

WICKED WOMEN: WOMEN & PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD

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For a short-lived, amazing period from 1930 to 1934, Hollywood movies portrayed American life as never before. Women could be flawed adults not merely virginal doormats or wicked vamps; actions could be ambiguous, colored in shades of grey, not merely black and white; social and political problems could be discussed, and sex, seductive and willful was no longer taboo. In the midst of the worst depression that the world had ever seen, when people were unemployed in their millions and forced by circumstance to queue at soup kitchens to eat, Americans still visited the movie-houses, drawn by the fascination of the great female stars: Garbo, Mae West, Shearer and Swanson. These actresses had become household names, their faces on every magazine cover, their images synonymous with glamor, with Hollywood. As never before, these women were able to control their own images, choosing their own projects and reveling in new freedoms. It was not to last. The enforcement of the Production Code in 1934 brought this period of liberty to an abrupt halt. Christian morality won over Hollywood liberalism and films could not even imply sex, much less shown it. Filmgoers soon forgot the pre-code era, the films produced rarely shown, but for a brief moment, American cinema was able to capture the zeitgeist in a manner it was unable to do for decades to come.

The twenties were the era of the silent movies, the emergence of the studios, of Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks. From the arrival of the first filmmaking studios such as Famous Players-Lasky – later Paramount Pictures – in 1913, the movie studios had begun to organize: 20th century Fox arrived from New York in 1916, the Warner Brothers created their studio in 1918 and United Artists formed in 1919.¹ At first, the moguls dominated the movies that the

studios made. Directors and screenwriters were usually anonymous and the mogul-producers marketed their films through star-appeal, especially the appeal of young actresses. They would categorize these actresses in one of two categories: ingénue or vamp, and few actresses were able to break out of those set constraints. No other female images were acceptable for the producers of the 1920s.²

Mary Pickford epitomized the ingénue. She was young, pretty, determinedly middle-class and continued to play teenagers well into her thirties in films such as *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *Pollyanna*.³ These virginal women, in constant need of protection from the stronger sex, barely reflected the changes going on in American society. In the wake of the war, women were becoming more sexually active and adventurous and the rate of pre-marital sex soared in the “flapper” generation.⁴ Yet, the only women on the movie screens to show any sexual desire were vamps, sexual predators who seduced men for their own evil purposes.⁵ However, the very prominence the moguls gave to the female stars began to work against them. In 1926, Greta Garbo, tired of playing vamp roles in movies such as *The Torrent*, went on strike. When MGM gave in eight months later, they agree to pay Garbo more and importantly, to allow her to play a new sort of rôle, the “virtuous vamp, the good-bad woman”.⁶ These women were to become more dominant in the new era of the talkies.

Although technology existed to create sound recordings from 1901 and early French movies used

¹ Paul Zollo, *Hollywood Remembered: An Oral History of Its Golden Age* (Cooper Square Press, 2002), 32.

² For more information on female roles in the 1920s cinema see Martin F. Norden, “Women in the Early Film Industry,” *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism and Practice* 6.3 (1984), 58–67.

³ David Wallace, *Lost Hollywood* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2001), 67.

⁴ Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2001) 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

technology to synchronize sound with movies from 1907, there was resistance within Hollywood to using these techniques in their films.⁷ While it was understandable that the great silent artists such as Charlie Chaplin feared the new technology, critics also questioned how desirable it would be to mar the visual imagery of film with sound. In the mid-20s, James Quirk wrote in *Photoplay* magazine, “Everyone has [...] neglected to mention [a motion picture’s] rarest and subtlest beauty: silence [...] The talking picture will be made practical, but it will never supercede the motion picture without sound”.⁸ It would also be extremely expensive to change production facilities to create the “talkies”, and despite or perhaps because of the boom in movies in the 1920s, many of the moguls were probably reluctant to invest such large sums in an unknown.⁹ Why change when silent movies such as *Ben Hur* (1926) and *King of Kings* (1927) were still successful?¹⁰ However, a new medium had emerged and become extremely popular in American homes: radio. Listeners could hear the words of their favorites in their own homes, and movie moguls were increasingly worried that this new fad would impinge upon their business. Warner Brothers studio decided to take the first step. They had installed the technology for sound in 1926, and finally used it for a full feature: *The Jazz Singer* (1927).¹¹ Al Jolson’s famous ad-libbed words “You ain’t seen nothing yet” changed the world of the movies. The first “talkie” was so popular that other studios rushed to put their own talkies into production, despite the cost. This was to prove to be a wise move.

