'What Price Widowhood?': The Faded Stardom of Norma Shearer

Lies Lanckman

In July 1934, *Photoplay* magazine featured an article entitled 'The Real First Lady of Film', introducing the piece as follows:

> The First Lady of the Screen – there can be only one – who is she?
> Her name is not Greta Garbo, or Katharine Hepburn, not Joan Crawford, Ruth Chatterton, Janet Gaynor or Ann Harding.
> It's Norma Shearer (p. 28).

Originally from Montréal, Canada, Norma Shearer signed her first MGM contract at age twenty. By twenty-five, she had married its most promising producer, Irving Thalberg, and by thirty-five, she had been widowed through the latter's untimely death, ultimately retiring from the screen forever at forty. During the intervening twenty years, Shearer won one Academy Award and was nominated for five more, built up a dedicated, international fan base with an active fan club, was consistently featured in fan magazines, and starred in popular and critically acclaimed films throughout the silent, pre-Code and post-Code eras. Shearer was, at the height of her fame, an institution; unfortunately, her career is rarely as well-remembered as those of her contemporaries – including many of the stars named above. This chapter, then, will attempt to provide an explanation for this discrepancy between Shearer's former success and her current relative obscurity.

Rhetoric on Shearer to date

Scholarly work on Shearer has been relatively scarce, with many early works on stars ignoring her completely. Texts that did mention the star frequently examined her in highly negative terms, with Richard Schickel's 'The Santa Monica Beach House of a Hollywood Genius and his Leading Lady' (1990) a good example. Although this article seemingly focuses on the Shearer-Thalberg home, instead the author provides an extensive condemnation of Shearer's career, life, and even her physical appearance. According to the author, Shearer was the 'Queen of MGM' solely by 'virtue of her husband's decree'. Since she was devoid of any talent or star quality, he explains, 'all of Shearer's star contemporaries at MGM […] exercise larger claims on film history and our memories' (p. 218).

Other authors have written about Shearer in more sympathetic, but limited ways. Although Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View* (1993), which focuses on women's film from the 1930s to 1960s, includes an appendix on 'Women at the Box Office' citing Shearer as one of the highest-earning female Hollywood stars for four years in the 1930s, Shearer is only mentioned three times throughout the book, solely in a context of 'excessive nobility' (p. 167). The greater accessibility of Shearer's pre-Code films on home video in the 1990s and 2000s led to a further examination of her career, including Mark A. Vieira's *Sin in Soft Focus* (1999), which featured her as a key pre-Code star within a wider discussion on the Production Code. Mick LaSalle's *Complicated Women* (2000) went significantly further by mixing biography and scholarly analysis to examine Shearer's star persona with a focus on her oft-

forgotten pre-Code films. LaSalle usefully notes that many of Shearer's earlier films did not fit into the 'excessive nobility' paradigm highlighted by Basinger, and is particularly interested in the way her films often embodied elements of feminine modernity, such as sexual independence and female employment. LaSalle highlights these as significantly more interesting than Shearer's comparatively dull later roles, and attributes her fading to this fact, but ignores the development within Shearer's star image that contributed to this evolution. This sentiment is echoed in Basinger's *The Star Machine* (2007), in which the author expands her analysis of Shearer and attributes her fading, in part, to the fact that no films but her later ones are ever revived (p. 357). Basinger also raises the point that 'Shearer's reputation has been given the coup de grâce by a simple biographical fact': her marriage to Irving Thalberg in 1927, which led to the assumption (as reiterated in the Schickel article) that he 'made her career for her' (p. 358).

These works suggest Shearer's lack of longevity as a star is due to the difference between her earlier (and, it is argued, better) and later (rather dull) films, and to the Thalberg marriage and its negative connotations for Shearer. No scholarly source to date has, however, analysed either of these factors in detail. This chapter aims to trace the evolution of Shearer's star image throughout her career, allowing for an emphasis on key biographical facts such as the Thalberg marriage, but also demonstrating how this evolution may have impacted on the reception of particular films.

In *Stars*, Dyer notes that a star image 'can be found across a range of media texts' (p. 60) and while films remain 'privileged instances of the star's image' (p. 88), it is important to also look at media sources outside of the purely filmic or biographical. In this chapter, I focus on the research potential of the fan magazine, which at this time was the primary way, outside of the cinema, for many fans to find out more about their idols. Many fan magazines, including publications such as *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture*, were published by independent companies from the early 1910s onward, but to a large extent 'published and wrote what the studios determined they should publish and write' (Slide, 2010, p. 73).

