper budget while Thalberg wanted prestige films at whatever cost. These differences caused tensions between Thalberg and Mayer.

During 1932 Shearer only appeared in two films. Her husband, who was overworked and tired, considered leaving MGM all together but was talked out of it by Mayer and Nick Schenck. Thalberg's pictures, while profitable, were extremely expensive, he was a perfectionist and to him, money was no object in pursuit of the perfect film. This caused tension between him and Mayer and the father/son relationship they once shared fizzled. Then at the end of 1932, Thalberg suffered the second heart attack of his life and was told by his doctor to take a break for several months. While he was away, Mayer and Schenck "began to formulate plans for a new production system. Never mind *Fortune* magazine's appraisal of MGM's system as the closest to perfection in Hollywood, and Thalberg its essential component."[40] They soon hired David Selznick as an independent producer while Thalberg was on break, which deeply hurt Thalberg. Although trouble was brewing at MGM, there was not much Thalberg could do about it, so he decided to put his health over his career and take a long European vacation. Shearer

[39] Quirk, *Norma*, 134.
[40] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg*, 224.

accompanied him, not wanting to return to films until her husband did. Unfortunately for the couple, being abroad did not stop bad news reaching them. One evening Thalberg received a telegram from Mayer, "its terse message was that he and Schenck were reorganizing the studio and had eliminated the post of vice president in charge of production."[41] Now MGM would hire a handful of producers to be in charge of their own units. Thalberg was devastated, but knew he needed to return to work soon, if not for his sake then for the sake of his wife's career. Critics who shout that Shearer only married Thalberg for career advancement can look to this year long absence from the screen as proof of her deep love for him. In Mark Vieira's book, he quotes Shearer as saying, "If it ever came to a choice between my career and Irving…I wouldn't hesitate for a moment. Not that work doesn't mean anything to me. But Irving means more."[42] Upon their return from the much need break for Thalberg, he began a new project he had in mind Shearer, *Marie Antoinette.* Now that he was no longer vice president of production, but still in charge a of small unit, he could really give his focus to just a few films. These films would be under the Production Code that was beginning to be enforced by William Hays and his group. The Code would change the course of Shearer's career.

Norma Shearer had a very successful career, portraying sexually liberated women before the Motion Picture Production Code of 1934, also known as the Hays Code or The Code began being enforced. Shearer loved the screen image crafted for her by her husband that was one of an independent, sexualized, modern woman. Her public persona was that loving wife and "The real first lady of films."[43] The Code now required films to be submitted for approval before being released, and much of what the pre-Code films did not shy away from was censored, particularly

[41] Ibid., 236.
[42] Ibid., 238.
[43] Basil Lee, "The Real First Lady of Films," *Photoplay,* July 1934, 28.

sexually active women and violence. “Since the advent of the Production Code, the public had been supporting films based on literary classics.”[44] After the Code started to be enforced, Thalberg continued the screen transformation of his wife from sensual actress to prestigious actress. The roles Shearer was offered were shadows of the women she had once portrayed Pre-Code. Post-Code, Shearer’s bad girl image became more conventional, and for her it must have been boring. In 1934 and 1936 Shearer only starred in three films, she took a break in 1935 to welcome her second child with Thalberg. Those three films, *Riptide* (1934), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), and *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) were all successes, *Barretts* earned Shearer another Oscar nomination. The financial returns were not as great as Shearer’s previous films, but it did not dim her star in Hollywood. It is interesting to note, that Shearer at 34 (supposedly) played the ill-fated teenager from Shakespeare’s play. She was not ready to start playing motherly roles and instead wanted to remain the young, desirable woman.

