



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Claus Tieber

Mary Pickford—as Written by Frances Marion

ABSTRACT: Mary Pickford's star image consists of her on-screen persona of "little Mary" and her off-screen image as Mary Pickford, the successful actress and businesswomen, co-funder of United Artists. Both parts of her image, the sentimental, Victorian, female ideal and the modern woman of the 1910s and 1920s were to a large part written by Frances Marion. Marion did not only write the screenplays for Pickford's most successful films, she also helped to construct her off-screen image in ghost-writing Pickford's newspaper column "Daily Talks." In analyzing some of these columns the article examines Pickford's off-screen image and compares it with her screen persona. The result is an insight in the specifics of the construction of silent era star images.

The composite Pickford character was considerably less simple than she is generally supposed to have been. (Wagenknecht 158)

In dealing with a historical public figure, it is usually worthwhile to look up that person in an encyclopedia—in this case I consulted the *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. Its entry on Mary Pickford reads:

The trade press published articles as early as 1910, noting that her fans called her "Little Mary." By 1912, illustrated magazines, such as McClure's, as well as newspapers, spread the word of her high salary. (Abel 520)

These two statements constitute a perfect starting point for my paper. In the most concise way they refer to the two sides of Mary Pickford: to her on- and off-screen image, to her screen persona as well as to her public image, or, in other words: to the "Little Mary" on screen and to "Mary Pickford," the actress, as an image "constructed in extra-textual discourse" as Gaylyn Studlar puts it (202).

Pickford was one of the very first film stars in silent cinema; she was able to define the very essentials of the term "star." More than most stars Pickford completely controlled her image both on and off the screen. She was able to do so with the help of screenwriter Frances Marion—Pickford's personal "public relations agent," so to speak—who literally wrote the roles for her, on screen and in "real" life.

My aim in this paper is to sketch the work of these two extraordinary women of silent cinema and to point out the modernity of their work. The question of modernity, feminism or progressive content in the films of Pickford and Marion is a heavily discussed one in the context of these women's work (see Ruvoli-Gruba; Basinger, 15-64).



With a coat covering her *My Best Girl* costume, Pickford stands with a battery of Mitchell cameras. She bought the first Mitchell for her cameraman, Charles Rosher. Third from left is a Bell and Howell 2709.

Mary Pickford and her battery of cameras.

Public Image

The first role that Marion wrote for Pickford was Gwendolyn in *Poor Little Rich Girl* (Maurice Tourneur, 1917). In 1915 Pickford was asked to write a daily column—entitled *Mary Pickford's Daily Talks*—distributed by the McClure Syndicate and published in many newspapers such as *The Detroit News* or *The Day*. This column, which was published until 1917, was ghost-written by Frances Marion. This film and the column were equally important for the construction of Pickford's image at this crucial point in her career (see Tieber, *Schreiben für Hollywood* [writing for Hollywood] 108).

Despite her image as the star that mostly played little girls, *Poor Little Rich Girl* was the very first film in which Pickford played a girl throughout the whole film, not a girl who grows up. But Pickford's public image was anything but a naïve little girl. Her status in the industry was well known, she was seen as a very successful businesswomen, a “modern woman, before such a concept was fully understood” as Jeanine Basinger writes (16).

As early as 1913, only a few years after it became customary to announce the names of film actors and actresses who then became known to the public, Pickford left Biograph to play for theatre producer-director David Belasco. Her salary in the movies was already noteworthy in 1913. The *Des Moines News* wrote about her comeback to the stage: she “went into the moving pictures to make money, and she left them to make more money” (qtd. in Keil and Singer 20).

Pickford's image as “America's sweetheart” was always connected with as well as contradicted by her image as a successful businesswoman. So much so that Charles Chaplin famously called her the “Bank of America's sweetheart” (Whitfield 146). Not only because of her extraordinary salary, but also because her films made money. Her image within the film industry was that of a tough, savvy businesswoman. A reflection of “the sexism of the time” can be detected in the remarks of her colleagues—both male and female. Ernst Lubitsch said: “She talks money, discusses contracts and makes important decisions with disconcerting speed.” Linda Arvidson adds: “That little thing with yellow curls thinking of money like that!” But as Lubitsch astonishingly stated: “nothing of this prevents her from playing scenes filled with sweetness and passion.” (See Whitfield 145).

