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by

Janet Reinschmidt

2021

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Let's Have a Gay Old Time: How Lesbians Shaped Early Hollywood

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Noah Isenberg, Supervisor

Curran Nault

Let's Have A Gay Old Time: How Lesbians Shaped Early Hollywood

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Janet Reinschmidt

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

University of Texas at Austin

August 2021

Abstract

Let's Have A Gay Old Time: How Lesbians Shaped Early Hollywood

Janet Reinschmidt, MA

University of Texas at Austin, 2021

Supervisor: Noah Isenberg

This thesis puts forth Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo as case studies for early Hollywood lesbian stardom and reception and unpacks how their star personas were constructed as well as the fan responses to their image and work. Through intersections of star studies, reception studies, classic literature, and queer historical texts, I discuss each star's life and career with textual analysis of their films and primary sources such as fan letters, fan magazines, advertisements, and newspaper articles. I argue that each star represents a queer, and more specifically lesbian and bisexual, sensibility within the early Hollywood film industry that deserves more scholarly attention. The fan letters columns within old Hollywood fan magazines such as *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen* particularly illustrate the construction of queer star personas and the impact that they had on informed movie fans. Nazimova, Francis, and Garbo were all-powerful and influential figures in the film industry during significant periods of change such as the rise of the studio era, the arrival of sound, and the shift from pre-Code to the

production Code era. Their star personas reflect how they were influenced by and went on to influence these critical transitions in Old Hollywood. There is a fundamental activist function to this work, to remind audiences that queer people have always existed, even without a framework to discuss identity, and this work endeavors to show a dedicated lesbian influence and audience of early Hollywood.

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Introduction

In an April 1933 issue of *Photoplay*, author Hilary Lynn describes the elusivity of women stars such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn and Joan Crawford in an article titled “What Is This Thing Called ‘X’?” She describes them as “different from other women” and positions them in contrast to “It” girls on screen such as Clara Bow. She uses the terms “mysterious” and “exotic” and other coded language to suggest that they are fundamentally different from other, implied more feminine, women stars. One thing that all of the women she lists with “X” have in common is that they are all either open bisexuals as in Marlene Dietrich and Tallulah Bankhead, or were often rumored to be lesbians or bisexuals. The language Lynn uses to describe the women she chooses to highlight suggests that this is not a coincidence. This article is just one example of the use of coded language and associations between stars in old Hollywood fan magazines to imply that some women were not as heterosexual as studios wanted the public to believe. Throughout the following three chapters, I examine movie magazine articles such as this one as well as fan letters, films, and their projections of queer star personas to show a dedicated lesbian influence and audience of early Hollywood cinema.

My primary research questions are: How do fan magazine editors/authors of the late 1920s and 1930s characterize lesbian and bisexual women stars? How are queer star personas constructed and maintained and in this process do fan magazines and audiences play a part in this star construction? Is there coded evidence of a dedicated lesbian fanbase in this era? To answer these questions, I analyze primary sources including gossip columns, movie fan magazines, and fan letters. I provide context and theoretical conjecture with respect to texts about stardom, reception, and lesbian cultural history. I use these materials to examine the queer star personas of

lesbian and bisexual stars Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo. I also provide textual analysis of two films from each star to examine the ways in which their personas are constructed and utilized in the characters they play. LGBTQ+ contributions to early cinema are innumerable, and the stars I chose to highlight had power in the industry during some of Hollywood's biggest changes including the rise of the star system, the shift from silent to sound cinema, and the enforcement of the production code. Through the study of queer star personas, fan magazines, and fan materials, I hope to speculate the role of lesbian spectatorship and representation in this era. This is an important task because a paucity of star studies and scholarly analysis of early Hollywood fandom mentions queer women at all, or connects individuals with a larger queer community that existed at that time.

When modern audiences look back to the first few decades of Hollywood cinema, we often see an erasure of LGBTQ folks. The language wasn't accessible to even describe sexual identities. People outside of the norm (the norm being cisgender heterosexual, terms we have today that didn't exist then), if they shared it at all, only shared it within small underground groups of friends with similar feelings, or possibly only ever admitted it in their diaries. Due to the lack of language, the extreme cultural taboo, and the criminality of being gay in this era, it is hard to produce concrete proof that anyone from the early 20th century was gay. However, it is a fact that same sex desire and gender non-conformity has always existed, and uncovering our history is an important task not only for academics, but to remind people that our stories matter. Reading between the lines is vital in forming this history due to the lack of overt visibility in an era in which being open about queer sexuality in the U.S. often meant cultivating a criminal record, or worse.

As a disclaimer, I feel it is important to state that my goal is not to unnecessarily “out” anyone that never wanted to be known as bisexual or a lesbian and can no longer speak for themselves. However, in order to uncover this overlooked history, it requires reading between the lines to find certain queer coded language and actions that, in context, implied a queerness to a savvy audience. Whether or not a celebrity was in fact LGBTQ+ matters, but in a time when no one was very open about their sexuality and didn’t have the words to name it, the fact that certain stars had queer coded star personas and/or appealed to a lesbian audience regardless of their sexuality is equally important.

In order to properly examine the impact of lesbian and bisexual women stars on early film and lesbian culture, it is necessary to first explain what it meant to be a lesbian in the early 1900s. In the following, I use the term “lesbian” to refer to women who have had romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women. Some of these women may have also had relationships with men or people of other genders, but it is often hard to find definitive corroborating evidence either way. They most likely didn’t identify as lesbians and probably didn’t identify as “queer,” “bisexual,” “gay” or any other common terms used today. In the early 1900s, these terms weren’t used in the same way they are now. Furthermore, using “queer” as a catch all umbrella term is problematic due to its long history as a derogatory slur— especially during the time period I’m examining. So, while I do use the term “queer” in this study, out of necessity and lack of better language, I try to limit its use and not force it on anyone who can’t speak for themselves.

The term “lesbian” was used infrequently in the 1920s, and most people didn’t see themselves through this lens and didn’t openly identify as anything other than possibly a spinster

(Faderman 63). Occasionally women of the era were called “Sapphic,” after the ancient Greek lesbian poet Sappho of Lesbos, but even that wasn’t a universal term. Most lesbians and bisexual women didn’t have terms for their love of other women and though some stars’ sexualities were common knowledge among fans movie-going audiences, as in Nazimova’s case, they weren’t overtly outed in print. Nazimova’s partner, whom she lived with for twenty years until her death, was simply called her “assistant” and “confidante” (Lambert 12).

The history of lesbianism is complex. For example, many lesbian relationships in the 1800s were described as “romantic friendships.” “Romantic friendship” was a common phrase throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century; the term referred to socially acceptable close romantic (and often sexual) bonds between women (Francicova 143-144). These women were expected to marry a man if a suitable one came along and could continue their “romantic friendships” with women as long as they still fulfilled their wifely duties and didn’t allude to any “erotic element” in their love of women (Faderman 1-2). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, first-wave feminists were working towards suffrage and more opportunities for education and work for white middle class women (Faderman 12). Although there were always working-class women that worked out of necessity, this shift led to more vocal same-sex relationships because more women chose to get an education and supported themselves, without giving up their same-sex relationships for a heterosexual marriage (Faderman 12). Though the societal pressure to marry at a reasonable age still existed and careers and higher education continued to be seen as unacceptable, for middle-class white women new possibilities were beginning to emerge (Faderman 12-13).

In the early 20th century however, medical texts coined the term “sexual invert,” which began to shape mainstream ideas of same-sex relationships (Faderman 2). Lesbians were stigmatized as “men trapped in women’s bodies,” “sick,” and “abnormal” (Faderman 3). This continued in the 1920s, when male physicians used their sway to demonize what they called the “New Woman,” who in their estimation “embodied the unnatural and monstrous” and were to be considered a “Mannish Lesbian” for experimenting with gender representation and politics (Smith-Rosenberg 268). The New Woman was in part a rejection of the Victorian woman of the past, and in part a reaction to World War I and the new roles women were encouraged to adopt for a brief time. This “New Woman” valued education, individuality, and self-reliance (Smith-Rosenberg 264). She was not interested in fitting preconceived notions of gender and other social conventions, determined to carve her own path without fear of consequence (Smith-Rosenberg 264). Many of these women did this with a political intent to gain respect and reshape the way women were treated at the time. This attempt at respect didn’t work, and by the 1930s these “New Women” were not only ridiculed, but deemed “unnatural” by physicians as well as the general public (Smith-Rosenberg 265).

Despite backlash from the older generation and medical professionals, many of the women of the 1910s and ‘20s continued to reject established gender roles, to educate themselves, and to have romantic and sexual relationships with other women. This can be seen in some of the most popular movie stars of the time, including Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Louise Brooks, Olive Thomas, and even Joan Crawford. Outside of Hollywood, androgynous women were still often ridiculed, but when someone like Marlene walked on screen or stage with her unmistakable swagger and dapper suits, audiences were awed to silence. Men and women alike were attracted

to her. This androgynous star image, influenced by lesbian literature of the day such as *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, rose to mainstream popularity and influenced the lesbian image, woman's identity in general, as well as the early film industry.

Although the studio system continued to stymie the lives and careers of marginalized folks in entertainment, reflecting a deeply racist and homophobic American culture, it is valuable to acknowledge the so-called "queer" contributions of celebrities and audiences in spite of this lack of overt visibility. While movie stars weren't often openly gay in a modern sense, there is evidence of a lesbian sensibility that permeated star personas, gossip columns, and fan correspondence as early as the 1910s. In the following, I unpack these primary texts with the goal of bringing to light some of the contributions of lesbian and bisexual women movie stars of the early motion picture industry. To achieve this, I focus on three queer coded star personas as case studies: Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo. Each of these stars was very successful at the heights of their careers and many of their contributions to the industry can be found in movie fan magazines of the 1920s and 30s. Fans reacted strongly to all three stars, keeping personal scrapbooks, writing letters to the stars via the studios, and writing to magazines such as *Motion Picture Magazine*, *Photoplay*, *Silver Screen*, and *Modern Screen* asking for information about their private lives and careers. Some magazine columnists printed wild rumors about all three, while others attempted to suggest they were all perfectly heterosexual and even the centers of male interest in their respective eras.

Further, the star personas of Nazimova, Francis, and Garbo relate to one another in unique and illuminating ways. Not only do writers of the era often link the three using the same coded language to describe each of them, but their personas also draw on different queer tropes

and temporalities, with Nazimova's vamp image out of Gothic fiction, Francis's Depression era flapper, and Garbo's mysterious recluse from lesbian literature are all plucked out of time and reproduced anachronistically. Each of these images, though seemingly from multiple epochs, are reproduced throughout early cinema and, to be sure, every time they are drawn on they function as shorthands for LGBTQ identities. In Susan Potter's book *Queer Timing*, she discusses early Hollywood silent film through a perspective of queer temporality stating that silent films "generate structures of representation and spectatorship—a disembodied and depersonalized moving image aesthetic...able to sustain queer subjectivities that are not exactly lesbian but that are enabled by the disparate forms of its emergence" (Love 2). Specifically, as I explore further in Chapter 1, Potter describes Valentino's androgynous and timeless star persona, cultivated in films such as *Camille*, and his legion of young women fans. Rather than focus on the over-analyzed heterosexual fantasies of some of his women fans, she argues that lesbian audiences could identify with his and Nazimova's androgyny on screen. Similarly, Kay Francis's characters in the 1930s and early 40s were always compared to Nazimova and Theda Bara's vamps before her, while adding a flapper spin (despite the flapper era having long past). Her butch flapper haircut and modern fashions equally entranced queer audiences of her time and others.

In this thesis, I draw on a variety of academic texts, primarily works about reception, stardom, and lesbian cultural history. I also discuss several star biographies and fictional works such as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* as they provide important context for the films and stars I discuss. First, in order to examine early Hollywood fans, I engage with the literature written about early Hollywood fan culture, reception, and female spectatorship, namely the work of Shelley Stamp, Anthony Slide, Diana Anselmo, and

Kathy Fuller Seeley. My work deviates significantly by focusing specifically on lesbian and bisexual women stars and queer fan interactions which none of these previous studies have done. Stamp's *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* is foundational for my work, as I draw on her research on early silent film audiences and the "movie-struck girl" fan culture to expand and study the next decade, focusing on the late silent/early sound, pre-Code, and early production Code eras. Anthony Slide wrote the definitive book on movie fan magazines titled *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine*. Slide includes statistics and studies of fan magazine audiences and has a treasure trove of research as he charts the rise of *Motion Picture Magazine*, *Photoplay*, and *Modern Screen* when each of them became the leading Hollywood fan magazines.

Another body of literature that is important in my study are works on stardom, and I draw heavily on the pioneering research of Richard Dyer and Jeanine Basinger as they provide foundational theories of stardom and star personas. Basinger, in her books *The Star Machine*, *A Woman's View*, and *Silent Stars* discusses star personas and how Hollywood targeted women audiences with contradictory messages in films about women. She offers a reading of Kay Francis that is particularly interesting in the context of my research, as she considers Francis a sub par actress but nonetheless a very important figure of the era. Richard Dyer is one of few scholars that focuses on "persona studies." In his book *Heavenly Bodies* he discusses the idea of "persona" and all of the factors that go into their creation; audiences, studios, press, etc. This research and framework are essential as I dive into the personas of three stars and contend with the way Hollywood wanted them to be seen versus their self-perceptions and their fan bases and press. My research differs from Basinger and Dyer insofar as I focus not only on the way their

personas were constructed and maintained, but also examine how each star wanted to be seen, how audiences perceived them at the time, and how they are remembered if they are remembered at all today.

A large part of my thesis is about queer coding and the history of lesbians and bisexual women stars. To write about these subjects I engage with queer theory and history including authors such as Susan Potter, Lillian Faderman, William J. Mann, Laura Horak and Sarah Waters. Lesbian culture in the early 20th century does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it stems from theories of “romantic friendship” in the 1800s and “The New Woman” of the 1920s both discussed at length in Faderman’s book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. Potter’s *Queer Timing* provides unique theories of queer temporality and film history as well as queer context for specific silent film works including Nazimova’s *Camille* (1921). William J. Mann’s (now out of print) book *Behind the Screen* describes how gay and lesbian folks were involved in all aspects of the movie industry through the golden age of Hollywood. He has an illuminating chapter on lesbian stars/content producers that I draw on in both my first and second chapters. Patricia White’s *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* is a significant study of queer coding and lesbian coding in classic Hollywood cinema that has informed my work as well as the work of other scholars that I reference throughout the following three chapters. Laura Horak’s *Girls Will be Boys: Cross-dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema, 1908-1934* brings lesbians and cross dressing back into the forefront of silent era discussions with important context and textual analysis of films that I draw on heavily in my third chapter about Greta Garbo. All of these texts help me identify various coded language in

films and fan magazines which signals to audiences that stars, characters, and even fans may not be heterosexual.