All was well for Thalberg and Shearer. He was producing good quality films that were making profits, and Shearer was basking in the critical success of *Romeo and Juliet.* Then in September 1936, Thalberg became sick with a strep infection, and he passed away on September 14th, 1936. Shearer was devastated. Mayer, after receiving a phone call, rushed over to console Shearer and to lend a hand in his funeral. “After this tender parting, Norma and Mayer did not see each other again for several months. And when they resumed contact, it was with great bitterness—and through lawyers.”[45]

After Thalberg’s death Shearer could not decide if she as going to return to the big screen--how could she continue without the guidance of her husband? In an article from *Photoplay* titled “How Norma Shearer Faces the Future” by Dorothy Manners, Manners writes,

[44] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg,* 335.
[45] Lambert, *Norma Shearer,* 233.

> Perhaps sometime in the dim future, just as surely as she felt her career had come an end with the potion scene in "Romeo and Juliet," she may come to know by the same source that Irving would want her to take up their work, continuing the inspiring career they built together. Only then can the screen hope to reclaim its gallant first lady of the drama![46]

Ultimately Shearer decided she had to go back to honor her late husband's memory with the last film he worked on for her, *Marie Antoinette*. MGM had already given her word that they would continue with the project and she wanted to make sure it was created the way Thalberg had wanted. Unfortunately, before Shearer could get back to MGM there would be a heated battle between her and Mayer over Thalberg's remaining stock in the company. Mark Vieira writes that after Thalberg's death, his estate was much smaller than what was expected. After taxes were taken out, it left only one million dollars to Shearer and to each of their children, but this was not the only money left. In 1932 after the restructuring of the production side of the studio, Nick Schenck had allowed Thalberg to purchase stock in Loew's profits at a low fixed rate. Thalberg, at the time of his death had owned 37.5 percent of shares in the company and would continue to profit from them until his contract expired in 1938. Mayer decided that these belonged to him and shut Shearer out of any profits from these shares. Once Shearer found out about the shares, she began a very public legal battle against MGM for the shares that were hers. Shearer did not hold back and even went on Louella Parson's radio show to condemn MGM for how she was being treated and that she was now a widow with two children to take care of. The public began criticizing the greediness of the MGM studio heads. Then in March 1937, Mayer conceded to Shearer who would continue to receive the full share of all profits until the expiration date of

[46] Dorothy Manners, "How Norma Shearer Faces the Future," *Photoplay* (December 1937): 81.

Thalberg's contract in 1938. After that she would continue to receive 4% of the net profits earned by pictures more than half completed from 1924 to 1938.[47] This made Shearer the most powerful stockholder at MGM. Shearer also re-signed her contract to do six more films at $150,000 a piece. Shearer had gone up against the top men in Hollywood and had won while maintaining her tactfulness, grace, and public sympathy. She was a force to be reckoned with and she showed the world that she would not be controlled by the men who possibly brought on her husband's early death. Unlike Crawford who followed studio rules and what "Papa Mayer," told her to do, Shearer tried to stand as an equal in the financial world and this stand possibly contributed to the loss of her career. Shearer gained financially, but lost Mayer's powerful backing. Crawford was not as a tough financial negotiator until later in her career when she would pass on roles that did not offer what she thought she deserved.

Between her battle with Mayer and her Oscar nomination for *Romeo and Juliet* Shearer's public image was revived. "When she arrived…the widow Thalberg was once again Queen of the Lot—but with an aura of reincarnation…she had colored her hair a lighter shade of brown and her personality with a fine sexual gloss. But she was not shedding the image of Mrs. Thalberg, only adding a new layer to it."[48] Even though Shearer had outwardly shown confidence in her return to film in reality she was now alone and was frightened of making the wrong decisions for herself. She wanted *Marie Antoinette* to be the picture that Thalberg had dreamed of and wanted it to do her husband justice. Shearer was able to help pick the cast of the film, and she had a few directors in mind that she knew she could work with well. She wanted Sidney Franklin to direct because she had previously worked with him on two films and knew he would do a good job. Mayer on the other hand, was looking for ways to undermine Shearer in

[47] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg,* 380-381.
[48] Lambert, *Norma Shearer,* 246.