On October 29 1929, US stock market crashed, the heady twenties died and the Great Depression brought misery to the United States and to the Hollywood movie industry.¹² Despite assurances from members of the Hoover government that the depression would be short, that even by June of 1930, “The worst is over without a

doubt” it soon became clear that the depression would have a profound effect upon the nation for more than a year or two.¹³ At first, the movie moguls were as outwardly optimistic as the government. In 1930, Samuel Katz of Paramount described the crisis as a “temporary period of changing values and confusion” while Harold Franklin, manager of a chain of movie theaters expected an imminent “return to normalcy”.¹⁴ They were hopelessly over-optimistic. Box-office takes plummeted by between ten and thirty-five percent, weekly attendance dropped from one-hundred million to sixty million, and one third of all movie-theaters “went dark”. Suddenly an industry that had never suffered a bad year, which had been raking in profits from the new “talkies”, was in trouble.¹⁵

From the beginning of the talkies, movies had begun to take risks unthinkable only a few years before. In *The Trial of Mary Duggan* (1929), Norma Shearer shocked the audience. Already MGM’s biggest female star, they knew Shearer for her portrayals of good girls and martyred women.¹⁶ Now, she played a chorus girl with a string of lovers accused of murder.¹⁷ Yet the movie expected the audience to sympathize with the Shearer character, and this movie, like many to come, attempted to challenge American culture. Rather than reflecting the accepted mores of society, these films asked the audience to change their perception of what was right and wrong. Other films followed suit, and in the grips of the depression, the movie studios realized that sex sold.¹⁸ Although the movie industry suffered in the depression, it was not so hard hit as most other industries. This freed actresses from the constraints of the roles they had played in the 1920s and opened up new vistas.

In the grim era of the early Depression, often the audiences wanted escape from the realities of life. They sought it in the movies. In particular, MGM produced a number of wish-fulfillment fantasies such as *Faithless*

⁷ David Wallace, *Lost Hollywood*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 32.

¹⁰ David Wallace, *Lost Hollywood*, 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹² Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 21

¹³ James J. Davis quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

(1932).¹⁹ *The Divorcee* (1930) showed a different kind of wish fulfillment for many women. In this film, Norma Shearer plays a wife whose husband cheats on her. In earlier films, the wife would have stoically remained silent, waiting for her husband to return to her. However, in *The Divorcee*, Shearer's character promptly cheats on her husband with his best friend and in the face of his anger tells him, "You're the only man in the world my door is closed to". She goes on willfully and happily to re-find her sexuality in an unsuspecting world.²⁰ Finally, the movies reflected the new reality of American life, in which women were beginning to reject Victorian taboos and explore their sexual power. Shearer had actively sought out a rôle that broke with stereotypes, despite concern from other Hollywood players including her husband. It was a success: she was the biggest Hollywood star of 1930 and won the Oscar that year for *The Divorcee*.

Shearer was not alone in her portrayal of ambiguous women. Since her argument with MGM in 1926, Greta Garbo had made the transition from silent movies to the talkies, playing increasingly challenging roles. Her first talkie rôle was in the wildly popular, and dreadful, *Mata Hari* in which she played the wartime spy. Soon, however, she was able to demand better roles. She headlined the sophisticated *Grand Hotel* in the rôle of a "fading, suicidal ballerina" and this gave her a real opportunity to play a real woman, complete with flaws. In her sensual scene with John Barrymore, she proved she could play "stylized sexuality" better than anyone could.²¹ Garbo took the portrayal of troubled – and troubling – women further in *Queen Christina* (1933). She plays Christina as bisexual – Garbo herself was bisexual – a gutsy move in a nation that still abhorred homosexuality.²² Hollywood had begun to deal with homosexuality in the previous three years, but had mostly compounded already accepted negative stereotypes. Films such as *Cavalcade* (1933) and *Sailor's Luck* (1928) portrayed male homosexuals as effeminate

"mauve characters," while lesbians appeared in prison films like *Ladies They Talk About* (1933).²³ Often the homosexuals were the second-string comic characters, but in *Queen Christina*, Garbo portrayed the central character sensitively and sympathetically as homosexual. Christina, however, was ultimately seduced by a man (contrary to historical evidence about the Queen) and abdicated her throne for love.²⁴ No such nobility was apparent in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) in which a sensual Roman dancer seduces a coy Christian slave girl. Paramount publicity used the Sapphic allure to entice audiences.²⁵ Marlene Dietrich took advantage of the atmosphere. Openly androgynous in dress and attitude in a Hollywood that continued to be shocked when Garbo wore slacks; Dietrich strode onto the scene. With sultry, powerful roles in films such as *Morocco* (1930) and *Blonde Venus* (1932), she brought exoticism to female empowerment.²⁶

Then along came Mae West. Already a noted performer in on Broadway, Paramount drew West to Hollywood as it built up a stable of female performers to rival MGM. Paramount publicized West as the new "Queen of Hollywood" and gave her extensive control of her roles and the production of her films.²⁷ West clearly delighted in her independence and strength. She was fearless: already the subject of two prosecutions for indecency while on the Broadway stage, she brought her brand of witty sexuality to Hollywood.²⁸ She was unafraid of appearing with openly gay actors and cross-dressers, and for blurring the lines of the acceptable with regard to race.²⁹ She also made sensuality funny, using the new talkie medium to its best advantage. Since the beginning of sound only a few years ago, humor had exploded into the movies. The Marx Brothers had made their name with *Duck Soup*, and many other movies featured snappy

²³ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 122.