My main methods are media reception studies, cultural studies, textual analysis, and historiography. I analyze old Hollywood paratexts including fan magazines, gossip columns, and fan letter columns to see how fan magazine authors interacted with audiences and how women audiences made meaning from the queer films and stars of the 1920s-30s. I contextualize my findings by exploring the history of lesbian and gay culture in America and what it was like to be a lesbian in the early 1900s. I also analyze the content of a few films from early Hollywood, focusing on *Camille* (1921), *Salome* (1923), *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Queen Christina* (1933), and *Camille* (1936) as well as the star personas of Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo in three short but distinct periods of transition in the early film industry. In each case, I discuss queer coding through textual analysis of the films and analyze the actresses' queer star personas as they are presented in the films. Along with the films, I analyze fan magazine authors' language to see if the queer coding on screen translates to articles in the magazines about these stars and the characters they played. Focusing on magazine articles and fan letter columns, I hope to demonstrate how fans picked up on these codes or contributed to the queer star personas.

In my first chapter, "Alla Nazimova, The Sewing Circle, and Silent Era Lesbian Reception," I focus on accounts of lesbian stardom and fans of the 1920s. Specifically, I use director/producer/star Nazimova as a case study to examine how fans and fan magazines interacted with other lesbian stars of the silent era and how this shifts as the early stages of the code start to take hold. In a section of this chapter, I focus on the life and career of Nazimova in

order to explain how she made a name for herself in this era and in turn, how she was perceived by the industry and its audiences. I provide a short history of the Hollywood fan magazine as we know it to give context for how actors began sharing their names and shaping the industry and consequently, became major celebrities. Using Shelley Stamp's research as a jumping off point, I chart how the demographics shifted from the 1910s and early 20s from an audience of male hobbyists to the women focused fandom of the 20s-40s. This allows me to discuss female spectatorship and the demographics of women fans as well as how these young women fans were characterized in the magazines and industry.

In 1923, Alla Nazimova directed, produced, and starred in *Salome* based on Oscar Wilde's play of the same name. This production was historic for several reasons. Just before the stage production Wilde had been arrested and charged with obscenity in a high profile trial that outed him as homosexual. Also, Nazimova reportedly hired an all gay cast and crew for the film production and came up with the term "The Sewing Circle" on set, a coded term to refer to the community of queer women in entertainment at that time. The term caught on and remained a common code for decades, used to describe closeted lesbian gatherings and communities. Through textual analysis of a few scenes in both *Camille* (1921) and *Salome* (1923) and Nazimova's star persona, as well as her impact on the silent film industry, I discuss lesbian stardom and queer fan interactions of the silent era. At the height of Nazimova's career she received a considerable amount of press in *Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Photoplay*, but as she broke off from the studios and became an independent producer she lost the coverage and studio protection that she once had. This is significant, especially considering that during this time she also left her husband and admits that the whole marriage was a sham and they were only

friends who lived together to assuage the press. By looking at her star persona, the trajectory of her film career in this era, and the queer interactions between fan magazine authors and her fans, I can paint a picture of what it was like to be a lesbian star in early Hollywood.

The second chapter, “Kay Francis, The Star Machine, and Pre-Code Hollywood,” focuses on the shift from silent Hollywood to sound era and pre-code Hollywood. I study fan letters and magazine responses to Kay Francis and two of her films, *Girls About Town*, and one of her most popular pre-Code films, *Trouble in Paradise (1932)*. *Modern Screen* became one of the most popular fan magazines in the 1930s and I study it in comparison to *Photoplay* and how the star system shifted in the early sound era. Francis also wrote in her diary during this time that she had relationships with several women as well as men. The diary is held in Wesleyan University’s Cinema Archives, but I have access to a few important excerpts through her three biographers, Scott O’Brien, Lynn Kear, and John Rossman. Their work informs my research as I study her star persona and deal with her own perception of herself versus how the fan magazines and audiences viewed and characterized her in print.

Modern Screen released their first issue in 1930 and it quickly became one of the most popular fan magazines and *Photoplay*’s main competition. As it grew in popularity, new types of columns and contests in the magazine formed to stimulate audience interaction with the film industry. Louella Parsons’s column “Good News” was one of the most widely read of the magazine’s run, as Parsons famously listed every bit of gossip that she came across. These types of gossip columns caused audiences to speculate and write in asking whether certain things were true and commenting their opinion on stars’ films and personal lives. The gossip and letters

columns are my primary focus within fan magazines as I try to understand how audiences' reactions and interactions with queer stars and the film industry shift in the early sound era.

Chapter three, "Garbo Mania," focuses on the life and career of Greta Garbo. Of the three stars I discuss, Garbo is the most famous and best remembered today. I start with an analysis of Garbo's life and career and examine how the studio and the fan magazines discussed and marketed her to audiences in the 1920s and 30s. Her widespread stardom has lasted much longer than Francis and Nazimova (and even her own film career which ended in 1941). A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to deconstructing the common myths and ideas of Garbo and showing how star personas continue to evolve long after their film careers are over. I offer textual analysis of two of Garbo's most famous films, *Queen Christina* (1933) and *Camille* (1936). I chose these films because both are significant feats of queer cinema and have shaped the way Garbo is perceived today. Another focus of this chapter is the fan responses to Garbo's work and image, which are some of the most passionate and intense of any I've seen during my research for this project. Young women especially worshipped Garbo even from the first years of her career, before her persona had been fully developed. Garbo's stardom presents an interesting case study to discuss interactions between fans, as many would write to magazines to respond to and argue with other fan responses to her work, reflecting a dialogue between informed movie fans of the 1920s and 30s.

Chapter 1: Alla Nazimova, The Sewing Circle and Silent Era Lesbian Reception

[To “The Mystic Rose”] “Well-and how are we this month, little-green-ink? You never ask me anything but my silent sympathy in your moments of heroine worship. You are the funniest correspondent I have--you have never waxed enthusiastic over a man; it is always Pearl White, Mary, or Nazimova.”

-*Photoplay*, Questions and Answers, 1919.

“The Mystic Rose” was a frequent correspondent of *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1918-1920. Her favorite actors included Alla Nazimova, Pearl White, Mary Thurman, and Norma Talmadge. The phrase “little green ink” is of particular importance for the audience fluent in queer codes of the time. Oscar Wilde often wore green carnations in his lapel when going to the theatre and public premieres, as it was believed to be a gay code among men in late nineteenth century Paris, a “distinctive emblem” to alert fellow homosexuals they are not alone (Beckson 190). Green ink is also what Marlene Dietrich reportedly used in letters to her lovers, most notably Mercedes de Acosta (McLellan 165). If the Mystic Rose’s “heroine worship” and lack of enthusiasm about male stars didn’t clue us in, the gay audience of *Photoplay* might know what “little green ink” implied.

Throughout this chapter, I examine fan magazine artifacts such as The Mystic Rose responses within *Motion Picture Magazine* and *Photoplay*, to show a dedicated lesbian audience of early Hollywood cinema. Specifically, in this chapter I examine Nazimova’s star persona as a case study to discuss the queerness of early Hollywood and to examine the level of interaction between fans and lesbian stars in the silent era. I also examine the production and content of the films *Camille* (1921) and *Salomé* (1923) to show how Nazimova cultivated a notoriously queer fan base and incorporated the works of queer friends and artists she respected, creating a network of industry professionals in the silent era. My two ulterior goals of this research are to show that

same sex desire between women has always existed, and existed in this era despite a lack of overt visibility, and to interrogate the level of so-called “queer” interactions between movie fans and lesbian and bisexual women stars of early Hollywood such as Alla Nazimova.

The Mystic Rose’s first name was Ethel and she was 18 in 1920, according to a patchwork of information pieced together from magazine responses to her in both *Motion Picture Magazine* and *Photoplay*. The title “The Mystic Rose” implies a Catholic background, as it is another way of referring to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, referenced in the Litany of Loreto. This is all we have in the way of biographical information. It is unclear where she originally got the moniker “The Mystic Rose,” whether a magazine writer gave it to her or she chose it herself. However, it is clear that the letter writer with that moniker is the same across both magazines. She consistently writes about Pearl White and Nazimova more than any other performers and the responses to her letters can only be found from 1918 to 1920, when she would have been ages 16 to 18. The Answer Man column in *Motion Picture Magazine* was the most popular content of the magazine according to Anthony Slide (Slide 19). It’s also important to note that although the person responding to fan letters in *Motion Picture Magazine* was dubbed “The Answer Man,” the writer was actually a woman named Elizabeth M. Heinemann, whose work in that capacity encompassed the early years of the publication (Slide 19). Thus, when The Mystic Rose and The Answer Man are discussing the appeal of Nazimova and joking about Ethel’s obsessions with women stars and lack of interest in male idols, these are two women absorbed in the lives and careers of women stars, and in Nazimova’s case, lesbian women stars. The Answer Men in *Motion Picture Magazine* and *Photoplay* both go so far as to

say Mystic Rose is one of their favorite correspondents, insisting that they always look forward to her letters and worry when she doesn't write.

The Rise of the Movie Fan

In order to analyze specific facets of 1910s-20s fan magazines it's important to discuss at least a general history of the movie fan magazine and early conceptions of the movie fan. In the early 1900s, motion pictures were still a new artform and early film trade publications tended to showcase the technical aspects of the medium. These publications mainly marketed to male hobbyists and technicians who made up a large portion of the moviegoing audience in the early years of film through the Nickelodeon era. The first non-trade movie magazines were published around 1907 and the first true movie fan magazines around 1910. Although many women were already interested in motion pictures in the early Nickelodeon era, theatre owners and exhibitors began aggressively courting a white middle-class woman audience by the early 1910s to combat the image of film as a lower class, less respectable art form (Stamp 13-14). This plea for respectability didn't work as planned because as we know, not all women like the same films. Some genres that were considered lesser art and cheap thrills such as the white slave film and the adventure serial were very popular among young women and didn't exactly put forth the respectable high art image that studios were looking for. White slave films focused on young women that were kidnapped or tricked into selling themselves to men, often for a larger network of corrupt male businessmen. This genre parallels the obsession with true crime and crime fiction series today. Serial films were cinematic universes of swashbuckling women heroines fighting bad guys with heart pounding narratives that always ended in cliffhangers. Both were seen as low art corrupting the minds of young audiences. However, both genres were immensely popular

despite their status as trash films. Women and girl audiences were catered to more in this era than in any other before or since, even as their presence in theatres and modes of viewership were constantly questioned.

Movie fandom had become a major phenomenon by the mid-1910s. As early as 1910, actors began sharing their names with the public and studios started to create widespread marketing campaigns for specific actors that audiences seemed to favor, such as Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford. The first issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine* was released in 1911 and published mostly short story/novella adaptations of popular movies. By 1914 however, the magazine dropped the “Story” in its title and catered to a different audience, the star obsessed movie fan. The magazine published fan letters and poetry about movies and fan favorite magazine columns. By the mid-1910s, whether it was entirely accurate or not, movie fans in *Motion Picture Magazine* were characterized as mostly young women and girls (Fuller 146). As the movie serial craze took off, this characterization only multiplied while women lined up and sold out shows every week to see their favorite adventure heroines such as Pearl White on screen in continuing stories. It makes sense then that The Mystic Rose would have been 16-18 when she wrote into fan magazines almost monthly. She was one of the primary audiences the magazines were marketing to at that time and her favorite star Pearl White was otherwise known as “Queen of the Serials” (Stamp 141). It seems Ethel may have had a case of “serialitis,” named to describe the type of compulsive film viewing and readership many young girls took part in during the serial craze (Stamp 102). The medical implications of the terms “filmitis” and “serialitis” used to describe girl fans in this era harken back to the fake illness “hysteria” used to discredit women in the 1800s. Women said to be suffering from “hysteria” were often outspoken or expressed their

emotions openly. Though many were suffering from what we now would call depression and anxiety, “hysteria” was a catch all illness used to write off women deemed overly emotional or unreasonable by male physicians. Similarly, the terms “filmitis” and “serialitis” were used in print to discredit girl fans as suffering from something unnatural, implying some form of mental illness causing their unhealthy obsession with film.

Women and girl audiences in this era were simultaneously sought after for their continued business and ridiculed by the movie industry, fan magazines, and newspapers (Stamp 10-11). As much as theatres were catering to and courting older middle class women audiences in the early 1910s, as women became more visible audience members everything from sociological texts to newspapers to movie trade magazines were questioning womens’ role in the audience and their participation in leisure activities away from the home and family. Women were both encouraged to dress up to go to the cinema and made fun of for it, their hats and intricate dress styles constantly ridiculed in comics and caricatures (Stamp 30-31). Similarly, genres that young girls frequented such as the adventure serial were negatively reviewed for their “crude” and “sensational content” even as no publication could ignore their immense popularity (Stamp 109). The theatres were so packed during this era and the demand so great that there was a reel shortage and girls were sitting up and down the aisles and standing by the seats trying to get a glimpse of the action on screen (Stamp 109-110). Young women and girls were lining up around the block to see active adventure heroines on screen in gripping plots with cliffhangers and continuing stories, a phenomenon that rivals an *Avengers* or *Star Wars* premiere today.

While older middle class women audiences were ridiculed for their extravagant cinema-going outfits, young girl movie fans were seen as immature daydreamers. As movie fan

magazines began marketing more to younger women and girls with competitions and lifestyle features directly aimed at a young female readership, a new image of the film spectator surfaced. She was the “movie-struck” or “screen-struck girl,” a young girl movie fan who obsessively consumed the cinema and had dreams of screen stardom herself (Anselmo 1). According to Diana Anselmo, these girls were engaged in analyzing features and participating in a movie culture that rivals the interactive web based modes of cinema fandom today (Anselmo 2). According to Shelley Stamp, they were at once celebrated by the industry for their repeat business, but also seen as unhealthy and “appalling” for their cinephilic compulsive viewing tendencies (Stamp 102). Although today when we hear “cinephile” a stereotypical image of a specific type of male film student with encyclopedic film knowledge may come to mind, back in the silent era cinephilia was portrayed as a phenomenon of concern particular to young women movie fans who felt compelled to go to the cinema every week and obsess over movie stars and film publications.