At this crucial point in her career—*Tess of the Storm Country* (Edwin S. Porter, March 1914) “made” her the first film star in feature films and consequently her public image began to take shape—Pickford once again had a hand in steering her public image by “writing” her newspaper column “Daily Talks.”

The Column

Pickford's daily column shows a character that consists of different roles. Eileen Whitfield writes that Pickford/Marion “talks about life, movies, and morals” (152). One can divide

the content of her columns into three categories along these lines, presenting her to the public as a star, a woman, and an advisor. Each of these categories draws on a specific role Pickford performed in public. Each of them could be analyzed in their own right and in their appropriate contexts. The point of this paper however, is to point out the manifold identities that Pickford represented.

For the interpretation of these columns it is essential to know that they were based on fan letters. The header of each column read:

Miss Pickford invites readers of *The Globe* who desire her opinion or advice on any subject to write to her through this paper.

In her column she answers questions and discusses issues raised in the letters. Topics included the film industry, being a woman and morally correct behavior. By the way, at this time Pickford is twenty-six-year-old! Of course it also is remarkable which topics were left out of these columns (her marriage to Owen Moore, for example); but for the sake of sheer methodological pragmatism, I shall be concentrating on the issues that were discussed.

The Star

A large number of these columns deal with the entertainment business. Pickford tells some anecdotes from her life on stage and many more about her work in the movies. She allows her readers to peek behind the studio walls and get a glimpse of the life of a star.

A subgroup of this category concerns her advice on how to get into the movie business. In these pieces she mostly concentrates on screenwriting. This is understandable for several reasons. First of all, the real author of the columns is a screenwriter. Second: At the time when the columns were published, a craze called “Scenario Fever” was ripping through bigger American cities. Books and magazines about the craft of screenwriting were published in large numbers; screenwriting contests were held constantly. The industry was looking for new stories. Pickford’s column played its role in this search for screenwriters and encouraged its readers to write. The column only became judicial with regard to correspondence schools, “which take your money and give you nothing,” as Pickford/Marion writes. (“Scenario Writer Duped”) This is exactly the position of the first screenwriting societies, the precursors of the Writers Guild of which Marion became the first vice-president (see Tieber, *Schreiben für Hollywood* [writing for Hollywood] 202). Screenwriting was the only field of the film industry in which the column gave practical advice (“send your scripts to . . .” and so on). These columns (as well as similar texts by stars and industry insiders) helped the film industry to structure and regulate fan activities (see also Morey). Pickford offered her readers intimate insights and thus also made her work less glamorous and more real.

Pickford/Marion is much more detached and critical when it comes to acting. She also

finds practical answers for people who want to meet film stars. (“Don’t be disheartened, but most of the handsome leading men are very happily married to dear little wives,” “Love, Reel and Theatrical”). She tries to disillusion anyone who believes that she could marry a film star or become a star herself. Pickford/Marion is reasonable and realistic in a way that must have cured at least some of the “foolish, sentimental girls,” as she calls that share of her fans (“Letters from the Lovelorn”).

The columns also function as advertisements for her films as they frequently refer to her most recent productions. In 1915 eleven Pickford-films were released. The number dropped to five films in 1916 and to six in 1917 as a result of the transition to features.

The columns in this category render an image of Pickford as an ordinary person who just happens to be in the film industry (“I am an average woman”). The character that is supposedly writing the lines is presented as a sensible and experienced woman and not at all like the naïve and sentimental girl one would expect if one identified Pickford with her screen characters.

The Woman

A small number of the columns Marion wrote for Pickford contain stories putatively from the star’s childhood, advocating for the importance of fairy tales and Santa Claus in children’s lives. They depict the author as a good-hearted, optimistic young woman, expanding the actress’s otherwise rational and successful off-screen image. These columns correspond to Pickford’s more Victorian roles, which represent her as an old-fashioned, child-like woman (see Studlar). Though these pieces add a poetical, sensitive and altogether younger side to Pickford’s public image, they do not present her as simply a naïve girl since every sentence is ostensibly written by a mature woman looking back to her childhood in a nostalgic mood.

The Advisor

The greatest number of Pickford’s columns consists of moral advice to young women who ask her advice on love troubles, “real and imaginary.” She also gives advice on issues of personal appearance such as hairstyles and fashion trends. The authorial persona put forward in these columns is that of someone to be regarded as an authority on these topics by younger readers.