Fan magazines, therefore, played a crucial part in shaping and communicating a star's studio-sanctioned public image, and can be highly useful for research on specific stars; nonetheless, none of the above authors takes them into consideration when discussing Shearer. I aim to examine the way Shearer's film roles and biographical facts were incorporated by the magazines into a wider star narrative, and how this narrative evolved across months and years. For this purpose, I have divided Shearer's life and career into three distinct phases: from the beginning of her Hollywood career in 1923 to her marriage to Thalberg in September 1927, from the marriage to September 1936, when Thalberg died, and from his death to her retirement in 1942.

Ingénue (1923-1927)

Shearer signed a contract with MGM in 1923, but mentions of the starlet in fan magazines only became more extensive when she starred in *Lady of the Night* (1925). An examination of

magazine (publicity) rhetoric in these early years is particularly fruitful, since it illustrates the formation of Shearer's star image before the Thalberg union.

Interestingly, speculations on Shearer and romance were infrequent during these pre-Thalberg years, and remained limited to vague references such as 'Norma has a number of beaux' in *Photoplay*, November 1926 (p. 106). Instead, Shearer's social class, a key element of her star image, was often discussed. The starlet's very first mention in *Motion Picture* magazine in April 1924 referred to her as 'a trained society girl' (p. 63), and this type of coverage continued throughout the years, with a reader's letter in January 1925 describing her as 'aristocratic' and 'like girls of good family are in real life', a 'wholesome, charming, well-bred little thing' (p. 12). This was rooted in the reality of Shearer's life since, contrary to many contemporary female stars, Shearer hailed from a respectable middle-class family and had started working primarily due to her father's financial problems after the Great War. This was often illustrated through visual means, such as an image published in *Picture Play* in October 1926 of Shearer and her elegantly-clad mother seated at a beautifully decorated dinner table (p. 73).

Magazine publicity also reflected upon this image as early as 1926. In June of that year, *Motion Picture* published an article entitled 'No Casting Today', which highlighted the extent to which Shearer had to struggle to achieve her (well-deserved, it is implied) fame. It refers to the 'social butterfly myth' in which Shearer was universally seen as privileged and wealthy (p. 29) and thus tries to counter the effects of her aristocratic, privileged image. The article recognises her background, while attempting to soften this by fitting the middle-class star into the 'soda fountain girl to star' narrative Daniel Boorstin describes as a 'leitmotif of American democratic folklore' (Boorstin, 1962, p. 162) - the belief that a class system does not apply in America (Dyer, 1979, p. 42). A number of articles highlighting Shearer as a 'plucky' and ambitious young woman followed, but the middle-class traces remained alongside these, and the attempt to tie the star completely into established patterns of democratic stardom remained problematic.

Shearer's well-bred public image also impacted on the fan magazine rhetoric on her films, such as *Lady of the Night*. In this film, Shearer played both lead roles, the rich, naïve Florence and the poor and worldly Molly. Although Florence was similar to the ingénue roles Shearer had previously played, Molly was decidedly different. *Photoplay* highlighted that many people initially believed Shearer to be miscast as the 'tough little dance-hall girl', but in the end, she was 'superb' in this role (*Photoplay*, April 1925, p. 47). Some readers' letters, however, expressed reservations about this sudden turn; even in January 1926, six months after the film's release, one *Photoplay* reader claimed to still be 'shuddering from [the] shock' of seeing 'the exquisite little Norma Shearer as a "lady of the night"' (p. 12).

Wife (1927-1936)

During the next phase of Shearer's career, from her marriage to Thalberg in 1927 to his death nine years later, this marriage became increasingly important to her star image. The magazine treatment of the marriage built further on Shearer's upper-class image, since it made her a

part of Hollywood's executive elite with publicity materials presenting the Thalbergs as an aristocratic Hollywood couple. This was a widespread phenomenon as early as 1930: in December of that year, the birth announcement of their son in *Picture Play* called the baby 'the Prince Royal' and 'the crown prince of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer establishment' (p. 28) with his parents the de-facto King and Queen. Other articles reiterated this 'royal couple' identity: in March 1935, *Motion Picture* published an article entitled 'Dinner For Eighteen' (p. 45), in which Shearer gave readers tips as to how to act like a successful society hostess. This shows that the representation of Shearer as an aristocrat was incorporated into the public image of her marriage to Thalberg.