The blatant derision and patronizing attitudes toward young women audiences parallels the treatment that many (young and old) women actors and especially women filmmakers experienced in the mid silent era. Nazimova is a prime example of a star/filmmaker who was simultaneously praised and ridiculed in movie fan magazines, sometimes even in the same issue. At the height of the silent era Nazimova was a frequent cover girl, appearing in *Motion Picture Story Magazine* as early as February 1916 when the magazine reported she was paid \$65,000 on one motion picture made in less than a month’s time. For the next seven years, Nazimova figured frequently and prominently in the gossip and fan letter columns of both *Motion Picture Magazine* and *Photoplay*, with audiences inquiring about everything from her horoscope to her

contracts to if she's married and how the marriage is doing. She was mentioned in nearly every issue of both magazines, with frequent features about her films, personality, and home life. Fans waxed enthusiastic about her characters and even sometimes sent poetry describing her film roles and her appearance in them. In this era, movie studios and fan publications shaped an actor's persona, but audiences and dedicated fans are what made them stars, allowing someone like Nazimova to demand higher pay and the freedom to branch out into more creative fields of filmmaking such as producing, writing, and directing.

Nazimova Star Persona and Biography

From Nazimova's first appearance on screen to the end of her film career (1916-1925), the writers and editors of fan magazines had a love hate relationship with her. Early in Nazimova's career, movie fan magazine writers lauded her naturalistic stage acting but some also labeled her as temperamental and overly emotional on the screen. As she aged, the praise she had once received by movie magazines slowly morphed into insults and sly ridicule by the end of her film career. The magazine editors often made fun of her desire to direct films, with one 1920 issue of *Photoplay* listing bad habits of the stars and simply stating "Nazimova: directing" ("Their Bad Habits"). Other articles questioned her business decisions, lampooning her for leaving MGM in 1921 and criticizing her independent work. It's been suggested that, although she didn't get credit for it, she did direct many of the films she acted in throughout her film career, most notably her pet project *Salomé (1923)*, which she made independently and funded herself. The widespread knowledge that she was a lesbian did not seem to help matters. Nothing was explicitly stated in the magazines, due to aggressive homophobia and even

criminality associated with being gay in the U.S. at the time, but the use of coded language to position Nazimova in contrast to other women is striking. One article published in the July 1918 issue of *Photoplay* titled “Elsie or Alla?” describes the differences between Nazimova and actress Elsie Ferguson. Ferguson was celebrated as “the best dressed woman on screen” that year and Nazimova’s personality and style are viewed in direct contrast to Ferguson’s high fashion and beauty (Raftery 22). The author states that Nazimova dresses with “eccentricity,” “individuality,” and “simplicity,” styles different from other popular actresses (Raftery 22-23). Her personality and overall looks are described as “odd,” “eccentric,” and “funny” (Raftery 23). Many of these words were classic code words used often in films and in print to suggest that someone might be different in some fundamental way, that they could be gay or a lesbian. Although LGBTQ people were largely ignored or never spoken about in public in this era, reading between the lines and searching for coded language was one way to identify a queer image in popular culture. One *Motion Picture Magazine* writer in 1920 even goes so far to say that Nazimova is “different from other women in everything she says and every mannerism she possesses” (Gray 30). When her fans write to the magazines, it is safe to assume they probably read these articles and had some idea of her difference from other stars, even if they didn’t know she was gay. The magazines also seemed concerned with presenting an overt image of Nazimova as a dutiful heterosexual wife. *Photoplay* writers penned features about her supposed happy marriage and home life and called her “Mrs. Charles Bryant” in articles, before the marriage was revealed to be a front in 1925. The articles about her pseudo-marriage did nothing to squash the rumors of her women companions, but probably helped cover her tracks as Hollywood moved toward a more conservative film culture in the early 1920s.

The other main factor of Nazimova's star persona in fan magazines was her status as an immigrant. She was typecast as a foreign-born "vamp" from the start of her career in Hollywood and she never seemed to shake the image. Most articles didn't specify her exact country of origin (Russia), but instead attributed an exotic air of mystery to her heritage. In fan magazines she was addressed as "Madame Nazimova," "Mme. Nazimova" or simply "The Madame," though it is unclear where this title originated. It is possible she invented it herself, but is more likely that the MGM publicity department drummed it up to call attention to her "foreign beauty" without concern for her actual country of origin. This exoticization of Nazimova was not separate from the implications that she was a lesbian and in fact added to the erotic nature of her "mysterious" queer persona. This is most clearly illustrated in an October 1920 article from *Motion Picture Magazine* titled "Nazimova...and Her Language of the Soul," by Frances Gray. Gray describes Nazimova's work as the highest of art, but does so with intermittent references to her "exotic" personality and looks. Gray is infatuated with every inch of Nazimova, describing her dress style, ideas, and looks with words like "intoxicating," "exquisite," and "forbidding" (Gray 30-31). This language suggests that she's interested in more than just Nazimova's film work. Every word of Gray's article reveals a deep infatuation while also drawing attention to Nazimova's queer image and status as an immigrant. "Her olive skin is set off by large, grey-blue eyes," she observes, "of that indescribable depth that sometimes reflects the warm, purplish lights of the Orient" (Gray 31). Gray ties Nazimova's beauty to her foreignness and difference from other "normal" women, which implies almost an erotic deviance. Gray manages to ask Nazimova about her "transformation" from a Russian stage actress in New York to a Hollywood movie star, but pauses intermittently to call attention to the "musical cadences" and "throaty mellow tones"

of her voice stating “she has the most attractive speaking voice of any woman in the world” (Gray 31). She then interviews Nazimova about how she learned English and mentions her slight accent, as if that adds to the appeal. With every line, Gray seems to reveal more of Nazimova’s appeal to a queer woman audience, while also calling attention to her foreignness.

Gray ends the article with a short reference to Nazimova’s happy marriage to Charles Bryant and his “adoring glances” directed at her (Gray 107). For 13 years, Nazimova was in a faux marriage with British actor Charles Bryant, also rumored to be gay or bisexual. It is unclear whether or not the two were ever seriously romantically involved, but they were certainly friends and lived together despite never truly getting married. The movie magazines ran with this union however and printed dozens of features about the happy spouses’ home life. Bryant was also often credited as the director on many films, though Nazimova is believed to have directed them herself, including *A Doll’s House* and *Salomé*. Every article about Nazimova, no matter how queer, always returns to her “happy life” with her husband despite the hidden truth that they were never married.

In 1917, Alla Nazimova was one of the highest paid women in the film industry, making \$3000 more a week than Mary Pickford according to Lewis J. Selznick’s contracts. She was considered the “star without a rival” when she signed her contract at Metro and Tennessee Williams even credited her acting with inspiring him to become a playwright (Lambert 5-6). How does a huge star of stage and screen with that much influence on the entertainment industry seem to figure only tangentially if at all in most written histories of Hollywood cinema? Not only did Nazimova have a large vocal audience, she produced many of her own films and branched into directing and writing as well. She was an actor, producer, writer, and director during the

height of silent Hollywood. She was even aware of her legacy and took pains to save as much of her writing and papers she could, most of which are now housed (largely uncatalogued) in the Glesca Marshall Library in Columbus, Georgia. She was also one of the most well known lesbians of that era. Her sexuality was “one of Hollywood’s best unkept secrets” according to many who knew her, despite never explicitly stating anything in print (Lambert 13). In order to understand her star persona and the way she perceived herself as well as how she was perceived by audiences, a short biography and some analysis of her films is necessary.

Alla Nazimova was born Miriam Edez Adelaida Leventon in 1879 in Yalta, Crimea to a Jewish family (Horne). She chose the name Nazimova for herself at age 10 after reading the name in a Russian novel and feeling an affinity towards it (Schanke 129). This was perhaps her first act of rebellion and reinvention in a life that was full of both. Already famous on the Russian stage, she visited New York City in 1905 and decided to stay and try her luck on Broadway. After performing in an all-Russian play, she was soon offered the lead in *Hedda Gabler* with the condition she learn English in just a few months. She was able to accomplish that feat with only a slight accent, and proceeded to perform on Broadway for ten years before catching the attention of a burgeoning film industry. She was offered a contract to reprise some of her stage roles on screen, which is how she wound up in Hollywood by 1916. From the moment she stepped foot in Hollywood she was romantically linked to a myriad of women, from Mercedes de Acosta and Eva Le Gallienne to Jean Acker, Dorothy Arzner and Natacha Rambova, among many others. Her parties at the Garden of Allah estate (and later hotel) on Sunset Boulevard were as notorious as George Cukor’s parties a few decades later. She has been called “the founding mother of Sapphic Hollywood” in more recent books about lesbians in that

era (McLellan). After her film career ended, she openly lived with her long term partner Glesca Marshall from 1925 until the day she died, though they never shared anything explicit with the tabloids.

The Queer Productions of *Camille* and *Salome*

Nazimova had aspirations aside from acting and hosting queer parties at her estate. She chose many of her projects and had a say in every aspect of production before she started producing and directing herself - which she rarely got credit for. Two of her most famous film productions today are *Camille* (1921) and *Salomé* (1923). *Salomé* is now considered an early feat of queer cinema, as rumors circulated that Nazimova hired an all gay cast and crew, something that has never been confirmed but nonetheless adds to the lore of her productions. *Camille* is notable for several reasons, it is Nazimova and Natacha Rambova's first full-fledged collaboration and it is an early film of famous heartthrob Rudolph Valentino, made before he reached peak stardom. Each film had entirely different productions and responses in print due to several factors. In 1921 Nazimova was still a featured player at MGM, but by 1922 she had left and lost all support from established studios and much of the support she once had in fan magazines and newspaper reviews as well. However, both films express the artistic partnership of Nazimova and Natasha Rambova and are their two most popular projects as collaborators. Stylistically, they also both reflect a distinctly queer aesthetic in set design and costumes as well as textual content.

The original film version of *Camille* (1921) was produced by Nazimova Productions and stars Nazimova as Marguerite and Rudolph Valentino as Armand Duval. Natacha Rambova, who

would later become Valentino's second wife, was the art director. June Mathis wrote this specific screen adaptation of the original Alexandre Dumas story. Although the film was submitted and passed by the National Board of Review in 1921, the film probably wouldn't have passed the later Hollywood Production Code of 1934 without significant edits. There are several reasons for this, but the most significant one is the very thinly veiled suggestions of prostitution. Marguerite is clearly portrayed as a prostitute who seems to enjoy or at least take some pleasure in her lifestyle before she contracts tuberculosis. She does both give up her lover and eventually die alone, but the implications of prostitution are still probably too overt for future censors. The film also has several scenes with same sex kisses between Marguerite and Nichette (Patsy Ruth Miller), an act that was allowed in silent and pre-Code films but is almost never seen after 1934. Although the kisses are played off as friendly pecks, the lesbian subtext of this relationship is clear to savvy audiences in the know. This subtext along with Rambova's designs and the queer personas of Valentino and Nazimova cement the film's place as an artifact of queer cinema history.

Valentino was relatively unknown when Nazimova hand picked him to play Armand Duval in the film. By the time the film released however, he had gained overnight stardom through his role in *The Sheik* and his newfound stardom helped make *Camille* a big box office success. Today, Valentino is seen as a gay icon, most notably due to speculation of his sexuality in Kenneth Anger's sensational *Hollywood Babylon* which was riddled with more inaccuracies than verifiable facts. However, at the height of his fame, Valentino had an androgynous star persona and a large audience of primarily young women. In *Queer Timing*, author Susan Potter posits the idea that Valentino's stardom had a queer appeal to his female audience instead of only

focusing on the potential heterosexual fantasies of many of his female fans (Potter 123). There is a level of identification that lesbian audiences felt watching Valentino that has not been explored in most discussions of his star persona. The androgyny and sexual difference of Nazimova and Valentino on screen together coupled with the sets and costumes of Rambova and the queer subtext in the film all create a meaningful feat of early queer cinema worthy of critical attention.

Set and costume designer Natacha Rambova was born Winifred Kimball Shaughnessy in Salt Lake City, Utah, though she traveled extensively after her mother and father divorced. Her parents relocated to San Francisco but she was sent to boarding school in England and spent vacations in France with designer Elsie de Wolfe. Elsie de Wolfe was her step-aunt from her mother's second marriage and they maintained a relationship after that marriage fell apart (Stutesman). Rambova often stayed with Wolfe as a girl in her Paris villa (Stutesman). Wolfe had a platonic marriage to a man for the sake of appearances but the two lived separately and Wolfe had a woman companion for 40 years. While visiting Wolfe, Rambova saw Anna Pavlova and decided she wanted to be a ballerina. She then became Russian choreographer Theodore Kosloff's protégé when she was still a teenager and decided to change her name to the Russian inspired Natacha Rambova. Wolfe's designs also had a big influence on Rambova's style and later design work. Today, Wolfe is known as an icon of LGBT history, according to Equality Forum, an international LGBT civil rights organization based in Philadelphia. Thus, although it is unclear if Rambova was heterosexual or bisexual, it is clear that from a young age she spent a lot of her time immersed in a queer Parisian culture. As she became involved in Hollywood production through Kosloff, she developed a distinct queer European aesthetic in her costumes and set designs that appealed to Nazimova.

Natacha Rambova designed parts of Nazimova's film *Billions* (1920), but Kosloff took credit for it. Rambova later showed Nazimova her sketches to prove she had designed some of the film, and this meeting was the beginning of an artistic partnership between the women that would last for several fruitful years. Some have also suggested the two were romantically or sexually involved, but this has never been completely confirmed or denied despite researchers' strong opinions on either side. The claims seem to originate from Kenneth Anger, whose book is not known for its reliability, which leads me to seriously question their validity. Regardless of if they were romantically involved, the two cultivated a queer aesthetic on screen in their work together, particularly noticeable in the costumes of *Salomé*.

Camille was the last film Nazimova made for MGM before she left to pursue more independent productions, a decision that ended her film career prematurely. Her next major work was the film version of Oscar Wilde's one act play *Salomé*. She had always wanted to star in the stage version of Wilde's *Salomé* and was determined to make a lavish film version in which she could finally play her, complete with extravagant sets and an expertly choreographed "dance of the seven veils," all of which she directed herself despite screen credit going to her pseudo-husband Charles Bryant. She couldn't secure any funding, but was so determined that she bankrolled the film herself and produced it with her own production company. *Salomé* is a direct adaptation from the Oscar Wilde play of the same name, with some lines of the film taken verbatim from the text. The rest of the screenplay was adapted by Nazimova and Rambova. The film was shunned by every major studio and as a result most major theatres refused it as well. It was only later released by a small independent distribution company long after the films' completion and marked the decline of Nazimova's career. Today the film has finally been given

due recognition, reclaimed as Nazimova's masterpiece, with a restored version in the Kino Lorber Blu-ray collection "Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers" released in 2018. The content of the film is very similar to the Wilde stage adaptation, which Wilde based loosely on the biblical story of Herod and biblical iconography of Salomé, Herod's stepdaughter/niece. In the play, Salomé is a beautiful Jewish princess who mesmerizes men with just a glance. Salomé becomes enamored of the prophet Jokanaan, or John the Baptist, and is determined to kiss him. When he refuses and insults her, she decides to get revenge. She dances the dance of the seven veils for her stepfather, also infatuated with her, and he grants her any wish. She wishes for the death of Jokanaan and proceeds to kiss his severed head on a platter. When Herod sees this repulsive display, he calls her deviant and has her killed as well. In dramatic fashion, his soldiers crush her with their shields.