some way so he took Franklin off the project and appointed W.S. Van Dyke. Shearer relied on steady directors to help coach her and let her know how she was doing, but Van Dyke was not one of those directors and Mayer knew this. *Maire Antoinette* began filming, and Shearer was dedicated to her husband's legacy:

> …Shearer realized that if *Marie Antoinette* was to conform to her husband's vision, she would have to play the game. She would have win over both Stromberg [the producer of the film] and Van Dyke, in spite of their allegiance to Mayer. This is what she proceeded to do. She matched them at their own strength—hard work.[49]

The movie was a hit with critics and the public grossing almost $3 million dollars. Shearer was officially back as a star having been nominated for her performance as Marie Antoinette. The animosity between her and Mayer also seemed to wane after "he cried at Marie's death scene."[50] Shearer only had five pictures left in her contract, and she wanted to make sure she picked the right ones.

In 1939 Shearer starred in *The Women* with Joan Crawford. "At the time Joan's career was less secure than Norma's, and of her last seven movies, only *The Gorgeous Hussy* had succeeded at the box office."[51] This would be the only film starring the rivals together, Shearer was still as popular as ever while Crawford's star was declining in her final years at MGM. Crawford the publicity surrounding the film, as well as the two actresses was nothing but cold. In a *Photoplay* article titled "Hedy Lamarr VS. Joan Bennett and Other Dangerous Hollywood Feuds," Barbara Hayes says, "Norma—intelligent, calm, reserved. Joan—impulsive, generous,

[49] Vieira, *Irving Thalberg,* 390.
[50] Ibid., 394.
[51] Lambert, *Norma Shearer,* 276.

warm. Theirs is that eternal conflict between mind and emotions—and a bitter one, too."[52] Lawrence J. Quirk writes in his book about an encounter he had with Joan Crawford while he was writing a book on her about how he said he wanted to write a book on Shearer. Crawford became cold and snarky and said back "*Someone* should...She's all but forgotten."[53] While another encounter he had with Shearer went like this "…I asked Shearer if she wanted to contribute anything on Crawford. 'She's said it all herself hasn't she?...I don't think I have anything to add.' This gentle riposte at Crawford's constant publicity seeking was the nearest Shearer came to malice in speaking of her colleague."[54] While there are a few photos of Shearer and Crawford together later in life it seems that they never resolved their feud. This makes sense as some of the things Crawford said about Shearer were certain to get back to the star, yet Shearer always remained graceful about Crawford.

In spite of the tension between the two stars, *The Women* was a huge success, giving Shearer great reviews, but emotional cracks were starting to show. "Cukor…found an air of forced confidence about her…Norma seemed to be trying to conceal "a need for sympathy and reassurance."[55] Shearer was beginning to feel the pressures of the studio and the outside world; younger women were coming in and taking roles she was once offered. The studio was changing as was the world. WWII was beginning, and audience wants were shifting.

Shearer only completed three more films before she decided to retire. Her last two, *We Were Dancing* (1942) and *Her Cardboard Lover* (1942) were failures with audiences. Shearer was not used to her films being failures, Thalberg had a certain touch that made sure her films

[52] Barbara Hayes, "Hedy Lamarr VS. Joan Bennett and Other Dangerous Hollywood Feuds," Photoplay (November 1939): 19.
[53] Quirk, *Norma*, 206.
[54] Ibid., 206.
[55] Lambert, *Norma Shearer*, 281.

were always a smash. Now without him to oversee her films and help her pick roles, she was at a loss as to what the public was wanting to see:

> It was not the failure that rattled her. She had personally chosen two movies rejected by the public, and personally rejected *Now, Voyager* and *Mrs. Miniver,* two major popular successes. The first made Bette Davis undoubted Queen of the Lot at Warners…the second earned Greer Garson an Academy Award. If Norma needed further confirmation that she had lost touch with the movie audience…with the U.S. at war, popular imagination was captured by Scarlett O'Hara, a movie heroine on the opposite end of the scale from Marie Antoinette.[56]