Pickford/Marion’s Daily Talks could and should be analyzed further (as Anke Brouwers does in this volume). For the aim of my paper it is sufficient to conclude that the public image of Mary Pickford in the mid-1910s as constructed by her films and in these columns is that of a character with varied and sometimes contradictory traits. She is rational, reasonable, experienced but also optimistic, poetic and sensitive. Pickford definitely was seen as a successful, grown-up twenty-six-year-old woman and not as a child star.

This means that she was not identified exclusively with her film roles. Her fans admired her not only for her screen persona, but also for being a skilled actress, whose stunts—playing children, playing childish scenes—they relished as much as those of Chaplin. A juvenile or childish aspect is not part of Pickford’s public image, at least not in these columns.

The Films

Critics who have analyzed Pickford’s screen persona fall into two camps. The first one argues that Pickford was trapped in her “Little Mary” image and that every attempt she made to break out of her typecasting as “America’s Sweetheart” failed at the box office (see e.g. Studlar). Other scholars emphasize the variety of Pickford’s screen characters, pointing to the fact that the films in which she played a girl from start to finish only represent a minor part of her *œuvre* (see e.g. Basinger). The first position focuses on a male, patriarchal society where women are stuck to their traditional roles. The second focuses on the role of a female agent, who is able to determine her own destiny. I want to look beyond these two positions and point out an often-neglected aspect of Pickford’s screen persona.

The crucial aspect of Pickford’s image is that she is *not* Little Mary, she only *plays* this character. Little Mary is a collaborative creation by Pickford and Frances Marion. In order to clarify this point, Pickford and Marion added various facets to Pickford’s on- and off-screen persona. I have already sketched out how they created Pickford’s public image through the “Daily Talks.” In the second part of this paper, I want to give a similar sketch of how the two women attempted to vary and widen the character of “Little Mary” in order to make its construction visible.

But in order to expand a formula like that of Little Mary, it needs to be constructed in the first place. On the basis of her former screen characters and her already developed on-screen image, Pickford and Marion “re-launched” Little Mary in *Poor Little Rich Girl*. Here Pickford portrayed an eleven-year-old girl, the youngest character she ever played up to this time in her career. She also added humor to what was primarily a serious, melodramatic narrative; these comic scenes were included against the will of the film’s director, Maurice Tourneur (Beauchamp 68). Thereafter, such humor became an essential ingredient of Pickford’s screen persona. As Kevin Brownlow writes, Pickford was first and foremost a *comédienne* (119).

Frances Marion wrote adaptations of sentimental and melodramatic “growing girl” literature, (see Tibbetts, Ruvoli-Gruba, Tieber “Not Quite Classical”), but she changed the source material to create a heroine who was funny. “Nothing got her down. Whatever grim turn of the plot presented itself, she exhibited no self-pity and kept on trucking. . . . she offered hope and escape,” Jeanine Basinger writes (15). Pickford’s screen persona connects to the ideology of “American-ness” conveyed by this spunky figure and is the reason why the Canadian-born actress was called “*America’s* sweetheart.”

Comedy

JoAnne Ruvoli-Gruba reads the comic elements in the Pickford-Marion films as a sign of modernity. But even more than the comedy, the most modern element of the Pickford-Marion films is the opportunities they create for the display of performance-centered comic numbers, which reveal the fact that Pickford was indeed just acting. The mud-throwing scene in *Poor Little Rich Girl* or the circus sequence in *Rebecca of Sunnybrock Farm* (Marshall Neilan, 1917) are only two examples of these signature moments, which can be found in many of Pickford's films.

No screenwriter knew Pickford's acting skills better than Frances Marion. She was able to sketch such a scene with just a few lines, knowing what Pickford could make of it. In a scene from *Rebecca of Sunnybrock Farm* the Pickford character is confronted with two opposing moral mottos. The scene is very short and efficiently written. When looking at screenplays of that time, it is rare to find such a short description for a much longer scene on film.

Scene 89.

Int. Kitchen – Sawyer Home (FULL VIEW)

Rebecca enters with dishes – puts them on sink, rocks back and forth, picks up pie – licks a little juice from edge of dish – reaches up to cupboard for knife to cut pie – sees sign-reads:

34. Insert: (Old Fashioned Motto)
“Thou Shalt Not Steal.”

Rebecca is startled – puts knife back – starts to go out of room.

Scene 90

Int. Kitchen Sawyer Home – (FULL VIEW)

As Rebecca walks toward dining room – Stops, sees another motto by the door – reads:

35. Insert: (Motto as follows):
“God Help Them Who Help Themselves.”

Rebecca reading sign.