When Wilde originally wrote the play in 1893, it was received well in France but banned on the English stage because they felt it was an offensive portrayal of biblical figures (Wilde 378-379). When the play was finally performed in 1896, Wilde had been imprisoned on charges of sodomy (Schweitzer 893). Thus, the reception of the play was heavily influenced by the homophobic image of Wilde as a "pervert" after his trial, and critics dismissed the play as an expression of Wilde's "perverted sensuality" (Schweitzer 893). Artist Aubrey Beardsley also illustrated the play with intricate and explicit ink drawings, but this art was heavily censored until the play's 1907 release ("Aubrey Beardsley Illustrations for Salomé by Oscar Wilde"). All of this context is important because Nazimova chose this work for her first completely independent production, after seeking out the part for more than a decade. Perhaps she felt a queer solidarity with Wilde and made this film to honor him. The imagery in the film, designed

by art director Rambova, is heavily based on the Beardsley illustrations in the bound copy of the play. Many of these illustrations include images of same sex attraction and explicit intersex nudity. Rambova used these illustrations and constructed all the sets and costumes on an indoor soundstage for controlled lighting effects. The film is Nazimova's most experimental undertaking and its avant-garde style, stylized sets and costumes, and symbolic text all make the film one of the first dedicated art films in Hollywood and an early feat of surrealist cinema.

By the time *Salomé* was released, Nazimova had lost most of her protection and support from all established Hollywood studios due to her refusal to conform to the studio system as well as the rising forms of early censorship in the industry. At the same time, the façade of her marriage to Charles Bryant was falling apart and rumors of her sexuality were no longer being silenced by a studio publicity team. All of this led to the film's abysmal reviews and Nazimova proceeded to make only a few more minor, largely unknown films before her film career was effectively over by 1925. Although Nazimova's career in film only lasted 9 years, she was one of the most influential women in Hollywood at the height of the silent era. At the same time, movie stars had just been invented and audiences were starting to interact with their favorite stars and participate in a widespread fandom network composed of young girls. Nazimova then faded into obscurity and was rarely mentioned until film scholars began excavating her work just a few years ago and reclaiming her as an early film pioneer. My hope is that, along with discussions of Nazimova as a woman film pioneer, we consider the impact she had on an audience of young girls and on the history of queer interest in cinema.

Chapter 2: Kay Francis, The Star Machine, and Pre-Code Hollywood

"My life? Well, I get up at a quarter to six in the morning if I'm going to wear an evening dress on camera. That sentence sounds a little ga-ga, doesn't it? But never mind, that's my life...As long as they pay me my salary, they can give me a broom and I'll sweep the stage. I don't give a damn. I want the money...When I die, I want to be cremated so that no sign of my existence is left on this earth. I can't wait to be forgotten."

-Kay Francis's diaries (via Wesleyan), 1938

Kay Francis stated multiple times in 1938 and 1939, both in her diaries and in an interview with S. R. Mook for *Photoplay*, "I can't wait to be forgotten" (Wesleyan and Mook). Sadly, for much of the population, she seems to have gotten her wish. Although 1930s film fans and glamour aficionados undoubtedly know who she is today, for wider film audiences she remains relatively unknown. While many of her contemporaries such as Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis are still household names, Francis has drifted into obscurity, becoming one of the most overlooked actresses of her day. Today, there has been a slight resurgence in her popularity due to Turner Classic Movies and Classic Hollywood internet fan groups, but Francis is still only discussed by the most fervent of film fans. However, in the 1930s Kay Francis was one of the most popular and most profitable movie stars. She made nineteen films for Paramount starting in 1929, including Ernst Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), and became the "Queen of Warners" years before Bette Davis became the "fourth Warner brother" (O'Brien 139). From 1929 to 1946, Francis appeared in roughly sixty-eight feature films, according to IMDb, and she was a favorite of movie magazines from the start. Her portrait was on the cover of the first issue of *Modern Screen* in November 1930, and she remained a frequent topic of movie magazine columns throughout the 1930s before she was given the dreaded title "box office poison" in 1937.

During the height of her career, Francis wrote shorthand entries in her diary about everything from her day-to-day work and social schedule to her sexual liaisons with both men and women. Luckily, these diaries still exist and are stored at Wesleyan University's Reid Cinema Archives. Because of the entries in these diaries, Francis is one of few figures of the early 20th century that we can say with complete certainty was not only involved in queer social circles and rumored to be gay, but identified herself in writing as not merely heterosexual. This is remarkable, as few women from that era admitted this so explicitly and kept any documents stating it. To be clear, she doesn't label herself as bisexual—no one did in that era, but she does discuss her sexual and romantic relationships with both women and men. Along with Francis's bisexuality in her personal life, her star persona also reflects a unique bisexual image. Like Nazimova, Francis was one of the most popular and influential figures in Hollywood for a short time, in another significant period of change for the industry, during the transition to sound cinema and the pre-Code Hollywood era. My goal with this chapter is to examine Francis's contributions to cinema through analysis of her star persona, self perception, films, and fan magazine responses to her image. I look at Francis's work and persona through a queer lens, analyzing her image to show how LGBTQ interest on screen and in movie fan magazines is reflected in this era and how it shifts from the silent era through early sound and the pre-code era. To accomplish this, I focus on Francis's life, career, and the films *Girls About Town* (1931) and *Trouble in Paradise* while analyzing discussions of her in popular movie magazines of the 1930s.

By the late 1920s, movie stars had existed for over a decade and studios had developed into big businesses. Films were becoming more technically advanced and movie studios and

producers were using popular film stars to advertise and sell their films to large audiences.

Francis rose to stardom after the studio system was well established and just as sound cinema became the dominant form of moviemaking. As the movie industry shifted from a slightly less regulated silent era, filmmakers began to grapple with increased censorship and the monopolistic practices of the big studios, and as a result many independent companies without studio protection died out (such as Nazimova Productions in the early 20s). Simultaneously, the star system that had begun to develop in the 1910s continued to evolve into a more factory-like star machine.

Star personas were expertly crafted by studios to cultivate modern audiences. These personas were influenced by not only the roles actors played on screen and their studio publicity team, but by every gossip item and biographical tidbit leaked about the stars as well. Kay Francis is a perfect example of this star machine developing an image and promoting it as long as it sells, but moving on as soon as the image is no longer fashionable or profitable. In some cases the studios would rather cut their losses than help a performer evolve with the changing culture. This chapter will focus primarily on the construction of Francis's star persona with a secondary focus on the reception of her image and films as they contributed to that persona. Although fans seem to be just as devoted as they were in the silent film era, by the 1930s the fan magazines show less of this interaction and more of the constructed personas and gossip fueled columns we first began to see in the 1910s.

Kay Francis Biography and Rise to Stardom

Kay Francis was born Katharine Edwina Gibbs in 1905 in Oklahoma City, OK (O'Brien 5). According to Francis, her father had just traveled to Oklahoma to buy cheap horses from the local Sioux tribe for polo, but this plan never came to fruition and the family was broke and stranded when Francis was born (O'Brien 5). Her father quickly found a job managing a local hotel and they survived for a while before they went on the road again when Francis was just a baby (O'Brien 5). Francis was famously private and rarely spoke of her childhood in interviews and when she did, she often contradicted herself. Thus, we have few first-hand accounts from Francis to go on and the ones we do have, such as this tidbit from an Ed Sullivan interview in 1937, become valuable insight into her life. At this time, Francis biographers Scott O'Brien, Lynn Kear, and John Rossman have written the only comprehensive breakdowns of Francis's life and career and I rely heavily on the evidence outlined in their three books to paint a picture of Francis's background and rise to stardom. Francis's image was fueled by gossip related to her childhood and family life. Breaking down Francis's origin and biography are an important part of piecing together the puzzle surrounding her rise to fame and the construction of her star persona.

Francis's mother Katharine Franks Gibbs was an actress and singer with the stage name Katharine Clinton (O'Brien 6-7). She was considered very talented by castmates and teachers though she married young and was never able to achieve widespread success (O'Brien 8). As Francis's mother was a stage actress and her father an entrepreneur, the family moved frequently from Oklahoma to Colorado to California and eventually New York City all while Francis was a young child. According to Francis's mother, Francis's first taste of the theatre was a short stage

appearance as a baby in Denver, CO where she performed calmly and cried at only the right moments (O'Brien 9). Somewhere along the way her father left the family and Katharine became a single mother of a toddler. It is altogether unclear what happened to her father—some sources say he died in the 1930s and some list him as a recipient in Katharine's will—but it is clear he was never a regular figure in Francis's life again. She never expressed real interest in finding her father and her mother quickly found ways to support and raise Francis on her own, though they always struggled to get by (O'Brien 10). Rumors have circulated to this day that Francis's mother may have been a prostitute or escort of some kind to support them, but again there doesn't seem to be any corroborating evidence of this. They moved often and lived on the road to avoid bills they couldn't pay, but Francis's mother did her best to keep Francis in school as consistently as possible, often sending her to private Catholic schools, which later added to her rumor fueled reputation as somewhat of a debutante growing up—the idea that she went to private schools implying that she grew up with family money (O'Brien 12-13).

Francis's first marriage had a lasting effect on her image. She first married at 17 years old to James Dwight Francis in New York City (Index to New York City Marriages). Her name at that time was still Katharine Edwina Gibbs and although the marriage didn't last, the name Francis did. This name is one of many instances in which myth and unsubstantiated rumor have had an impact on the perception of Francis's life story. Many unverifiable sources such as Wikitree and Wikipedia list Francis's mother's maiden name as Francis and allege that Francis consciously kept "Francis" in tribute to her mother, but I was unable to verify this claim or trace it to its origin. The name Francis does show up in Francis's family tree a few generations back as a first name, but otherwise it's unclear where this idea may have originated. Several other more

reputable sources such as Francis's biographers and the New York City marriage records list Katharine's maiden name as "Franks" (Index to New York City Marriages). O'Brien even states, in quotes from an interview with Francis's sister-in-law, that Francis's first husband's family loved Francis so much they asked her to keep the name Francis (O'Brien). This lack of clarity or a unified story about Francis's background is significant because gossip, fan theories, and unsubstantiated claims shape Francis's image even today, and were a common theme throughout her career in Hollywood.

Francis first garnered public attention performing on stage in the mid 1920s. She was consistently told that she was no good as an actress (even by her own mother) but it didn't faze her; in fact it drove her to prove them wrong (Kear 31). She made her Broadway debut in 1925 in a modern dress version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the Player Queen. Even though she had a small role, the production was a success. Later, when asked how she received the role with little to no experience, Francis said, "by lying a lot, to the right people" (Bubbeo 183). Success in *Hamlet* led to Francis's first screen test for D. W. Griffith at Famous Players Lasky in New York in 1926, but she was rejected by Griffith and no contracts came of it (Kear 7). For her second test in 1928 Famous Players had become Paramount and relocated to Hollywood and Francis had spent a few more years on the stage. This time, they signed Francis and brought her to Los Angeles to act in her first film, a 1929 talkie *Gentlemen of the Press* (Kear 8).

In the film, Francis plays Myra May, a sleek and glamorous secretary with a short butch haircut who, in her first scene, sues a newspaper for libel and assures everyone she isn't just a "normal secretary." She goes on to flirt with just about everyone in the film, manipulate a few rich men and have several affairs, all while drinking gin and smoking cigarettes through every

scene. Francis's unapologetic androgyny and confidence in this vamp role would become the trademarks of her entire film career. Francis's new vamp—sleek and glamorous rather than dark and edgy—set the stage for many of the roles Francis would get for the next decade. This image was no mistake, the studios and magazines of this era had a symbiotic relationship with fan magazines and a tendency to use them to prop up a new star with an image that would sell. After her first film job, Francis wasted no time and made four more films released in 1929 alone and nine more in 1930. She was one of the most prolific actors of her day and would take little to no time off for the greater part of the next decade. At the height of her career she averaged six feature films per year.

From the start of Kay Francis's film career she had a distinct image and persona. She primarily played variations of the same archetype: the glamorous, often wealthy, adulteress. Sometimes her characters were prostitutes, sometimes career women, and sometimes they married or inherited money, but whether they could afford it or not they always wore the most fashionable clothes and dated whomever they pleased. Her films were most often sex comedies or women's pictures and her characters were particularly emblematic of the pre-Code Hollywood era. The pre-code era (1929-1934) directly coincides with the height of Francis's career as she rose to fame in 1929 and became a major star by the early 1930s. This was a time when adultery and promiscuous women were often pictured on screen despite increasing calls for strict censorship from groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency. It was a short period when films would show more than they were told they should and more than they would be allowed to for the next 30 years. Although this era is often described as "pre-Code," the first Hollywood Production Code was actually established in the early 1920s and revised by Will Hays (who was

previously the Post Master General) in 1930, and there were many regional censors in place during the era as well. These censors were far less strict than what would come, but they still had a say in how and where a film would be released. For example, Hays ordered that *Baby Face* (1933), a Stanwyck pre-code film about a prostitute that climbs the corporate ladder, be cut to remove some of its more morally ambiguous scenes otherwise the film wouldn't receive a wide distribution. The pre-Code era wasn't without censorship but it pushed every censor to its absolute edge. By 1934, Hollywood amped up its censorship practices to avoid the dreaded possibility of government censorship and revised the Hays code to be even more limiting, creating the Production Code era that followed.

1930s Movie Fan Magazines and Kay's Image

As discussed in the previous chapter, by the end of the 1920s movie fan magazines were an established part of the filmgoing experience and were one of the ways fans interacted with their favorite films and the stars pictured in them. By the early 1930s, the go to magazines of the 1910s-1920s, *Motion Picture (Story) Magazine* and *Photoplay*, were outsold by two new frontrunners: *Modern Screen* and *Silver Screen*, both first released in the fall of 1930 (Slide 122). However, all of the magazines of this era began to look alike and sell similar stories and Francis was often featured in all of them, sometimes at the same time. Francis was pictured on the very first cover of *Modern Screen* and remained a frequent feature of all of the popular movie magazines for the first half of the 1930s. She was on the cover of 35 movie magazines from 1930-1937, and was second only to Shirley Temple for the most covers of that era (Mann). She

was voted most popular star several times by magazine polls and was the highest paid actress at both Paramount and Warner Brothers at different points throughout the 30s.