These failures show that Shearer, while a determined woman, had relied heavily on the guidance of her husband. The men in Shearer's life were no longer going to help the aging star stay connected to audiences. Mayer certainly was not going to take her under his "fatherly care" and help revive her career. He was only interested in the young, fresh talent coming into the studio. Thalberg was no longer alive to shape her career for the new decade, and she did not marry another Hollywood powerbroker. In the 1942 Shearer found herself at a crossroads, she was fully in control of her career, but she did not know how to adapt without someone telling her what to do.

Shearer faced what she felt was the inevitable head on and retired in 1942. She turned Mayer down for a contract renewal, which could have been offered out of pity or for fear of public retribution. She went on vacation where she met her second husband Marti Arrougé, a ski instructor 12 years her junior. After her retirement, Shearer faded from the public's view turning down offers for films and theater productions. Shearer remained close to a circle of friends with

[56] Lambert, *Norma Shearer*, 298.

whom she attended occasional parties or movie screenings. Her children stayed out of the spotlight as well, choosing not to ever speak about their mother to the public. Shearer's final years seem to be a sad image of her former life. She was admitted to the Motion Picture Country Home in 1980 after her health began to slip. She began going blind and began to lose her memory. At the end of her life, Shearer was completely blind and could not remember her children or husband. She passed away June 12, 1983, at the age of 82.

While Shearer was at MGM, her star power was undeniable, and she was comparable to how popular Garbo was in Europe. Yet few today remember her. Why is this? Women throughout the past have been forgotten; their voices lost to history. Luckily for Shearer her voice lives on through her movies. Shearer was a trailblazer for the sexual woman. She paved the way for the likes of Mae West too, as LaSalle writes that West "…joked about the things Shearer depicted dramatically…[57] West's films are still shown on television networks like Turner Classic Movies, while Shearer's, except for *The Women*, are rarely ever shown. Shearer was able to step outside of the studio machine and help her husband shape her career. She is one of the few exceptions of women in Hollywood being able to have a say in what she did. Unlike Crawford who listened to the men in charge, Shearer pushed back and decided to make her own choices. Shearer, among numerous important actresses, have been forgotten and it is time to reclaim them as important symbols of the female experience.

While Shearer has mostly disappeared from public recognition, there are mentions of her in modern pop culture. In a February 2018 edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, there was a pole being taken about the greatest actress of all time; Shearer is nominated along with Crawford, Vivian Leigh, Grace Kelly, Katherine Hepburn, and many others in the old Hollywood category.

[57] LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 228.

The pole features women who won an Oscar for their roles in iconic films, Shearer for *The Divorcee,* Crawford for *Mildred Pierce*; while Leigh is nominated twice for her roles in *Gone with the Wind* and *A Streetcar Named Desire.* Shearer doesn't make it past the first round and Crawford makes it to the second to last. In the end it is Leigh vs. Leigh in their respective category. There are other categories which are a part of the poll such as, the blockbuster era, movie mavericks, and the new millennium. Of all the talented actresses listed, Vivian Leigh won the title of greatest actress of all time for *Gone with the Wind.* One cannot deny the groundbreaking roles these women starred in, and it is amazing to see Shearer even nominated.

It is important to notice that Shearer and Crawford's legacies are different because they played the Hollywood game differently. Shearer was able to remove herself from the studio politics and be guided by her husband. Lucielle LaSuer on the other hand was morphed into the Joan Crawford that the world remembers today by the men around her. She listened to what the men in charge of the studio told her to do, and she rarely pushed back. Shearer did push back and was punished for it.

