



# Female Agency in 1930s Hollywood

*Uncovering  
Independent Stardoms  
at the Harry Ransom  
Humanities  
Research Center*

**ABOVE:** Detail from promotional poster for *Becky Sharp* (1935), directed by Rouben Mamoulian and starring Miriam Hopkins. Reprinted courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

**T**HIS PAST SPRING I received a CSW Travel Grant to examine the film collections of the Harry Ransom Humanities Center (HRC) housed at the University of Texas at Austin. This research pertains to my dissertation project, in which I argue that female film stars used their contractual labor to achieve creative and professional autonomy in the 1930s American film industry (often referred to by film historians as “the studio system”) by choosing to work independently as freelance artists. The HRC’s David O. Selznick, Myron Selznick, and Jock Whitney collections all contain contracts and legal documents that are critical for my dissertation in that they illuminate the unique contractual provisions and terms negotiated by these women in their pursuit of professional autonomy in Hollywood during an era of presumed monolithic economic control.

The notion of 1930s female stars negotiating their own labor in the oligopolistic studio system raises important new questions for a feminist perspective on American film history in significant ways. The female film stars Constance Bennett, Claudette Colbert, Janet Gaynor, Dolores del Rio, Irene Dunne, Katharine Hepburn, Miriam Hopkins, Carole Lombard, and Barbara Stanwyck were all business-savvy women who used their contracts and their star commodity to challenge the patriarchal business structure of Hollywood. By doing so, they took a more active role in shaping their careers vis-à-vis their freelance labor practice, thereby calling into question the controlling contracts and oppressive labor policies of the male-run studio system. These women sought professional autonomy in Hollywood by working with independent producers and powerful talent agents, signing non-exclusive and non-option contracts for a limited number of films, or negotiating for a percentage of their films’ profits. What is particularly striking about these female stars, however, is that they worked independently during a time in the film industry when Hollywood moguls presumably controlled and manipulated stardom for their own economic gain. In this way, these women attained what I call independent stardom—an early, nuanced form of freelancing in the 1930s male-dominated, profit-driven studio system before it became a standard practice after World War II for a larger number of Hollywood stars.

*continued*

Since freelance female stars of the 1930s remain a neglected and compelling subject for further historical research, my research at the HRC underscores a new understanding of female labor and stardom in 1930s Hollywood, one that recognizes women as able to bargain for and gain professional independence in the American film industry. For example, the actresses Janet Gaynor, Carole Lombard, and Miriam Hopkins worked with the independent producers David O. Selznick and Jock Whitney to star in prestige productions at the apex of their careers. My archival findings highlighted how each of these women negotiated for an increased amount of creative and financial control in their contracts; most significantly, they all earned a percentage of their films' profits, which was an unorthodox practice for Hollywood stars in the 1930s. After leaving Paramount Studios, Hopkins starred in the first Technicolor® live-action feature film, *Becky Sharp*, also produced independently by Jock Whitney's company, Pioneer Productions, in 1935. Likewise, Janet Gaynor signed a landmark freelance deal with David Selznick after terminating her long-term contract with Fox Film Corporation to star in his first Technicolor feature *A Star Is Born* (1937). Curiously enough, Gaynor's costar, the freelance male star Fredric March, had neither a percentage deal nor as high a salary as Gaynor. Both of these women received star billing, approval of the screenplay, and a ten percent cut of the film's distribution profits (in addition to their flat rate salary for the film).

Additionally, Lombard's freelance deal to star in Selznick's acclaimed independent production, *Nothing Sacred*, crystallized her position in the industry as highest paid Hollywood star (male or female) in 1937, with a yearly income of approximately \$500,000. Scrutinizing these contracts and the numerous memos generated during their negotiations, my research underscores how Gaynor, Hopkins, and Lombard shrewdly used their star commodity to secure these high profile roles (and lucrative financial deals) in these esteemed productions as freelance artists. My examination of the Selznick and Whitney files further corroborates my dissertation thesis that these women were nascent freelance artists who paved the way for professional independence in Hollywood.