Francis first appears in movie magazines in the October 1929 issue of *Photoplay*, where she is described as “a long legged, short haired, frank eyed girl” and “the first great vamp of the audible pictures” (“Vamping with Sound”). Francis had been in a total of four films by the time of the article’s release, all in 1929, and each role reflected this same image. The article describes how Francis adapts the vamp styles of those before her such as Theda Bara to create a “modern, up to date man killer” with more subtle seduction techniques but just as deadly. This description of Francis as a modern vamp echoes the language used to describe Alla Nazimova just a decade earlier. Like Nazimova, Francis is described as dark and slender, intimidating, commanding, and provocative. Nazimova has the additions of her foreign heritage and Rambova’s costumes, but Francis has a sharp witted tongue loaded with snappy pre-Code dialogue. Like the silent vamp before her, Francis’s characters play with sexuality and gender in unique ways, asserting a bisexual image through her close relationships with women characters and her confident sexual promiscuity. The dark and ambiguously foreign image of vamp stars such as Nazimova would follow Francis as well, with false rumors circulating that Francis may not be all American herself.

Despite being born and raised in the United States by ninth-generation white American parents (on both sides!) Francis’s early star persona was complicated by rumors of her origin and ethnicity (O’Brien 7). At first, articles only emphasized her dark hair and tall stature—she was considered the tallest woman on screen in the 1930s at 5’9”. However, as she gained fame and audiences wondered more about her personal life, gossip columnists quickly began to speculate

about her absent father and unknown childhood as well. Francis rarely spoke publicly about either, even to correct unfounded rumors. At one point, a rumor circulated that Francis's mother had been from Trinidad and Francis was mixed race with a black birth father (O'Brien 6). Maya Angelou even references this rumor in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She discusses how she had heard that Francis was mixed race when she was a young girl and saw every film Francis was in. She even dreamed that Francis might secretly be her birth mother (Angelou). These rumors, though completely unfounded, only added to the mystery of Francis's image.

There were dozens of feature articles in fan magazines about Francis throughout her career and most of the writers describe her in a similar way, as a woman of mystery. In "Projections," a *Silver Screen* article published in 1937, writer Elizabeth Wilson is quick to assert that Francis has little acting talent, "isn't the most beautiful," and is never listed in the top ten exhibitor's polls. However, Wilson states, Francis has the more elusive qualities of class, mystery, romance and glamor and when "women cry for it, women pay for it." To Wilson, this glamor is worth more than any of the other attributes that could make a star, and audiences of women eat it up. Wilson also acknowledges Francis's popularity and prolific career, stating that anyone reading would have surely seen her on screen multiple times (she was making between 4 and 9 films per year at that point). However, the phrasing throughout the article downplays all of Francis's hard work and talent to suggest she has some innate quality that makes her popular against all odds, as if she doesn't work for it or even deserve it. This language would follow Francis for the rest of her life and persist long after her death to this day. Wilson's article was published just before Francis's career took a downturn in 1938 and today modern audiences only

see this story: that Francis is glamorous; that she wears the right clothes; but that she has no acting chops. Wilson is quick to assert that she doesn't even belong in the same category as a Bette Davis type, even as her films still made more money than Davis in this era.

Wilson also compares Francis to other mysterious women who have a similarly elusive star quality stating, "Paramount has its Marlene Dietrich, Metro has its Garbo, and Warner has its Kay Francis." This is a curious list, all three were highly profitable major stars and fan favorites in the 1930s, but they also have something else in common: their sexualities. Garbo was rumored to be bisexual or a lesbian for most of her life and although she never publicly said as much, it seems clear that she did have relationships with women. The Mercedes de Acosta letters that modern audiences can access electronically certainly suggest this. Dietrich was about as unapologetic in her bisexuality as one could be in that era without stating things outright, and of course Francis wrote in her diary about her three affairs with women. The rumor mill had already decided all three were lesbians by the time of the article and we can confidently speculate that writer Elizabeth Wilson was aware that this comparison isn't only about a shared glamor.

The ambiguity of Francis's star image in this era aligns with the rumors about her sexuality that circulated throughout her life and career. Just as gossip columnists and audiences speculated about Francis's background and personality, they also speculated about her promiscuity and sexual preferences. Shaped by the sexually charged vamp roles Francis embodied on screen, her star image was one of sexual fluidity as well as glamor. The fan magazines are quick to assert her so-called happy marriage to Kenneth MacKenna in articles from 1931-1934, but like the Mrs. Charles Bryant articles of Nazimova's career, they don't seem to depict the whole truth. Many fan magazine articles push back against Francis's image on

screen and try to describe Francis as someone who hates parties and doesn't have many affairs, but her diaries tell a different story. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic I have been unable to visit her diaries in person at the Wesleyan Archive, but I do have a treasure trove of information from her three biographers.

In *Kay Francis: A Passionate Life and Career*, Lynn Kear and John Rossman describe Francis's diaries more as detailed datebooks than full blown journals (Kear and Rossman 1-2). Despite insistence from Wesleyan that the diaries wouldn't be very helpful, a response I also received via email when I inquired about them in the early stages of this project, Kear and Rossman assert that they have a lot of great information, much of it in shorthand. According to them, the books paint a picture of "a sexually adventurous" modern woman who recorded every romantic and sexual encounter with men and women across 30 years until she stopped writing in 1953 for unknown reasons (Kear and Rossman 1-2). To me, Francis wasn't exactly sexually adventurous, she just had a healthy sexuality in a time before the birth control pill and when women's sexuality was demonized more than it is today. This resulted in many illegal abortions and some damage control by the studios. At times, the diaries can be confusing and some sections still haven't been fully decoded, but nonetheless they only add to what has become Francis's image to modern audiences. Curiously, Francis donated her own diaries to the University, an act incongruous with her own description of herself as a very private person. She told reporters and friends that she hoped someday she would disappear in the annals of history, as cited at the beginning of this chapter, but perhaps she did want to make her mark. I argue that one reason Francis is finally being discussed more seriously in old Hollywood fan communities online is due to her diaries. Her healthy, frank sexuality and bisexuality outlined in her diaries

and published by her three biographers add a level of relatability to a younger audience that sees itself in Francis's attitude on screen and off.

Francis's fans at the height of her career, according to what I can find in various fan magazine letters columns, seem pretty equally composed of men and women. The actual numbers are impossible to know and the fan magazine published fan letters are a one-sided account heavily biased by what each magazine editor chose to share. However, it seems believable that her fans would be divided fairly equally across multiple genders. The fan magazines published some fan letters to Francis from men, women, married couples, and anonymous fans. She even got some hate mail as many of the popular stars did, describing her as either too sexual on screen or worse, not a real actor, an accusation that would plague her image for decades. What persists across most of the fan letters is Francis's relatability to an audience that is used to manicured star images. Francis may seem too glamorous to be relatable, but audiences could see past the image to the parts of her that continue to resonate.

In the letters columns from 1931 issues of *Motion Picture Magazine*, Francis's fans (who appear to be men, women, and anonymous readers) asked her everything from how she got her start in show business to her shoe size. Some of the answers are lies of course. In July 1931, "The Answer Man" lists Francis's height as "five feet five" while competing magazines list her as five feet eight. We now know she was closer to five feet nine, but at that time it was anyone's guess (O'Brien). In May 1931, seventeen year old Sara Schwartz wrote to the magazine to say she buys it every month and reading the articles makes "every actor and actress a friend of [hers] because [she] reads about them, learns what they do, compares them with [her]self and in that way becomes very intimate with them." Sara lists Kay Francis and Lew Ayres as some of her

best friends because of this (Schwartz 6). This letter not only mentions Francis specifically, but it shows how fans, especially young girls, were reading these texts and connecting with stars on a deep, if one sided, level. Sara compared stars like Francis with her own life and found a common ground to consider them her friends. Fans remembered everything the magazines printed and factored that into their perception of their favorite stars even as they watched fictional films or heard them on the radio.

Girls About Town, Trouble in Paradise, and Pre-Code Cinema

As mentioned in the previous chapter, self-regulation and censorship of the film industry existed before 1934, but it was more regional and wasn't universally enforced. By 1934 the film industry decided to be more stringent with their censorship after a series of high profile scandals, pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency, and the threat of government censorship loomed over them. Often referred to today as the Hays Code, Hays created a list of "don'ts" and "be carefuls" in 1927 that formed the basis of this code. Pre-Code films weren't free of all censorship, but could get away with a lot more violations than films after 1934. Francis was emblematic of this pre-Code era, playing courtesans and glamorous adulteresses in nearly every film she appeared in. The Great Depression was raging in the U.S. at the time, but on film it became an era of excess and escapism and Francis's characters embodied that. One film that is rarely discussed but is one of the best examples of the pre-code era is *Girls About Town* (1931). The film can also be described as a feat of LGBT cinema with many of the filmmakers, writers, and starring actors all part of the LGBT community at that time. Further, the film's story has some significant gay subtext.

Girls About Town, a pre-Code comedy directed by George Cukor and based on a story by Zoe Akins, is Francis's first starring role and she receives top billing as Wanda. Writer Zoe Akins had Tallulah Bankhead in mind for the role on stage, and Bankhead's open sexual fluidity may have contributed to the writing of the part even as it was adapted to screen (O'Brien kindle location 2244). Francis was cast in the film version and stars opposite Lilyan Tashman as Marie Bailey and Joel McCrea as Jim Baker. The film follows Wanda and Marie as high class prostitutes and roommates who pursue wealthy men to make their living. Francis eventually falls in love with Jim and decides to give it all up to be with him. Despite the cookie cutter heterosexual ending, the lesbian subtext of the film is very clear for viewers in the know. Not only do Wanda and Marie live together, but they share a bed on screen and conduct their lives almost as a romantic couple, with Marie protective of Wanda when she goes out with certain men and Wanda seriously worried about leaving Marie when she considers marriage. *Girls About Town* was a queer production on par with Nazimova's *Salomé* years earlier due to not only the content of the film, but the amount of queer people in crucial roles in the development of the film and on set, particularly George Cukor, Zoe Akins, Lilyan Tashman, and Francis. The film is a product of the network of LGBTQ artists in Hollywood at the time.

Lilyan Tashman and Francis were fast friends and quick to praise one another in print interviews for years to come. Fan magazines at first try to position the two against each other for publicity, but are quick to note that no animosity truly exists. Francis even lists Tashman and her husband Edmund Lowe ("the Edmund Lowes") as some of her best friends and frequent house guests in subsequent interviews (Harris, from *Silver Screen* 1931). In a 1931 issue of *Modern Screen*, Tashman discusses the possibility that she may have a child and states "I like [the name]

Francis too, but perhaps this is because I associate it with Kay Francis, a girl I admire very much.” Author William J. Mann describes the two as close friends involved in the same queer social circles in Hollywood. When Francis moved to Hollywood, she connected with other theater transplants including Tashman, George Cukor, Ruth Chatterton, and Tallulah Bankhead and quickly became part of these social circles which included many gay and lesbian filmmakers and actors (Mann). It’s important to discuss the LGBTQ network in Hollywood at this time to show how this queer friendship and solidarity affected not only Francis’s career, but Hollywood as a whole. Lilyan Tashman’s friendship with Francis is significant because they were constantly connected in print (as friends) and Tashman, like Francis, vanished into obscurity as the years passed.

Tashman is a largely forgotten stage and screen actor, but *Behind the Screen* author William J. Mann discusses her as an important part of queer social circles in Hollywood and Anthony Slide describes her as one of the most well known lesbians in Hollywood in the silent era (Slide 29). Still, none of these texts really dig into Tashman’s background and biography. In fact, it seems no scholarly texts that are in print and accessible have much biographical information about Tashman aside from her marriage and her sexuality. Her profile on the Turner Classic Movies website lists her birthplace as Brooklyn, NY in 1896 and has only one sentence in her biography describing her as a former Ziegfeld Girl and movie star of the 20s and 30s. There are a few non scholarly websites with full biographies of Tashman, but it is unclear where the information came from originally. The Legacy Project Chicago, a website that “illuminates and affirms the lives of” LGBTQ people, has a page devoted to Tashman written by Owen Keehnen. Keehnen states Tashman was the youngest of ten and began working as a model for

money before performing in vaudeville, joining the Ziegfeld Follies of 1916, and later moving to Hollywood in 1922 where she found more work in silent films. Keehnen even states that she and Greta Garbo had a four year affair beginning in 1928, while Tashman was in a lavender marriage with her best friend Edmund Lowe, also rumored to be gay. Like other starlets of this era such as Jean Harlow and Carole Lombard, Tashman's life was cut short, in her case due to abdominal cancer in 1934. Keehnen suggests that 10,000 fans attended her funeral at Washington Cemetery (Legacy Project). I include all of this information to add to the queer tapestry of old Hollywood, but also to illustrate how hard it can be to find verifiable information about figures from history, especially queer women, even when they were big stars at one time. Even more than Kay Francis, Tashman has disappeared in the annals of history.

Although the vast majority of Francis's films are often ignored, *Trouble in Paradise* is one exception. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, it is probably the most famous and widely available Kay Francis film today. It is still a fan favorite and discussed by film scholars as one of the first films to kick off the screwball comedy genre in the 1930s and a staple of the pre-code film era. The film follows thieves Gaston (Herbert Marshall) and Lily (Miriam Hopkins) as they attempt to steal a fortune from Madame Colet (Kay Francis). The film revolves around the love triangle between the three as Gaston seduces both women and the three end up living and working together after attempting to swindle Colet. The implication that Gaston has sex with both women behind Lubitsch's closed doors is so clear it is barely implication. Similarly, Gaston and Lily are unrepentant crooks and the film seems to celebrate them for it. They even get away with it in the end with no real punishment. The film makes sex and crime glamorous and attractive, some of the worst offenses to the Production Code that soon was adopted.

In addition to being one of the most famous pre-code Hollywood films, *Trouble in Paradise* really cemented Francis's image as a philandering "play girl" with her character Madame Colet. Colet isn't the most intelligent woman when it comes to her pocketbook, but she has another type of intelligence that Francis's characters would be known for - street smarts and sexuality. Colet is already in a love triangle when Gaston meets her, and she quickly becomes part of a second love triangle with Gaston and Lily while simultaneously stringing along her two other suitors. Colet is glamorous, rich, and available. She is the blueprint for most of Francis's roles in this era and continues to be the most obvious archetype of Francis's Hollywood persona.