Louis B. Mayer seems to almost be a modern-day Harvey Weinstein. While he never approached Shearer or Crawford sexually, that we know of, he did many other actresses. Gary Cary writes, "There was talk of Mayer making crude passes at Myrna Loy and Jean Harlow, of bottoms being pinched, of relay races around his horseshoe desk."[58] Mayer was the second most powerful man at MGM, and he used his power to his advantage. When Shearer fought against Mayer for money that was rightfully hers after Thalberg's death, he punished her when she finally returned to the studio. He denied her the director she had wanted for *Marie Antoinette* and perhaps ruined what could have been a performance of a lifetime for Shearer. Mayer could make

[58] Cary, *All the Stars in Heaven,* 226.

or break a woman's career and he no doubt used that for his benefit. This could also be a big reason why there are women who have been forgotten about in modern day film history. While Shearer left on somewhat good terms with Mayer, there was probably still some bitterness towards her humiliating him so publicly. After Shearer left the studio she was rarely ever written about again in the press. While this could have been her own doing, it seems this would not be the case because of how much Shearer loved being in the public eye. A more plausible explanation is that it had something to do with Mayer; he did have connections within the media and perhaps he ordered them to stop writing about her. Mayer could have also played a role in the downfall of her career by not helping to guide her after Thalberg had passed. Shearer heavily relied on her husband for guidance and Mayer knew this. After Thalberg was no longer around to help Shearer, she stumbled a bit and did not have the support she so desperately needed; and Mayer who acted as a father figure to Crawford did nothing to help Shearer. Mayer knew how to act friendly for the public and even in person, but he was a scheming man who did everything he could to pay her back for the way she embarrassed him. The films she made after Thalberg passed prove that Mayer did not try to help her as Thalberg once did. After Thalberg, Shearer was in full control of the roles she picked, and after *Marie Antoinette*, her movie selections fumbled. *The Women* is proof of Shearer trying to reclaim some of the prestige that Thalberg had once brought to the studio. Although she tried her hardest to reclaim her movie-star status, Mayer had washed his hands of her and would not help her through the changing times.

This is reminiscent of the recent story of Weinstein and actress Mira Sorvino. After Sorvino rejected the advances of Weinstein, he made sure she was blacklisted in Hollywood. In an article on NBC news, author Daniel Arkin writes about how Peter Jackson was told to avoid hiring certain actresses by Weinstein. Jackson is quoted as saying, "I recall Miramax telling us

they were a nightmare to work with and we should avoid them at all costs…at the time, we had no reason to question what these guys were telling us. But in hindsight, I realize that this was very likely the Miramax smear campaign in full swing."[59] While Mayer had offered Shearer another contract, it seems possible that he was willing to let her fail and perhaps ruin her legacy as "Queen of the Lot." Although it is likely that Mayer played a large role in her leaving film for good and in her not being written about in fan magazines, there are other theories surrounding her exit from Hollywood.

One such theory is that Shearer's legacy is almost non-existent because of the changing morals and attitudes of the world around her. After the Great Depression, women's roles in films transitioned from the glamourous, sexual women to the mother and housewife--which Shearer did not want to play. There was also a war going on overseas. Jeanine Basinger, in her book *The Star Machine* writes that as Shearer's last film came out, *Her Cardboard Lover* (1942), America was at war and priorities and morals were changing for women. They were going to work in factories and scrimping and saving everything to be sent over to their boys who were fighting in the war. However, in this film, Shearer is every inch the 1930s glamourous, sophisticated star she was known to be. She is dripping in diamonds and in formal gowns, but this is the 1940's, and women in the audience are rolling up their sleeves and putting their hair up to go to work. Shearer's performance seems out of touch with what is going on in the world.[60] Crawford on the other hand was able to adapt to the changing times and even made a war movie with John Wayne, *Reunion in France* (1942). She was always recreating herself and reviving her career with roles that were relatable to the audiences of the time.

[59] Daniel Arkin, "Peter Jackson seems to confirm Weinstein blacklisted Mira Sorvino, Ashley Judd," *NBC News*, last modified December 15, 2017, nbcnews.com.
[60] Basinger, 396.