Alongside coverage of Shearer's marriage to Thalberg, however, fan magazines also chose to focus on the institution of marriage itself, particularly in terms of its position within the life of a modern, working woman such as Shearer. An early example was published in *Photoplay* in May 1927, four months before their marriage and during speculations about a Shearer-Thalberg engagement. This article was entitled, rather disingenuously, '"I'm Not Going to Marry" Says Norma Shearer' and was an outgrowth of the established commentary on Shearer's pluck and ambition. Although the article echoed previous characterisations which focused on Shearer's wealthy background – comparing her to girls 'just graduated from finishing school' (p. 33) – it was also the first article to refer repeatedly to the star as a highly intelligent, ambitious 'modern'.

Its most interesting aspect is an outlining of the sacrifices Shearer had willingly made for stardom, including a decision not to marry. The star states that she believes 'an entirely new marriage relation, in which the husband and wife are equals' will eventually evolve, 'but that hasn't come yet' (p. 121). Thus, she claims she will not yet marry, since she wishes to focus primarily on her career and believes she could not muster the energy or will to care for a husband as wives are still expected to do.

The career-family balance debate for working women was particularly relevant to the social climate of the time. While female employment was on the rise, 'public sentiment in the 1920s was hostile to wives working out of a sense of personal fulfillment, rather than dire need' (Dumenil, 1995, p. 124), and film stars were certainly a part of that group. The phenomenon of working wives had, in fact, been commented on in fan magazines a number of times before. As early as 1922, an article on Gloria Swanson noted that the star did not believe 'that marriage – happy, successful marriage […] – is possible if a woman insists on following a career', and if a woman wants a career, she 'must leave marriage alone' (*Photoplay*, February 1922, pp. 21-22). This 1922 article cited careerism as an unnatural state and the main cause of unhappiness for the modern woman, whereas the Shearer article quotes the star as repeatedly saying that personal sacrifices are worth it for a career. This is a first hint, perhaps, that writing on Shearer would move further and further away from Swanson's standpoint throughout the following years.

A mere four months after the publication of the 'I'm Not Going to Marry' article, Shearer married Thalberg and the career-home balance took precedence in her star image, especially in 1930 when she became a mother for the first time, giving birth to Irving Thalberg, Jr. in

August – and when at the same time, in November of that year, she won her first and only Academy Award for *The Divorcee* (1930). *The Divorcee* represented a transition within Shearer's film career, since it was the first of a series of films I have titled her 'free soul' films, including such films as *Let Us Be Gay* (1930), *A Free Soul* (1931), *Strangers May Kiss* (1931) and *Riptide* (1934). The 'free soul' films generally feature a main character, played by Shearer, who explores issues of modern femininity, such as the institution of marriage, sexual freedom for women, female employment, etc., and who remains empowered and sympathetic at the end of the film. *The Divorcee*'s reception in fan magazines is particularly interesting since, rather than representing Shearer as a star portraying a particular role, she is given agency in the choice of this film. *Photoplay* reported in September 1930 that it was Shearer who recommended the original book *Ex-Wife* (1929) to the studio, thus emphasising Shearer's support for the messages conveyed in book and film (p. 99).

In *The Divorcee*, Shearer is a young, modern career woman who lives in a companionate[i], equal union with her husband. They have agreed that, since they are modern people, everything will be 'fifty-fifty', but when he has an affair and tells her such things shouldn't matter in a modern world, she decides to have an affair of her own. After she finds he still believes women are not allowed the same sexual freedom as men, she promptly divorces him and has a string of lovers, as well as a successful career. He, on the other hand, loses his job, and the two are reunited in the end when he asks her to give him another chance.

The film thus highlights multiple themes. Firstly, it focuses strongly on modern, companionate marriage and the place of sexual equality therein. This is broadened to include notions of sexual equality outside of marriage, without loss of status for women who choose to experiment. Furthermore, despite the film's focus on the couple's divorce and reunion, the career of the Shearer character is never problematised or blamed for the couple's problems. Considering that at this time, most working women were single and the idea of a wealthy, married woman choosing to have a career was still rare, this filmic depiction was fairly controversial, especially as such wealthy career women were often labeled 'the enemies of society' (Dumenil, 1995, p. 124), and wives who did work very rarely pursued well-paid and fulfilling careers (p. 116).