The film also projects a queer sensibility, not only with Francis's glamor and sexual fluidity, but also through the characters of Gaston, The Major (Charlie Ruggles) and Francois (Edward Everett Horton). Even though all three characters are interested in Colet and seem to be straight, if you read between the lines their images also reflect gay codes of the era. Horton was known for playing "sissy" characters, as outlined in Vito Russo's *Celluloid Closet*, and this is no exception. The Major and Francois are constantly comparing the authenticity of their masculinity with the other as they attempt to woo Colet. In one scene, Francois enters a women's shop in search of a purse for Colet. As he picks out the perfect one, he then carries it around and blushes when another man enters the store, presumably embarrassed about being seen exhibiting a feminine behavior. Gaston, on the other hand, embodies a sophisticated persona rivaled only by Cary Grant on screen. He speaks, walks, and talks like a gay stereotype of the era, with a feminine lilt to his voice and several scenes in which he demonstrates an extreme knowledge of women's clothing and make-up. All of these characterizations are problematic stereotypes that

don't make a person gay, but at the time they would be deliberate choices by the filmmakers to suggest they might be, if only for comedy's sake.

Career Decline and Kay Francis's Image Today

As the 1930s wore on, Francis began to drop in popularity, particularly as the pre-Code era came to a close and Hollywood censorship went into full force. She still appeared in multiple films per year in the mid to late 30s, but she was no longer a number one star at Warner Brothers. She was suddenly cast in B pictures often playing a version of the same, now stale, archetypes she made famous in the early 30s. In 1938, Francis was branded "box office poison" in a now infamous article that named Francis among others including Katharine Hepburn, Fred Astaire, and Joan Crawford. Although some of the others were able to revive their careers, Francis had significant trouble—no longer in paradise. Around the same time, she sued Warner Brothers for better roles. This was right after other high profile stars like Bette Davis had tried the same thing and won, but Francis wasn't so lucky. She ended up deciding not to break her contract (for unknown reasons) and Jack Warner then made an example out of her by giving her the worst roles possible for the rest of her time there. In a 1938 article "Looking at Hollywood," Ed Sullivan speculated that Warner may have promised her better roles if she acquiesced (Sullivan). It seems that once she did let the suit go, he must have gone back on his word out of spite. The roles became so humiliating that Francis vowed to never act in films again when the contract lapsed (O'Brien). However, she didn't fully retire and instead freelanced into the 1940s when she worked for the USO and performed for the war effort. By this point her Hollywood career was

over and she returned to the stage, where she had moderate success until health problems made her retire altogether.

In 1939, Sullivan penned an article for *Silver Screen* about major movie stars retiring from the business. He specifically focused on women stars and named Kay Francis alongside Marlene Dietrich and Arleen Whalen. Sullivan suggests that Francis was still being offered plenty of roles, but chose instead to get married and be a wife. Only a year later he would write another article about Francis titled “Kay Francis, Comeback Queen,” but despite Francis’s efforts she would never truly return to her level of stardom before the Warner lawsuits. Even today, Warner Brothers history books never mention Francis in any meaningful way. Despite being their most popular and influential stars for several years, Francis now only appears in footnotes or in the background of group photos. Warner’s intentions to blackball her certainly succeeded and Francis was nearly forgotten.

Francis isn’t mentioned in most film history books and is a footnote at best when she is mentioned. Browsing the indices of several Warner Brothers history books (*The Warner Bros. Story*, *Warner Bros. Hollywood’s Ultimate Backlot*, and *You Must Remember This*) I was only able to find her mentioned in a couple sentences and the backgrounds of a few photos. Much worse are the poor descriptions of her in film books, as they often reflect a very gendered misunderstanding of her persona and career. For instance, Francis is discussed only briefly in *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*, a book about the films of Ernst Lubitsch by Joseph McBride. McBride discusses the film *Trouble in Paradise*, and the differences he sees between co-stars Miriam Hopkins and Kay Francis. Instead of describing them as simply different types, he describes Hopkins as a far superior actress and Francis as “dull,” “flat,” and “unpleasant,” refusing to

acknowledge any merits of her performance in the film (McBride). McBride's sentiments reflect the more insulting descriptions of Francis since her death.

On the other hand, film historian Jeanine Basinger has a deep reverence for Kay Francis as an important figure in film history and the epitome of fashion and glamor in the 1930s (Basinger 152-153). However, she also declares, "obviously, Kay Francis can't act" and asserts the "only" reasons for Francis's success are her "glamor and fashion" (Basinger 153). This is still one of the most common depictions of Francis, as a glamorous clotheshorse who simply showed up and received a career. These comments are much more well intentioned than McBride's insults as Basinger is writing from a place of respect, but her idea of Francis as someone who has a big presence but no talent, still reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Francis's work. Scholars continue to minimize Francis's skill on screen and impact on the industry, seeing her in a much different light than she was portrayed in fan magazines during the height of her career, and even by fans in their letters then and now blog posts and tweets.

Today, Francis has made a small resurgence among Turner Classic Movie viewers and old Hollywood fans across the internet. Her films aren't the most popular of that era, but they are now released on Warner Archive DVDs and occasionally screened on TCM and in classic film cinemas. Francis's frank sexuality and modern womanhood seem to resonate with modern audiences almost as much as her style and image on screen. Many of her most fervent fans, such as biographer Scott O'Brien, various twitter and tumblr fans, fansite owners, and myself are all part of the LGBT community. We can see the queer appeal of Francis's androgyny on screen and identify with her style, her diary entries, the constant rumors about her, and her struggle to control her image and career which she ultimately lost.

Chapter 3: Garbo Mania

“Why should you care for a woman like me? I’m always nervous, or sick, or sad, or too gay.”
- Marguerite Gauthier (Greta Garbo) in *Camille*

Greta Garbo is one of the most famous people that ever lived. The statement sounds like hyperbole, but if you look at the facts it is hardly an exaggeration. She is listed at number five on AFI’s list of 50 greatest female screen legends. Not only was she one of the biggest celebrities during long stretches of her film career and in her lifetime, but she is still widely renowned today, admired by film fans as well as the general public. She has become an international icon, a mythic figure, and a staple of pop culture. When a portion of her estate was up for auction in 2012, over 20 years after her death, the demand for Garbo’s items pushed prices up three times their estimated value, proving just how much people still cherish her in the 21st century (Reuters). Despite her enduring fame, her films are only rarely revived or re-released. Garbo is known as much for her star image and personality as she is for her film roles. The public knows her as the mysterious star who said “I want to be alone” in *Grand Hotel* (1932), the androgynous figure who said, “I shall die a bachelor!” in *Queen Christina* (1933), even if they haven’t seen the films in which those lines are uttered.

In this chapter, I examine the construction of Garbo’s star persona through analysis of Garbo’s life and career, as perceived by her fans, with specific attention to the films *Queen Christina* (1933) and *Camille* (1936). During Garbo’s film career, her fans wrote passionate letters to the star detailing their devotion to her and pleading for signed photographs. Several of these letters are housed at the Margaret Herrick Library and available online in their digital collections. I discuss these letters along with the so-called “Garbo mania” in fan magazines during the height of her career.

Unlike Alla Nazimova and Kay Francis, Garbo retired by choice and still remained a legend long after her retirement. Garbo's star image is also intrinsically linked to her status as a gay icon and the queer coding at play within her films and public image. From the beginning of Garbo's career in Hollywood she was suggested to be a lesbian through coded language and associations in advertisements and movie publications. The queer aesthetic and lesbian sensibility in her star image were inspired by lesbian cultural texts of the period as well as Garbo's real-life personality and style. According to friends, Garbo often referred to herself as a boy or with masculine signifiers and pronouns and she preferred to dress in simple androgynous styles off screen (Paris 266). Her image has a distinct feminine masculinity that attracts LGBTQ+ audiences to this day. She was often compared to other lesbian and bisexual women stars in print throughout her life and career. Whether or not Garbo herself was a lesbian or bisexual is unclear, as the language didn't exist to identify oneself in that way, but what is clear is her great impact on LGBTQ+ audiences through the perception of her gender and sexual difference in her queer image. I am not the first scholar to suggest Garbo's impact on the LGBTQ+ community, but I hope to show how fans perceived the star during her career and how Garbo's queer aesthetic and lesbian sensibility interacted with her stardom and the films in which she acted.

Garbo was a star from the mid 1920s through 1941, making hits after the pre-Code era and solidifying her image in pop culture through her queer enigmatic persona. Although Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo all had their successful film careers cut relatively short, Nazimova and Francis were largely forgotten while Garbo remained an icon long after she graced the screen. Thus, where there is a lack of accessible information about Nazimova and

Francis, Garbo has the opposite problem: an excess of information. There are so many biographies, articles, and digitized archival materials about Garbo that it is an impossible task to sort through them all. I froze at the sheer number of books on Garbo that have been published since her death. As an additional ethical dilemma, most of the information we have about Garbo's personal life was collected by friends and shared without her knowledge or permission after her death—something she probably would have considered a breach of trust and privacy if she were alive. I do my best to sort through this information and make sense of Garbo's life and career amid the sea of endless quotes and texts about the star.

Garbo Biography and Early MGM Career

Greta Garbo was born Greta Gustafsson in Stockholm, Sweden on September 18, 1905 (Swenson 23). She grew up in a small two room apartment in the working class Södermalm section of Stockholm with two older siblings and her father was an itinerant laborer (Swenson 24). They never had much money, but young Greta had a vivid imagination and dreamed of being a star even as a child. When asked what she wanted to do, she told her family she would grow up to be a “diva” and a “princess” someday, despite her otherwise introverted personality and preference for solitary play while growing up (Swenson 25). During World War I, she acted in plays with the Salvation Army, and any spare change she had would go towards seeing movies at the local Nickelodeon, particularly those featuring Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks (Swenson 29).

When Greta was 13 years old, she graduated from public school, and at the time it was uncommon for a girl of her social station to pursue any further study (Swenson 32). In 1920, her

father died after months of pain and illness during which time Greta took him to the clinic weekly (Swenson 33). Shortly after his death, she went to work more seriously to help support the family, starting at a barber shop and eventually transferring to a women's department store as a clerk (Swenson 35-36). Greta volunteered to model for the store's catalog and acted in a few short film advertisements to be shown in theatres preceding feature films (Swenson 39). By this point, Greta wanted to be a professional actor and was determined to achieve her goal. In 1922, she was granted a scholarship to study at the Royal Dramatic Theatre Academy in Stockholm to learn more about her craft (Paris 37-38).

In 1924, Mauritz Stiller, an accomplished Swedish film director by the 1920s, began casting his next film at the Dramatic Academy (Paris 46). He asked for two of the prettiest actresses to test for him and the Academy director sent him Greta. After her acting test, which she thought went poorly, Stiller cast her in his next film, *The Saga of Gösta Berling* (Paris 47-49). Stiller's decision to cast Greta was a turning point in her career and also adds to the lore of her rise to stardom. In most texts devoted to Garbo, the narrative of her rise to fame is contingent on Stiller's "discovery" of her, to the point that he is often given credit for every aspect of her early stardom, including her name. Although most stories of Garbo's rise to fame state that Stiller is the one that gave young Greta Gustafsson the name "Garbo," one account by Betsy Erkkila asserts that this is a myth and the evidence actually suggests Garbo named herself in 1923 at the Ministry of Justice in Sweden (Erkkila 595). The common assumption is that Stiller and Garbo had a Svengali/Galatea like relationship, and I speculate that over time their relationship was mythologized to fit with other stories of older European directors and young starlets such as the relationship between Marlene Dietrich and Joseph von Sternberg. However,

this version of events is misleading and perpetuates a studio created image of Garbo as a “dumb Swede,” an overly simplistic and misleading aspect of her persona which I will complicate further in the next section.

Louis B. Mayer met Garbo in a Berlin hotel in 1924 while he was scouting European talent for MGM (Folkart). Some accounts of this meeting suggest that Mayer was trying to sign Stiller to a contract and Stiller said he wouldn't agree unless Garbo came with him (Folkart). Others say Mayer saw *The Saga of Gösta Berling* and became smitten with Garbo instead of Stiller, then signed them together because Garbo knew no English and refused to go without the director (*TCM Original Documentary: Garbo*). Either way, the mythic retelling of Garbo and Mayer's meeting is common knowledge to many movie fans. It is often said that Mayer believed he could spot star quality in someone just by looking in their eyes, that there was something behind the eyes in certain people that would be able to communicate and connect with an audience, regardless of the script, acting training or talent (*TCM Original Documentary: Garbo*). More than any other star, Garbo had that “behind the eyes” quality for Mayer. Regardless of whom he signed first and how he decided to sign them, Mayer offered both Garbo and Stiller contracts at MGM and they arrived in Hollywood in 1925.

After their arrival, Stiller was slated to direct Garbo in several films, but when he began directing *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), he often clashed with the studio, prompting some to speculate that Mayer didn't like the level of control he had over Garbo, as she was becoming a money making star even then. Stiller was soon let go from the production and sent back to Sweden after only a few years (*TCM Original Documentary: Garbo*). Whether or not Stiller “molded” Garbo like Svengali is unclear, and likely exaggerated, but what is clear is that Stiller

and Garbo were very close. They were close enough that two years later, after Stiller's death, Garbo attempted to return to Sweden for the funeral, even though she wasn't able to due to contract obligations at MGM (*TCM Original Documentary: Garbo*).

During the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood, star personas were expertly crafted by the studios to market and sell films and film ephemera. As discussed in the previous two chapters, these star personas encompassed not only the film roles of an actor, but other aspects of their life and career as well. In Richard Dyer's book *Heavenly Bodies*, he touches on an idea that is particularly relevant when examining the queerness of stars' personas: a star's image includes every piece of info available about that star. How audiences perceive them, how they are manufactured, as well as the person themselves are all part of the creation of a star image and no one part is more "real" than another (Dyer 2). Whether or not a star was LGBTQ+ in real life matters, but the queerness of their star image, the film roles, and queer coded articles and gossip about them matters just as much, if not more.

When Greta Garbo arrived in Hollywood, MGM didn't know what to do with her. She barely spoke English and her natural star power had yet to be discovered by MGM producer Irving Thalberg. Desperate to find what star quality Mayer saw when he signed Garbo, he put her through the ringer to see if any star persona would stick. As Jeanine Basinger discusses in her book, *A Woman's View*, studios crafted star images by trying out different personas in publicity tests in which audiences "remember what [they] want to remember and discard what [they don't] like or respond to" (Basinger 161). First, the MGM publicity department had Garbo do photoshoots with track teams, flexing muscles to highlight her athleticism, despite the fact that Garbo was not an athlete and had little interest in running track (*TCM Original Documentary:*

Garbo). Around the same time, she was forced to take photos with exotic animals such as Leo the lion and several lion cubs, perhaps to see if a persona as an exotic European elite could stick. She was eventually cast as a Spanish peasant in *Torrent* (1926). The film performed fairly well at the box office and led to the full star treatment and her introduction in the fan industry. Garbo was so versatile that nearly every image the studio tried seemed to find a way to connect with the audience. It seems that behind the personas studios used to sell Garbo to audiences there was an essential Garbo-ness that shone through.