Another possible reason why Shearer left the film industry is because she did not want to play mothers. She prided herself on her beauty, and even though she was at or over 40 at this point, and she herself was one, she could not bring herself to play a mother.[61] Although she starred as a mother in *The Women*, this is one of the only roles when she ever plays the noble mother role. Crawford did not mind this role; she even won an Oscar for her role as a mother in *Mildred Peirce.* Crawford wanted to remain a star, and she did what was necessary to stay relevant. Crawford played the studio's games because she was a smart woman who knew what she needed to do. Shearer, while also smart, could not adapt without the guidance of Thalberg. It is also interesting to note the change in characters Shearer plays later on in her career. In *The Women* Shearer plays the noble wife whose husband has run out on her and in the end decides to take her husband back. This character is a far cry from the one that made her a super star in *The Divorcee;* the wife who decides to get even with her cheating husband. It's interesting to parallel the two and see how far Shearer's characters had changed in the matter of years.

The later part of Shearer's career could also be a reason as to why she has been forgotten in modern movie history. LaSalle says "Shearer's most famous film, *The Women*…this utterly delightful film is the culprit of her career. As a classic, it is the first—and often, last—Shearer film many people see. The result is that she has been most often associated with a film she did not want to make and with a character she considered 'too noble.'[62] While Shearer had begun starring in more prestigious films, there was still some kind of scandal in the plot that drew Shearer to them. Audiences that only see *The Women,* see a wonderful performance from the entire cast, but they do not get to observe the Shearer that illuminated the screen in her favorite pre-code films.

[61] Ibid., 396.
[62] LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 224.

Critics of her films have been unforgiving and contributed to why Shearer's movies are not remembered. In *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet* by Andrew Sarris he writes "Many people, some like myself in retrospect, tended to resent Shearer for the supposedly "special" treatment she received from the studio…I even once described Shearer in print as cross-eyed but not without some sense of guilt."[63] Critics like Sarris play a role in letting audiences forget famous women of Hollywood, like Shearer, because they hold pre-conceived notions about her and even attack her physical attributes rather than her talent. Lasalle writes that "In the film book mythology, that emerged, Shearer became the queenly, no-talent, cross-eyed actress who was invariably used as an example of someone *not* as good as whatever actress was being written about."[64] Shearer's legacy has been tarnished unfairly by men who thought her privileged because of her marriage. Thalberg guided her, this is undeniable, but he could not make her talented, that was all Shearer. Shearer deserves to be remembered for her acting, not who she was married to.

Reinventing the legacy of Norma Shearer is important because she was a very significant actress of the 1930s. She is a great example of a woman who was able to step outside of the studio machine and still become a huge movie star. She was able to help change the way women were viewed sexually on screen. With *The Divorcee*, she helped pave the way for the likes of Mae West and Jean Harlow. LaSalle writes, "Mae West, who joked about the things that Shearer depicted dramatically, went to the grave rightly hailed for her outrageousness and historical importance. Shearer was dismissed. But then West's pre-Codes had been shown on television repeatedly. Shearer's had not."[65] It is interesting that she is not considered a feminist icon for her

[63] Andrew Sarris, *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet* (New York: Oxford Universities Press, 1998), 422.
[64] Lasalle, *Complicated Women*, 226.
[65] Ibid., 228.

pre-code work because of how she portrayed women's sexuality. Shearer's films are still not shown often on television, and when they are, they are usually her prestige films. Looking through the Turner Classic Movies schedule for March 2019, three of Shearer's films will be shown, one of which is *The Women*, while four of Crawford's will be shown. Shearer's pre-code films are rarely televised which is a shame because those films showcase her at her best. Perhaps the taboo of sex and eroticism from pre-code, at least to the point that Shearer depicted it, is just that, taboo. Even though sex is openly shown on television daily in some form maybe the public maybe the stigma surrounding her films never fully went away and because of that her films are rarely shown.