Scene 91

Int. Kitchen .- Sawyer Home – (FULL VIEW)

Rebecca marches back – starts to eat pie.

Scene 92

Int. Kitchen – Sawyer Home – (CLOSE UP)

Rebecca's face – smeared from ear to ear with pie. (FADE OUT) (Marion, *Rebecca of Sunnybrock Farms*. Scenario.)

Such moral epigrams were standard in the silent era, especially in the 1910s. The film is making explicitly fun of this morality in melodramatic films of that time. The self-consciousness and intertextuality of this scene is an unequivocal sign of modernity.

Duality

Jeanine Basinger writes about Pickford's status in 1918: "[s]he had developed a screen character of her own; and she was already attempting to expand the boundaries of that character" (34). One way to achieve this was via dual roles: "[t]hroughout 1918, she appeared successfully in movies that presented the public 'two Marys': *Stella Maris*, *Amarilly of Clothes-Line Alley*, *M'Liss*, and *Johanna Enlists*. In each film she played her traditional character and a better-looking, better-dressed version of herself" (Basinger 34).

It is no coincidence that all these films were written by Frances Marion. The possibilities to play two different sides of a character were the following: "by growing up, by having a dream or fantasy, or by playing a second, older character." (Basinger 34).

In this way Pickford emphasized the fact that she was acting—she exposed her acting in an almost Brechtian sense. One should not forget that Pickford's films had relatively high production values, that the shots, which show her in two roles in one frame were technically demanding special effects. In *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (Alfred E. Green, Jack Pickford, 1921, not written by Marion) she even kisses herself.

Another way of "expanding the boundaries" of her screen persona was to play both male and female characters, sometimes within the same film, as she does in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

Gender Play

In terms of gender roles Pickford mainly appears as an old-fashioned ideal, in contrast to more progressive contemporary female types, like the "new woman" or the "flapper" (see Studlar). Yet the gender identities of Pickford's characters are usually very ambiguous. Her roles sometimes include cross-dressing, and she often plays characters who are tomboys.

Pickford's predilection for cross-dressing is well illustrated in a scene in *Poor Little Rich Girl*, which shows her character Gwendolyn being punished. She has to dress like a boy. When she looks into a mirror, however, Gwendolyn quite likes herself as a boy: "I am Gwendolyn, and I am a boy" the intertitle reads. Nowadays, if a pop star like Anthony from *Anthony and the Johnsons* sings the following lines, he is being praised for enhancing the boundaries of traditional gender roles in popular culture:

One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful woman
One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful girl
But for today I am a child, for today I am a boy.
(“For Today I am a boy”)

In the case of Mary Pickford the same lighthearted play with gender roles has been largely ignored by her critics.

In *Little Lord Fauntleroy* Pickford plays a boy throughout the whole film. But she more commonly plays a tomboy. In many cases the sex of these characters has been changed from the source material to enable such a portrayal, for Pickford's growing girl narratives depict a process which begins with a child who plays with gender roles and concludes with a woman, "who in the end marries a lover waiting in the wings for Mary's character to grow up" as Kevin Brownlow writes (157).

Conclusion

I have argued that Mary Pickford cannot be reduced to just one single image or identity. "Little Mary" was complemented by the public image of Mary Pickford, the successful businesswoman and columnist. In her films, too, Pickford complicated her screen persona. She played characters at different age stages. She played dual roles. She played girls, boys and women and therefore was able to raise questions about gender roles in at least some of her films. "Mary Pickford" was constituted out of a number of complex and contradictory elements, which Pickford put on display both on and off screen. Most of these identities were developed in concert with her closest collaborator: Frances Marion. In this way Pickford was able to control her image both on and off screen to an extent still rarely encountered in film history. In the end it was her own decision to "kill" "Little Mary," to cut her curls, bob her hair and play an almost flapper-like character in *My Best Girl* (1927). Needless to say: the film was written by Frances Marion.

The modernity of Mary Pickford cannot be found by looking solely at the issues raised in her films. Rather, her image is better understood as a composite of the multiple identities she assumed both on and off the screen. Further, by letting movie audiences perceive that she was only acting rather than just "being herself": in many of her films, she encouraged her fans to view gender identities as roles which could be changed. In all of these projects, her friend and collaborator Francis Marion was a crucial partner.

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