MGM still didn't know exactly where Garbo would fit, but audiences began to notice her and respond positively. In September of 1926, *Motion Picture Magazine* listed her as one of their rising stars, and fans began writing in to discuss her and ask questions. The magazines also began shaping her early vamp persona, trading her preferred androgynous attire for backless dresses and beads, as seen in a 1926 *Motion Picture Magazine* clipping stating "Greta Garbo has radical notions of Garb-O. All her modesty needs is a string of beads" ("The Movies' Sub-deb"). At this point she was already known as a mysterious foreign figure, and publicity photos and feature articles in magazines hammered that image home with descriptions of Garbo highlighting her Swedishness and lack of participation in studio events and parties (Horak "Queer Crossings").

"The Mysterious Stranger," a May 1926 feature article in *Motion Picture Magazine*, showcases photos of Garbo by MGM portrait photographer Ruth Harriet Louise and discusses her arrival in the U.S. and the professional trajectory from Swedish unknown to rising MGM star (Palmborg). Author Rilla Page Palmborg discusses Garbo's lifelong dreams of acting as well as her beauty and status as a Swedish immigrant. As Palmborg describes how little we know about

Garbo's nature, she quotes the star in broken English and highlights her lack of understanding of English vocabulary and customs. Palmborg also describes how primitive the film studios and productions in Sweden were and how taken Garbo was with the vastness of California. The interview also attributes quotes to Garbo that are not entirely accurate. For instance, the article states that both her parents didn't want her to go to America, while we know that her father had died before Mayer even offered her a contract. This suggests that studio publicists may have answered the questions for Garbo without her knowledge, which once more emphasizes the elaborate construction of Garbo's star image.

One image that this early article about Garbo perpetuates is the "dumb Swede," which scholar Betsy Erkkila asserts MGM executives devised to downplay Garbo's early star power (Erkkila 596). In this era, stars were the most important factor in marketing a film, but with a popular star image came a certain level of power for the actor that possessed it. By 1926, Garbo was already becoming a major box-office draw. This was evident from the first rushes for *Torrent*, and that power didn't dwindle significantly until the end of her film career (Erkkila 595). The studio, and various magazine editors, liked to paint Garbo as almost a blank slate or a "passive female vessel" with which a director could mold a "male voyeuristic fantasy," when this was never really the case (Erkkila 596). Accounts from Garbo's friends and collaborators indicate quite the opposite, that Garbo was very involved in the artistic process. Erich von Stroheim, who worked with Garbo on *As You Desire Me* (1932), suggested that she actually creates such a profound response in audiences through her intense and precise nuances while acting, that she fully understands the meaning behind each word in the script and how to convey each line without any direction from him (Erkkila 596).

Garbo's thoroughly continental, mysterious, and foreign image, similar to that of Alla Nazimova just a few years earlier, led to her new persona as a man-killing vamp. This persona was similar to the bad-girl roles she played in her earlier European films, particularly *Die freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street*, 1925), directed by G. W. Pabst. However, the vamp image was truly cemented with Garbo's second American feature film *The Temptress* (1926). Although Laura Horak argues that Garbo was not suggested to be gay or gender nonconforming until roughly 1930, this isn't exactly the case (Horak 175). Garbo's image certainly shifted to a more androgynous and implied lesbian persona in 1930, but as I discussed in my first chapter, the vamp image and the coded mysterious foreign persona in Hollywood have significant ties to gender deviance and lesbianism as well.

The vamp character, and Garbo's vamp specifically, was a powerful seductress with a feminine masculinity. She is often in the masculine position of power, not only in her strident and assertive pursuit of male characters, but in the amount of space she unapologetically takes up on screen. Similarly, by discussing Garbo as a mystery and casting her in foreign vamp roles, her persona is in conversation with other lesbian and bisexual women figures of early Hollywood with similar personas such as Nazimova and Theda Bara. The language used to describe Garbo echoes that used for Nazimova, with words such as "foreign," "mysterious," "odd," "moody" and "unknown-" in heavy repetition. In "The Mysterious Stranger," published in 1926, Garbo is also credited with saying she hates being asked if she has any love interest or wants to marry someday. This implies an added "mystery" about why she hates being asked those questions and what she might be hiding about her love life.

In addition to her vamp image implying a deviant sexuality, Garbo was often discussed in association with other gay, lesbian, and bisexual stars of the era. By 1930, any actress that wore pants was fair game for a Garbo comparison, particularly Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn, but even as early as 1928 Garbo is discussed in relation to gay male stars Billy Haines and co-star Ramon Novarro. She rarely appeared at celebrity parties, but Haines reportedly visited her on set several times and was quoted in *Photoplay* in 1928 stating, “If Greta kissed a tree there’d be a forest fire!” All of these subtle statements and coded imagery, from the vamp persona to the associations with queer stars, suggest to a savvy audience that Garbo may not be heterosexual.

As the late 1920s wore on, Garbo had become a bonafide star and her early star personas, from ambiguous foreign nymph in *Torrent* to exotic vamp in *The Temptress* and *Flesh and the Devil*, didn’t seem to fit with her real-life personality or the films she hoped to make. Magazines quoted her saying she hated her “bad girl” vamp roles and wanted to play something more authentic even early on in her career (Palmborg). By 1930, Garbo’s image shifted and became more androgynous. This shift occurred because of several factors. The release of more explicit lesbian literature including the novel *The Well of Loneliness* and the play *The Captive* made a more queer-coded star image palatable to modern audiences. At the same time, Garbo had stopped blindly following studio orders. She knew she had power in the industry and one way she exercised that power was by refusing any formal contact with the press and public after 1928 (Erkkila 599). This freedom from extreme studio control gave her freedom in her personal life as well. And simultaneously, the magazines began suggesting that Garbo may not be as heterosexual as her man-killing roles would otherwise suggest.

As more books with lesbian content made their way into the mainstream culture, lesbianism simultaneously became more visible yet also more taboo. More average audience members knew that homosexuality existed and the kind of crossdressing on screen prevalent in the silent era no longer slipped by undetected. This led to more pushback from conservative voices already calling for film content to be censored. Queer social codes on screen became more subtle, there were fewer onscreen kisses between women and if women did crossdress, they were expected to keep enough feminine accoutrements to offset any suspicion.

In her pioneering study *Girls Will Be Boys*, Laura Horak suggests that Garbo's shift from vamp to the implied lesbian androgynous star of *Queen Christina* began around 1930 and was greatly influenced by lesbian literature of the era. This shift also coincided with Garbo's relationship with the out lesbian playwright Mercedes de Acosta, who was very involved in lesbian social circles in Hollywood and has often been assumed to be Garbo's lover during this time (Horak 175). Garbo was never outed explicitly as a lesbian in print, but journalists and fan magazine editors used queer codes to suggest as much, and many of these codes were references to lesbian literature including masculine signifiers and androgynous clothing.

For instance, Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe Hall published the influential novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. The book, along with other literature about lesbians such as Edouard Bourdet's 1926 play *The Captive*, led to a public backlash against homosexuality amid public obscenity trials against both works for their lesbian content (Horak 121-122). Laura Horak argues that the lesbian content of these two works, along with the publicity they attracted, changed the way that the public viewed crossdressing women. Unmarried women who liked to wear men's pants were no longer simply modern single women as in the earlier Jazz Age.

Crossdressing was now seen as an overt expression of lesbianism (Horak 122). Hall's novel had a more profound effect in England, while *The Captive* had a larger effect in the United States with its similar obscenity trial in 1926. However, the publication of both books, along with the increased visibility of lesbians they espoused, contributed to an increased legibility of queer codes in film. All of this publicity coincided with increased calls from religious conservatives for censorship in Hollywood. Although Hollywood largely ignored this call until the Production Code of 1934, this backlash against homosexuality would eventually contribute to one of the core tenets of the "Hays" Code, the banning of so-called "sex perversion" on screen.

Garbo Mania and the Evolution of Fan Interaction in the 1920s and 30s

Movie fans wrote into fan magazines frequently about Garbo, and not just to discuss their own opinions of her, but to interact with other fan letters published in the magazines. Many movie fans of various stars, and even of lesser-known actors, were passionate, but from the published letters in 1920s and 30s magazines, Garbo fans seem to have been on an altogether different level. Fans would often write in to reference other fan letters and articles in various issues of the magazines and argue with one another and with the editors. By the late 20s, there were several of these published in each issue of most major movie fan magazines. Some letters would say Garbo was overrated or unattractive, compare her to other stars, and fans would write in with passionate rebuttals, often even attacking the character of the letter writers that had insulted their idol. Similarly, if a magazine writer/editor wrote a piece that painted Garbo in a negative light, or even if they ranked her in a way that fans took offense, the passionate defenses would pour in. The Garbo content in fan magazines of this era proves that movie fans remained

passionate in the 1920s and 30s and fan magazines continued to be an interactive forum of fandom as the industry shifted from the silent era to sound. One example of this type of fan interaction is a 1927 letter by Garbo fan Doris Burge in *Picture Play Magazine*.

Burge wrote into *Picture Play Magazine* with a passionate reply to a previous letter to the magazine by Dorothy Derr, whom Burge calls out by name. Burge's letter is titled (most likely by the magazine editor) "Why They Rave Over Garbo." - "I have just finished reading a letter in *Picture Play* that makes me want to come right out and say what I think—" she writes, "I wish to tell [Dorothy Derr] and everyone else why the magazines rave over Greta Garbo. She is certainly someone to rave over!" She goes on to say she hopes Garbo will make many more pictures and Miss Derr shouldn't take her hatred of one Garbo film (*Torrent*) out on the star, as the studio chose the project, not Garbo! This letter is one of many passionate defenses of Garbo, and they would pour in at an ever-greater rate as the industry shifted to sound and Garbo became an even greater box office draw.

The letter suggests several things about Garbo's early stardom and movie fans of the late silent and early sound era. First, it suggests that Garbo had already made an impact on audiences as early as her first Hollywood film, without the more dedicated star persona that she and MGM would cultivate in the years that followed. Second, Miss Burge wrote her letter in response to another fan letter from a previous issue of the magazine, suggesting fans were not only communicating with magazine editors about articles and films, but that they participated in a discourse with one another through the magazine editors. This type of fan discussion and interaction is almost comparable to fan discussions on modern-day Twitter or comments sections on movie fan blogs of today. Further, Burge suggests that she has at least some understanding of

the studio system when she states that Garbo did not choose her film projects. This shows a level of knowledge about the film industry that wouldn't be possible without research in filmmaking. Fans of this era weren't just over-excited girls raving about their favorite picture plays, they were also well informed moviegoers that made it their job to know everything they could about their favorite films and the stars that performed in them.

The Margaret Herrick Library has digitized over a dozen Garbo fan letters addressed directly to the star, and these are just as passionate as the letters columns of movie fan magazines, if not more so. The fan letters to Garbo show not only the breadth of Garbo's dedicated fanbase, but also show how female fans were reacting to Garbo's image from the start of her career in Hollywood. All of these artifacts prove that not only were 1920s movie fans interacting with star personas and magazine editors, but they were in a discourse with one another as well as attempting to reach the stars themselves. The dozen letters digitized at the Margaret Herrick Library are all from 1928 and represent fans from many different countries.

In 1928, one Garbo fan, Miss Cecil M. Deane, wrote a letter to the star on Chicago hotel stationery, a four-page poem in green ink with alternating rhyming couplets, culminating in a hand-drawn pencil portrait of the star. This particular letter is interesting for several reasons, the first being the green ink. As I explained in my first chapter, green ink was a significant queer code of the era. Not only did Oscar Wilde wear a green carnation in his lapel as a gay code for other homosexual men (Beckson 190), but Marlene Dietrich later wrote her love letters to women in green ink (McLellan 165). It is not ethical to state that Miss Deane was a lesbian, as I have no way of knowing what she intended with this letter, but whether or not she knew it, her letter does have queer significance. In the letter, Deane describes her adoration for Garbo. She

alternates describing Garbo's beauty and telling her how much she wishes she could be just like her. In one verse she states, "go on with your acting, we girls from afar, in looking at you dear, forget who we are" (Herrick Library). At certain points in this letter, it seems as if Deane is as much in love with Garbo as she wants to emulate her. She dreams of Garbo's happiness and beauty. For Deane, Garbo is an escape from reality, a touch of adventure, and she also inspires pages of romantic verse from young girls like Deane who "never miss a picture" of hers. Deane ends the letter with "My Greta Garbo, by Cecil M. Deane" alongside her pencil portrait of Garbo in profile with slicked back curls and long eyelashes. Deane represents the legions of devoted girls who loved the image of Garbo on screen.

While Nazimova had a pre-written response for her fans (whether by her or her publicist), and Kay Francis addressed them directly when she could, Garbo didn't seem to address her fans at all other than to ask that they leave her alone. It's less that she was a recluse, as the press painted her, and more that she just didn't want to deal with the press and all the attention she received from fans. She simply saw it as a rude invasion of privacy. However, she presumably kept the letters for us to be able to access them now, or it is possible that she never saw them and her publicists or the studio kept them.

Queen Christina, Camille, and Garbo's Enduring Image

Queen Christina (1933) is one of the most recognizable films in Greta Garbo's filmography, especially to LGBTQ audiences. The role of Christina is one of several in which Garbo played a Swedish character, and the film is often referenced as an early feat of lesbian cinema (as discussed, for instance, in Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*). In fact, earlier silent

cinema has hundreds of examples of queerness from subtle codes to crossdressing and lesbian and gay kisses on screen. However, *Queen Christina* has still had an immense impact on lesbian culture and, along with *Morocco (1930)*, is one of the few examples of on-screen same-sex kisses to appear during the Golden Age of Hollywood film.