²⁴ Barry Paris, *Garbo*, 295.

²⁵ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁷ Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 20, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 54.

²⁰ Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 69.

²¹ Barry Paris, *Garbo* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 219.

²² *Ibid.*, 294.

dialogue between characters.³⁰ Yet, West soon became the queen of the wisecrack. In one of her first major movies in Hollywood *I'm No Angel* (1933), when a fortune-teller predicts "I see a man in your life," West promptly retorts, "What? Only One?"³¹ In *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) she constantly uses humor, including the famous volley with Cary Grant:

Grant: "Haven't you ever met a man who can make you happy?"

West: "Sure, lots of times."³²

Here is a woman happy to portray a character, Lady Lou, as voracious sexual predator, but with whom the audience can sympathize. West herself makes clear part of the reason for the comedy, "I've developed a different way of selling my sex. I laugh them into it. [...] If you laugh with a sinner you like her. [...] The wages of sin in all cases is not death."³³ Curry suggests another reason: that West's frequently aimed her jokes at men in positions of authority, and that by poking fun at them, West was rebelling against the power such men wielded over women, and importantly, encouraging others to laugh at them too.³⁴

Many credited Mae West's roles in such inflammatory films as *She Done Him Wrong* as the cause of the imposition of the Production Code, yet her films were merely another coffin in the nail of the Pre-Code era. Christian moralists, especially Catholics, had long railed against the indecency of Hollywood. In 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) appointed Will H. Hays as their president, to clean up the industry and in 1930 formally adopted the Production Code. A Jesuit priest Daniel Lord and a Catholic layman Martin Quigley had written the Production Code using sophisticated Jesuit principles, dividing it into "general principles" and "particular applications," that reflected the concerns of middle America, of the Christian majority. It was received well by all but the studios. Poet John Drinkwater noted there was "nothing in the moral aspects

of the Code to which reasonable objection can be taken."³⁵ The studios grudgingly accepted the Code because they realized they had to show willing, but from the beginning had no real intention of following it.³⁶ In the first few years of the Depression, they flouted the Code, producing films that brought in enough viewers to keep the studios afloat. By 1933, it was a clear failure, *Variety* noting "[It] is not even a joke anymore; it's just a memory."³⁷

However, by 1934, political change brought strength to the moralists. The "New Deal" government of Franklin D. Roosevelt had formed in Washington, and was beginning to talk of federal censorship of the film industry. The studios realized they had to accept change. They abolished the weak and ineffective Studio Relations Committee and created the Production Code Administration, headed by Joseph I. Breen.³⁸ Breen was a zealous and bigoted man who treated film censorship as a moral crusade. A Catholic and an anti-Semite, he became the "last word" in motion picture content.³⁹ Breen did not merely want to abolish naked skin or obscene language; he wanted to change the entire moral character of the movies, to be "dream police."⁴⁰ Under the Code, crime could not pay; criminals had to be punished and without ambiguity.⁴¹ Worse, was that the Code once again relegated women to submissive positions. Pre-marital sex, adultery, divorce were all wiped from the movie screens, or the women who committed such sins had to be seen suffering from them. No more happy divorcees or sexual experimentation for American women: their place was, once again, in marriage.⁴² Censors even insisted that distributors should pull movies made in the pre-Code era from movie screens, including *Queen Christina*, *Riptide* and *Baby Face*. Censors butchered other films.⁴³

Some female stars were able to continue: Shearer and Barbara Stanwyck maintained their popularity, but the

³⁵ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 7.

³⁶ Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 40.

³⁷ *Variety*, quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 8.

³⁸ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 9.

³⁹ Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 201.

⁴⁰ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 9.

⁴¹ Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women*, 190.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁰ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 172.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

³² *Ibid.*, 184.

³³ Mae West quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 183.

³⁴ Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 95.

imposition of the Code hurt Garbo and reduced Marlene Dietrich to shallow exoticism. Mae West tried to continue and enjoyed a brief success with *Belle of the Nineties* (1934), but her audiences were unhappy at the effect of the Code on the movie and deserted her. The fading of so many stars annoyed the studios. As one studio executive grumbled, “The leading lady must start out good, stay good, and be whitewashed for the finish.”⁴⁴ Defanged and declawed, the women of cinema no longer mirrored society, but became pale reflections of what parts of society wanted them to be.

For four brief years, Hollywood broke all the rules, yet the period ended with brutal censorship that lasted for

until the 1960s. In that short time, women took control of their own images, and stars like Garbo, West and Shearer chose roles that broke out of the confinement of previous eras and showed women as strong, sexual, independent beings. In doing so, they saved Hollywood from the depression and brought a light to the people suffered under the yoke of poverty while reflecting the new mores of society. For such a short-lived phenomenon, it was extremely important, in both cinema and feminist history, and despite what came afterwards, remains so to this day.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

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