*What is particularly striking about these female stars, however, is that they worked independently during a time in the film industry when Hollywood moguls presumably controlled and manipulated stardom for their economic gain.*

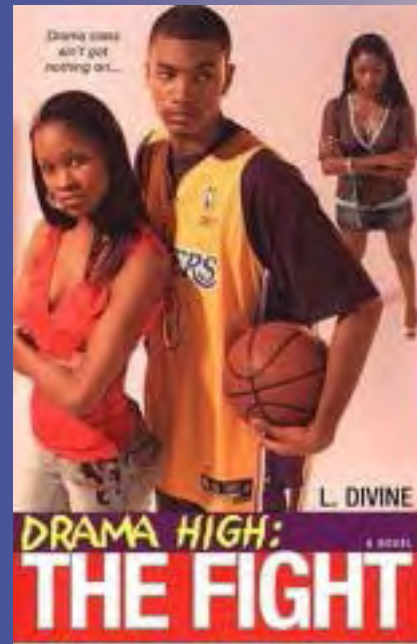
Furthermore, these women were represented by the quintessential Hollywood talent agent Myron Selznick, who assisted them in their contractual dealings with the studios in attaining professional autonomy. Reviewing Myron Selznick's client files reveal how this maverick agent assisted these women in their trend-setting freelance careers in the 1930s. Most film scholarship stresses the importance of talent agents in Hollywood as a post-World War II phenomenon, and they have attributed the first significant freelancing deal to male star James Stewart and his agent Lew Wasserman in 1951 for the film *Winchester '73*. However, the aforementioned female stars (aided by their agent Selznick) preceded Stewart and Wasserman by over a decade in their distribution deals with major Hollywood studios. After consulting Myron's client notebook, I also discovered that Katharine Hepburn, despite signing a long-term contract with RKO studios, also had a percentage deal with the studio similar to those of Gaynor, Hopkins, and Lombard. In sum, my review of Myron's files underscores how women made profes-

*continued*

sional strides in 1930s Hollywood through their freelance labor practice, and I intend to use my findings to challenge the existing film historical scholarship that has excluded their contributions thus far.

My analysis of the David and Myron Selznick and Jock Whitney collections reveal how 1930s female stars established their professional independence and set an early precedent for Hollywood artists to freelance long before it became standard practice. Although such achievements have been primarily attributed to male stars in post-World War II Hollywood, my research suggests that stars like Gaynor, Hepburn, Hopkins, and Lombard all accomplished independent stardom nearly a decade earlier. In sum, my HRC discoveries both ground and broaden the scope of my dissertation argument about female stars and their independent freelance labor, underscoring a new understanding of the industrial practices of the studio system in the 1930s in regard to female stardom, one in which women are recognized as active agents bargaining for their professional independence with giant film corporations. In this way, the primary sources at the HRC will serve as a crucial aspect to my dissertation research, as they provide archival evidence that challenge how certain histories of stardom and American film industry have been conceived and written.

**Emily S. Carman** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Critical Studies program in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media. She is currently researching and writing her dissertation project about female stardom, Hollywood labor, and the American film industry in the 1930s. She earned her M.A. in Critical Studies of Film and Television at UCLA in 2003 and has a B.A. from the University of Florida in English, with a minor in Women's Studies. In addition to her research on gender, she has been selected as the coordinator for the 2007 Thinking Gender conference. A CSW Travel Grant helped support her research trip to the Harry Ransom Center in Austin.



## Just Published: *Drama High: The Fight*

Alysia Logan, a new CSW Research Scholar, is the author—under the pseudonym L. Divine—of a series of young adult novels called Drama High. In these books, Logan seeks to connect her knowledge of African American folklore and oral history and wisdom with contemporary high school experience. The books chronicle the life of Jayd Jackson, a young black girl from Compton, California, who attends a predominantly white high school in the South Bay area of Los Angeles. As a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Logan noticed that many students had no interest in reading for pleasure. Her motivation for writing this series was to create material that would resonate with modern teenagers.