The real-life Christina, queen of Sweden in the 1600s, often dressed in a combination of men's and women's clothes and reportedly had romantic feelings for other women (Waters 42). We don't know for sure the extent of her relationships with women, but she did write many affectionate letters to her lady-in-waiting Ebba Sparre. In one letter she states "Wherever I may be, I shall always be entirely devoted to you... I embrace you a million times" (Waters 42). When Christina was in her mid-twenties, pressure mounted for her to get married and produce an heir. Rather than lose her independence and marry a man, she abdicated, converted to Catholicism, and fled the country disguised as a man (Waters 42). She was wealthy, and her status as a royal allowed her to exist as she was- therefore she wasn't penalized for the illegality of her crossdressing in seventeenth-century Europe (Waters 43). Scholar and novelist Sarah Waters suggests in her article "A Girton Girl on a Throne" that Christina had a "liminality," or an inability to be fully categorized as one thing or another, from nationality to religion and sexuality. This quality is the exact reason Greta Garbo was the perfect person to embody Christina on screen. Garbo, like Christina, has escaped categorization. She has been described as a lesbian, asexual, bisexual, gender deviant, nonconforming and every descriptor under the sun. She never identified herself as any fixed identity either. She was from Sweden, but spent the majority of her life in New York City, and played many different nationalities on screen. She is widely considered to have been romantically involved with John Gilbert, while in the next breath

she is described as a lesbian or even celibate. Garbo embodies the liminality that Waters ascribes to the real-life Queen Christina.

The film adaptation of *Queen Christina* was released “when discussion of Christina’s sexual identity was at its most intense,” according to Waters (Waters 41). In the nineteenth century, Christina’s sexuality was not part of the conversation surrounding the monarch’s life story (Waters 44). Instead, she was considered simply unusual or an unhappy single woman who had been raised as a boy to be a king. A biography of the Swedish monarch had just been published in 1933 titled *Christina, Queen of Sweden* by Margaret Goldsmith and this, along with other twentieth century accounts of the monarch, endeavored to bring Christina’s gender and sexuality back into the conversation, albeit through a lens of psychoanalysis (problematic clinical terms like “tribade” and “invert” were more common than “lesbian”). Meanwhile, Garbo’s rumored relationships with women were becoming higher profile—from playwright Mercedes de Acosta to actress and screenwriter Salka Viertel (who appeared in a small role in Garbo’s first talkie *Anna Christie*). In fact, Viertel co-wrote *Queen Christina* specifically for Garbo.

In 1932, Garbo’s contract with MGM was set to expire and she was one of their biggest box office draws (Paris 283-284). She knew this, and the studio knew they needed her. According to Garbo biographer Barry Paris, Garbo arranged a trip to Sweden without asking or negotiating her new contract and made sure everyone knew she was planning to leave as soon as it expired (Paris 285). The studio was so afraid that Garbo would leave for Sweden without signing a new contract that they agreed to let her make pictures that she liked and gave her co-star and director approval on her next films (Paris 285). This type of agreement was unheard of in studio era Hollywood, but illustrates the power Garbo held over the industry. As soon as

Garbo signed, she left for Sweden. Instead of announcing her contract renewal, MGM let the press and audiences believe Garbo may never return. A November 1932 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* detailed her trip in gossip columns, emphasizing her desire for seclusion. According to the magazine, she told reporters “Please go away! I am going to Sweden” and dodged fans with “disguises, doubles, chases, and all” (“Garbo’s Trip From Hollywood”). Fans and journalists questioned if she would ever return. In fact, Salka Viertel had already begun writing the screenplay for *Queen Christina* when she left and they would correspond via letters throughout her trip. During the trip, Garbo studied for her role by visiting a descendant of Christina’s “master of the house” (Paris 287).

The actual plot of the film *Queen Christina* reflects Garbo’s personality as well as the liminality and gender and sexual nonconformity of both Garbo and the real-life Christina. In the film, Garbo dresses in masculine attire and expresses a desire never to marry. Arguably the most famous scene of the film is when Christina’s trusted advisor and Chancellor suggests she might marry and says, “but your majesty, you cannot die an old maid!” And she responds, “I have no intention to Chancellor, I shall die a bachelor!” As I stated earlier in this chapter, Garbo often referred to herself with masculine signifiers, and friends have said she referred offhand to herself as a boy or a man. With her swagger across the room and the devilish glint in her eye as she says “bachelor,” this line may be the most of Garbo’s real-life personality that we ever see in her screen career.

Although it is not explicit, the film also suggests that Christina has a romantic interest in her lady-in-waiting Ebba. Christina kisses Ebba on the mouth several times throughout the film and expresses jealousy when Ebba shows a romantic interest in a boy. The two also talk as if

they are a married couple, with Ebba asking Christina to take her on carriage rides and getting upset when Christina has to work rather than spend time with her. Christina even offers to take her on a vacation in the country with just the two of them. In addition to the lesbian subtext between Christina and Ebba, Garbo's Christina expresses a gender fluidity and queer sensibility in her relationship with John Gilbert's character Antonio.

One scene in the film shows Garbo "passing" as a cis man as she rides her horse into town. There she meets Antonio, who assumes she is a boy due to her attire. He is stuck in the snow, due to a carriage accident, and Christina laughs at his predicament and fixes the problem. Antonio occupies the position of a damsel and distress and Christina a chivalrous knight in shining armor. She meets Antonio again at a nearby inn where she, still passing as a man, gets the last room available and eventually offers to share with him. Even while Antonio believes Christina to be a man, the two flirt and have dinner with one another as if they are courting one another. Then, when they retire to their room, a waitress at the inn flirts with Christina and essentially hands her a key to her room saying, "the master says you're to have everything you need... If you should need anything, my room is at the end of the passage."

The sexual fluidity and lesbian subtext of the film, along with the context of Garbo's influence on the project and the real-life Christina of Sweden, make this film one of the most explicit examples of queer cinema within the confines of studio-era Hollywood. Garbo had a fondness for the film, which is not a surprise considering the fact she was vocal about her desire never to marry, not to mention the other striking affinities that she shared with Christina. Today, the film is remembered as lesbian cultural history and has cemented Garbo as a queer icon.

In 1936, Garbo appeared in *Camille*, the first sound adaptation of the original Alexandre Dumas play and novel, *La Dame aux Camelias* (often titled *Camille* in English). The film was directed by George Cukor and the screenplay was written by Zoe Akins, Frances Marion, and James Hilton. Like *Queen Christina*, *Camille* is also a period piece. However, *Camille* was produced after the Production Code of 1934, and thus has a level of censorship that *Queen Christina* did not have to contend with. The film is also a direct adaptation of the earlier Nazimova silent film of the same name, as Zoe Akins wrote the earlier film and is credited as a co-writer on this adaptation.

While Nazimova's silent *Camille* reflects a dark art deco imagery with almost experimental set design through Natacha Rambova's art direction and Nazimova's edgy vamp character, the George Cukor/Garbo adaptation is a studio era costume drama. The plot is quite similar between the two films, but they are made in two very different styles, from the mise en scene to the camera work and acting performances. As I explained in my first chapter, Alla Nazimova's version of *Camille* has queer significance due to the context of its production as well as several queer coded sequences in the film. Garbo's version, despite no explicit queer content on screen, can also be considered a feat of queer cinema for the same reasons. One important similarity between the two films is the queer context through which the films were made. The 1936 *Camille* was directed by George Cukor and stars Garbo and Robert Taylor. All three of these figures were rumored to be gay during their lifetimes and still continue to be seen as queer figures in pop culture and LGBTQ+ history. Recently, during TCM's "LGBT Icons" programming for Pride Month in June 2021, *Camille* was screened on the network with discussions of Cukor and Garbo's sexuality in introductions to the film.

I describe the plot of the earlier *Camille* adaptation in greater detail in my first chapter, and this film follows the same story. Garbo's Marguerite Gautier (the "Lady of the Camellias") is not a vamp prostitute like Nazimova's version was, but is a fashionable European socialite - and also a prostitute. She is suggested to be a high-class courtesan with her unmarried status, frequent parties, choice of rich suitors and use of their funds to pay her debts and buy expensive luxuries such as spare horses. Further, this version of *Camille* suggests a little more forcefully that Marguerite may have contracted tuberculosis as a result of, or even punishment for, her immoral lifestyle, perhaps an addition necessary to get the film past the strict Production Code era censors eager to ensure that no crime goes unpunished. Robert Taylor's Armond Duval at one point suggests that Garbo's lifestyle is the reason for her sickness, saying "you're killing yourself" when she has a coughing fit after dancing at a party. When he offers to take her to the country and take care of her, she initially refuses but soon agrees. However, even as she says she loves him, she never accepts his many offers of marriage, not out of guilt, but out of a desire to retain her independence. She asks that they simply love and have fun together without marriage. When Armand's father asks Marguerite to give up his son, he is concerned both about her past as a prostitute and her desire never to marry— another Garbo-specific update from the original film in which Nazimova's Marguerite had accepted Armand's proposal. This new more independent Marguerite who shuns marriage reflects Garbo's real life sensibilities.

The same coded lesbian relationship in Nazimova's 1921 *Camille* is suggested in Garbo's version, though less overtly. Early on in the film, at a party in Paris, Garbo goes to check on her friend Nichette (Elizabeth Allan). In the earlier film adaptation Nazimova's Marguerite kisses Nichette on the mouth many times as she inquires about her love life and future plans. In this

version, released after the strict enforcement of the Production Code, Garbo simply holds Nichette's arm, then kisses her hand and touches Nichette's face. She asks why Nichette would want to marry and suggests that her suitor is not good enough for her, perhaps betraying a jealousy of her affection for him. Later in the film, Garbo's Marguerite calls her "my little Nichette" and kisses her face three times. This could of course be seen as a European greeting, but in the context of the earlier film version and the queer sensibility of the production, it also suggests a lesbian subtext behind these actions.

TCM suggests in their June 2021 programming notes that *Camille* may be Garbo's finest hour and it is one of Garbo's most frequently referenced roles in motion picture history. One well-known example is in the 1980s musical *Annie*, which was edited by Margaret Booth, the same woman who edited *Camille* 45 years earlier. In the film, there is a song titled "At the Movies" during which Annie's new rich family takes her to Radio City Music Hall and screens *Camille*. A line from the song references the film, "Greta Garbo is probably crying/While Robert Taylor is locked in her dying embrace." The song is about the power of film to transport audiences away from their real lives through the magic of screen acting. Garbo's enduring persona and image in pop culture can be attributed to how strongly the images of her on screen have resonated with audiences long enough for a reference several decades earlier to evoke the wonder of seeing a film on the big screen for the first time.

Despite her longevity as an icon, Garbo retired from film relatively early in 1941, after roughly twenty years and 29 feature film appearances. During her film career, Garbo was often responsible for earning a large percentage of MGM's revenue and only retired after her first truly failed project, *Two Faced Woman* (1941). It has been suggested that Garbo probably made more

money in fewer films than any MGM star in history, famously referred to as the studio with more stars than there are in the heavens (Folkart). Her retirement didn't stop fans and reporters from clamoring to speak with her, touch her, or even just get a glimpse of her. She implored everyone to simply leave her alone, to stop following her, stop taking pictures, and stop asking for autographs, but they never did. This gave her the reputation of a recluse, which was never the whole truth. Today, young fans of old Hollywood are still Garbo maniacs and have mined the research to understand the complexities of the star, from her gender and sexual nonconformity to her misunderstood status as a recluse.

Conclusion

Although Alla Nazimova, Kay Francis, and Greta Garbo were very different people, their careers have many similarities, especially when viewed through an LGBTQ+ fan perspective. All three were in positions of power during key shifts in the Hollywood film industry - the rise of the studio system, the arrival of sound, and the shift from pre-Code to the production Code era. Studios attempted to pigeonhole each of them with the same “vamp” image, an inherently queer persona, early in their careers and each of them tried to break from the limits of that image with different levels of success. They all had to deal with sexist attitudes for being women in positions of power. Further, they each dealt with homophobic sentiments for the gossip printed about their personal lives and the queer imagery in each of their star personas, even after their film careers ended. Nazimova and Francis have been largely forgotten by popular culture, while Garbo remains a staple of pop culture but has been reduced to a single story of her so-called reclusive lifestyle. My goal with the previous three chapters is to not only show that queer people existed even when they didn't have the language or framework to express their identities, but to show how these three women left their mark on the early film industry and remain important figures of queer history today.

In Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Doty discusses the questionable assumption that mass culture is inherently straight. Doty states, “the more the queerness in and of mass culture is explored, the more the notion that what is ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ is therefore ‘straight’ will become a highly questionable given in popular culture” (Doty 104). My study is just one example of a re-examination and reclamation of the queerness of pop culture and the dedicated fans that contributed to its popularity. Although Nazimova and

Francis are largely forgotten today, they were popular stars at one point and their impact can still be seen. Garbo is still a large presence in pop culture today. All three of these women expressed a gender nonconformity and/or had romantic or sexual relationships with other women. They are just three examples in a sea of queer imagery and experience in mass culture. LGBTQ+ voices, and more specifically lesbian and bisexual women, have shaped our entertainment industry and had a massive effect on pop culture. Even if straight audiences aren't aware of what they are consuming, queerness is part of pop culture and always has been.

Doty's study as well as some of the foundational texts in the previous chapters (including the star studies work of Basinger and Dyer) are now considered classic and somewhat outdated texts. However, they laid an important foundation for understanding stardom in old Hollywood that updated studies, such as the work of Laura Horak and Shelley Stamp (also referenced throughout my study) still seem to follow. In Horak's book *Girls Will Be Boys*, she focuses on silent era crossdressing with minute detail and specificity, ending with Garbo and Dietrich in the 1930s rather than beginning with them as many studies had done previously. Stamp, though her text is older, lays out important primary sources that show how audiences of girls were interacting with early Hollywood. Both texts are now formative, but they don't make Basinger, Dyer, or Doty's earlier works any less foundational. I like to think of my work as a bridge between all of these works with a foundation of the older texts. I focus both on the queer stardom of old Hollywood that Horak discusses and the girl fandom that Stamp uncovers, and in order to make sense of these topics I need the foundation of star persona studies that Basinger and Dyer outline in their now classic texts *Heavenly Bodies* and *A Woman's View*.

Looking to the future, I would like to see more close examination of the paratexts of early Hollywood, particularly fan magazines. These texts are often overlooked in academic works as gossip or studio propaganda, but they had a deep impact on moviegoing audiences and continue to be collected and referenced by classic film fans today. Another goal of my research within fan magazines and old Hollywood fandom is to suggest that the type of fan interactions between Garbo fans in the 1920s and '30s is not that different from contemporary classic film fandoms online. There seems to be a brick wall between fan studies and reception studies that suggests historical fans and contemporary internet fans have little overlap. This simply isn't the case, and I hope my study at least begins to show the similarities between the two types of fan interaction. To further expand this study, during a year that isn't pandemic stricken, I would like to conduct interviews and survey old Hollywood internet fan groups to prove these similarities further. I suspect the main difference is that the fans of the 1920s and 30s are often no longer alive to tell their stories and therefore, the specifics of some of their demographics may be lost in the ether.

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