In August 1930, *Photoplay* addressed this career-home question directly in an article entitled 'Will Norma Shearer Retire?' - a question to which the answer was a resounding no. In this article, Shearer suggested it is not only possible to have both a career and a successful marriage, but she went further, advising that 'one should take up a career for the sake of love' and that she celebrates 'women who have accomplished things' (p. 47). Her work has strengthened her marriage, because her husband is proud of her accomplishments, and working makes her a more pleasant and interesting person to be married to.

Throughout the next few years, Shearer's magazine coverage consisted of a number of similar items, including a July 1931 article in *Motion Picture*, 'Married the Modern Way', in which Shearer described herself as 'the mistress kind of wife' (p. 108), proclaiming that a modern wife should be attractive, exciting and adventurous, but not necessarily tied to domestic life. 'Norma Shearer Tells what a Free Soul Really Means' described, almost a year

later, how Shearer believed that a woman should get as much sexual freedom as a man, and while a woman should not take lovers purely for 'transient pleasure' (p. 96), experimentation is fine as it makes her a better partner. This sentiment is also advocated in Shearer's films *A Free Soul* and *Strangers May Kiss* (1931), in which she portrays young women who are sexually active without being married. A third article, entitled 'Let's Be Civilised About Sex', published in *Photoplay* in December 1934, had the star defending sex as a part of life which brings 'electricity and vitality' to it, and which must be represented on screen as well (p. 45). Although these sentiments were still controversial at the time, Shearer and the characters she portrayed onscreen embraced female sexual freedoms, but were never condemned for this.

While Shearer remained an aristocratic presence at this time, the star's unusually stable love life allowed her to embrace a particularly progressive view on a happy, companionate, modern marriage between two people with their own careers. This enlightened, yet respectable modernity balanced out the potentially traditionalist or elitist connotations of her aristocratic star image, and in a sense rendered it more relatable and palatable. Her films, which were able to represent an unprecedentedly progressive image of the modern woman during this brief window of time before the enforcement of the Hays Code, aided this balancing act and enhanced it further.

Widow (1936-1942)

After the production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), Shearer did not make any new films for almost two years, until *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), due to personal reasons: she gave birth to her second child in June 1935, and her husband suffered a heart attack the same year. In September 1936, Thalberg died of pneumonia aged 37, leaving Shearer a young widow with two small children. This would prove to be a pivotal moment for her career, as Shearer's new tragic widowhood problematised the careful balance between upper-class respectability and modern freedom her star image had been based on.

Tragedy had never been part of Shearer's star narrative. As noted, her early stardom characterised her as a plucky, ambitious girl, whereas during her marriage, she became 'the one girl in Hollywood who has everything' (*Motion Picture*, June 1931, p. 113). In her pre-Code films, as well, her characters had always emerged romantically triumphant as respectable, free-spirited women with the man of their choice, in part due to the inherently progressive nature of this phase of Hollywood film-making. Set in this broader context, the tragic ending of Shearer's real-life love story was jarring.

Additionally, the concept of star-as-widow had few precedents at this time, when most writing on widowhood confined itself to the economic needs of young, impoverished widows (Berardo, 1968, p. 193), a vision incompatible with the financially secure Shearer. Previous examples of young, widowed film stars were scarce; although Jean Harlow, widowed in 1932 after the murder/suicide of husband Paul Bern, might be the closest precedent, the nature of his death and the short duration of their marriage meant that widowhood never became central to her star persona.

Another trope in regard to widowhood was that of the aristocratic/royal widow, of which the prime example was still Queen Victoria, who had notoriously worn mourning dress for forty years after the death of her husband and who was the subject of the play *Victoria Regina*, a Broadway hit throughout 1936-1937. As such, the widowed Queen was still a common cultural presence at this time, and the connotations of tragic, aristocratic and conservative widowhood may well have in some sense influenced public perceptions of the widowed Queen of MGM.

In the first full-length article on Shearer after Thalberg's death, she was referred to as 'the tragic young star' (*Photoplay*, December 1936, p. 36) with the remainder of the article illustrating the conservative turn Shearer's image was taking. Firstly, it announces her retirement; while Shearer was too 'modern' to retire for marriage, widowhood apparently easily accomplished this. In a similar way, this article also indicates that a star who tended to steer clear of excessive domesticity now became defined by her position as wife, mother, and homemaker. Her only desire, it states, is 'to carry on the dreams and ideals of Irving Thalberg', and 'her only thought is of her children', whom she wants to 'grow up here in the home their father planned for them' (81). This traditionalist emphasis on devoting herself to Thalberg's legacy and to her children's happiness remained almost unchanged until 1938, when the star finally began production of a new film, *Marie Antoinette* (1938).