In a time when women are seemingly getting their due, with the Me Too and Time's Up movements, it is important to talk about and remember groundbreaking women like Shearer. Her legacy is more than a second-rate actress who relied on her husband. Her legacy is a strong woman who went up against one of the most powerful men in Hollywood and won. Her legacy is showing that women can have sex lives too, while still being a likeable character. Her legacy is proving the men who doubted her, Mayer as well as Thalberg, wrong. Norma Shearer's legacy is influential for those who have seen her films and know her story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women in Hollywood, and in all occupations, have had their voices and stories silenced in history. An example of this silencing is shown in Kate Moore's book *The Radium Girls.* Moore tells a true story that highlights the brutal reality women have had to face in their jobs. Moore tells the story of women who worked for watch companies during WWI. They would paint watch dials with radium paint, placing their brushes in their mouths in order to get the thinnest numbers possible on the small watch face. They were told radium was safe, and they would ingest radium daily while also having radium dust set their skin aglow every day. They did not have a clue that the very thing that gave them a livable wage would ravage their bodies. The majority of the women died gruesome deaths. Some of the women who caught on to what was happening sued the companies, many not even winning enough to cover the debt they had gone into trying to relieve the excruciating pain they were in; many were not believed. The companies brought in huge amounts of money for the towns and these women were seen as causing trouble. During one of the more prominent lawsuits, it came out that it would seem the men in charge of the companies knew to some degree that the radium was dangerous because they ordered the men in the labs to wear protective gear when handling the same material the women were putting in their mouths. Moore's book is the first one describing these women and the horrific ordeal they went through. History and men wanted to erase their accounts from history, but it's important that their voices be reclaimed by women, so their stories can be remembered and honored. The story of the radium girls is significant because it shows how women are caught in a vicious circle of not being believed when they come out with stories of abuse. Hollywood is among the worst at covering up sexual abuse scandals as well as underpaying them and not giving women of color the roles they deserve.

In the past year and a half, there has been a purge happening in Hollywood. one that has exposed dozens of high-ranking men for sexual harassment: be they actors, news anchors, or CEOs. Women and men alike are coming forward to speak their truth about the abuse they endured at the hand of these powerful men. Women are also stepping up for their female co-stars fighting for equal pay for women of color. In a recent story, Jessica Chastain tied herself to her future co-star, Octavia Spencer so that Spencer was guaranteed to make the same amount as Chastain. Women and men alike need to support each other in order to help break the cycle that has been around since the time of Crawford and Shearer. For women in early Hollywood, they could not come forward with injustices without fear of retribution. Abuse took many forms then because of the nature of the contracts between actors and the studios. Actors were locked in for a certain amount of films, and they had to be completed in a certain amount of time, so some actresses, under the direction of the studio heads, were making films non-stop like Crawford. While others, like Shearer, could be forced to navigate the murky waters of the studio themselves if they questioned the male authority over them.

Crawford and Shearer were both independent women who suffered at the hands of the men in their lives. While Shearer did blossom under Thalberg's care, the years after him are painful to recall. Crawford had men going in and out of her life her entire career, from her father to stepfather to Louis B. Mayer to all four husbands. These men affected Crawford in some way and helped shape who she was. It is important for modern and future film historians to remember not only Crawford but Shearer as well because of the interesting legacies they leave behind.

Crawford is the perfect example of a woman, who did everything the studio told her to do; she adapted, and she has withstood the test of time. She tried to find happiness in the men around her and ultimately could never find what she so desperately searched her entire life for.

While Shearer is a good example of an actress who tried to portray women who were sexually liberated giving a modern face to the woman's experience in film that was not allowed after the code. While Crawford suffered under the studio system because she bent to will of the studio heads, Shearer suffered under the same system because she tried to stand up to it.

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