This film broadly covered the life of Marie Antoinette from her teenage years to her death, and thus required Shearer to play the tragic Queen at different phases of her life. As such, the (fairly complex) film fulfilled different functions within Shearer's evolving star persona. Particular elements of its plot were not wholly different from the earlier 'free soul' films, particularly the middle section of the film which focuses strongly on Marie's exploration of extramarital sexuality before she reclaims her respectability by becoming a happy wife and mother. However, the film's tragic ending overshadows these earlier scenes with Marie's ultimate widowhood and death re-emphasising the tragic angle that had become an unavoidable part of Shearer's persona. Additionally, Shearer's identity as the dignified and tragic Queen of MGM matched, to a large extent, Marie's royal persona as sketched in the Zweig biography, the film's main source material.

The film was announced in *Photoplay* in July 1938 in an article entitled 'A Queen Comes Back', establishing this parallel between the tragic Queen of France and the tragic Queen of MGM that ran throughout the promotion of the film. In fact, its very production was represented as 'a testimonial to one of the greatest real life loves Hollywood has ever known' (20), and a great deal of emphasis was put on the fact that this film, particularly close to Shearer's heart and personal life, was chosen as her return from retirement. The article ends by reiterating the tragic links, stating that '[Thalberg and Shearer] were the royal couple and she is still queen. As queenly as Toinette herself' (p. 86). Once again, press and film came together to sketch an image for Shearer, but now the aristocratic and tragic elements of the film's plot, rather than the sexually empowered elements, were stressed. Similar stories emerged during the next few years, with Shearer no longer linked with modernity but instead with traditionalism, quiet maturity, and tragedy. Articles now focused on her 'handful of

memories' (*Photoplay*, October 1938, 32), or, as an 'Open Letter to My Fans', on Shearer giving emotional support and advice to other young widows (*Modern Screen*, November 1940, p. 87).

In 1939, Shearer starred as the central character in *The Women*, a divorce film reminiscent of her 'free soul' films of the early 1930s, re-introducing concepts of progressive femininity into her star image. The restrictions, however, of the 1934 Production Code resulted in a more conservative worldview and collaborated with Shearer's already traditionalised star image; *The Women'*s central divorcée was a 'devoted mother and wife' (*Photoplay*, December 1939, p. 92) with none of the formerly typical traces of radical modernity in terms of female employment or sexual liberation. In an article connected to the film, Shearer is described as 'calm, intelligent and reserved' (*Photoplay*, November 1939, p. 19), laudable attributes of an aristocratic widow, but a far cry from Shearer's previous star image.

Conclusion

In 1956, John Springer, publicist for RKO Pictures, authored the first issue of *Old Hollywood* magazine, a publication focused on 'Movieland's Mad Past'. The front cover of the issue featured such stars as Rudolph Valentino and Greta Garbo, alongside a small portrait of Norma Shearer. The photo used was a publicity image for *The Divorcee*, yet the only mention of Shearer within the magazine was not connected to this film, but to the more conservative *The Women* (p. 72). This magazine thus neatly illustrates the – particularly post-retirement – development of Shearer's star image, as well as emphasising, once more, the importance of fan magazines as a methodological tool to trace and analyse the star narratives of faded stars.

These fan magazines illustrate that throughout Shearer's career, the star was identified through her wealthy background and aristocratic demeanor, magnified when she married mogul Irving Thalberg. This chapter, however, has attempted to establish that both the contents of her pre-Code films and fan magazines enabled the star to use this stable home life as a vehicle to articulate a particular brand of modernity, in which women were able to enjoy both a happy, egalitarian marriage and a successful career. Despite what Basinger suggested in *The Star Machine*, therefore, it was not the marriage itself that really problematised Shearer's legacy. As Shearer became a young widow in 1936, however, this progressive emphasis was completely reversed as her star image became rooted in tragedy, and her films, impacted by the more conservative atmosphere of the post-Code era, could no longer assist her in presenting an alternative image. As Springer's magazine demonstrates, even by 1956, Shearer was only casually remembered as a respectable star-as-widow, which remains the case to this day.

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[i] Within the study of early 20th century history and sociology, the term 'companionate marriage' is used to indicate a supposedly new type of marriage, in which the spouses function as friends and equals rather than simply as partners for procreative or financial purposes.