

1 Creating a Signature

Weber's 1915 feature *Hypocrites*, the film that secured her place among the foremost filmmakers of her generation, opens with a still photograph showing her elegantly dressed, posed against a chaise lounge, eyes cast sideways out of frame. A handwritten signature across the corner proclaims, "Yours Sincerely, Lois Weber." Although viewers would have been accustomed to seeing favorite screen personalities introduced in opening vignettes, it was unusual to see a filmmaker so visibly embodied in her own production. A title card has already announced that *Hypocrites* was "written and produced by Lois Weber." By adding her photograph and the trace of her signature across the screen, Weber asserts full authorial control over *Hypocrites*. And she does so in a manner that is distinctly feminine and distinctly bourgeois. Certainly this brief prologue tells us just how far Weber had come after a few short years in the motion picture business, evolving from an unknown actress working behind the scenes, writing and directing her productions, to a filmmaker of commanding authority whose personal signature guaranteed quality cinema. But the prologue also tells us a great deal about how Weber negotiated the terrain of feminine propriety, how keenly aware she was of the need to embody and visualize her femininity within and around her own work. Indeed, Weber evolved a highly public persona in the early years of her career, quite unique for a filmmaker in this era. She used this persona to demonstrate a distinctly feminine mode of authorship and artistry in the new art form.

Weber entered the movie business at a time of significant transformation, her early career fueled by developments of the transitional era, some of the most far-reaching in U.S. film history. Single-reel films, which had dominated the market since late 1908, were being replaced with longer offerings of two, three, and even four reels, signaling the growth of more

intricate storytelling and more nuanced demands on audience attention, and paving ground for feature-length titles. As films grew in complexity, scenario writing became a more valued and better understood component of filmmaking, and acting for the screen a more nuanced art. Independent production companies, such as Rex and later Universal, became viable alternatives to the powerful Motion Picture Patents Company (known as the Trust), which had attempted to monopolize film production and distribution. Los Angeles became the center of U.S. film production, and enormous new facilities like Universal City showcased the evolution of moviemaking there, while also signaling a growing standardization of film production in factory-like studio settings. An energetic and vocal trade press helped stabilize and solidify the industry throughout this period, while also providing an increasingly sophisticated discourse on aesthetic aspects of moviemaking. Cinematography, performance style, and storytelling were evaluated with considerable nuance during these years. New fan magazines and regular newspaper coverage of films and filmgoing culture put movies and movie stars at the forefront of the nation's cultural imagination. Industry leaders made a concerted effort to woo middle-class patrons, and motion pictures became, for the first time, the preferred recreation for most Americans.¹

Even as Weber's career flourished in the burgeoning movie business, her work sometimes challenged dominant filmmaking norms emerging at the time. Working at Rex with founder Edwin S. Porter and her husband, Phillips Smalley, Weber honed a collaborative, artisanal mode of production that she would retain throughout most of her career, long after it had fallen out of favor, replaced by the highly rationalized, highly stratified Hollywood studio model. Even in the early 1910s Weber's approach to filmmaking remained out of step with a general drive toward greater standardization and formula. Weber also embraced her growing celebrity as a female filmmaker, assuming leadership roles first at Rex and then as mayor of Universal City, and speaking out for "better" pictures and quality scenarios. Publicity at the time attempted to position her as a matronly embodiment of refinement behind the scenes—and subsequent historians have also aligned her with this cause—but a closer look at her comments on screenwriting and, especially, at her films reveals a much more radical approach to filmmaking than simple feminine uplift. What emerges is a body of work at Rex and Bosworth in which complex, well-developed, often unconventional female characters dominate, and in which institutions like marriage and the family are interrogated. In Weber's case, the reality of a feminine hand, so desired in the industry at the time, was a near-wholesale rejection of popular

female screen types. As Weber's own celebrity grew, she evidently became all the more aware of cinema's role in circulating, reformulating, and challenging feminine norms.

"MY LIFE WORK"

Details about Weber's early life are difficult to verify and come mainly from interviews and profiles published later in her career, but two distinct themes emerge from her recollections.² She grew up in a household that valued creativity and the arts; yet her early forays into professional life were marked by a persistent struggle against social expectations for "respectable" young women of her generation. Weber's passion for creative work and her determined efforts to challenge restrictive gender norms would inform her entire career, so it is not surprising that she stressed these elements of her upbringing when talking about it later in life.

Florence Lois Weber was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1879, the middle daughter of George and Tillie Weber. Her older sister, Bessie, had been born two years earlier; their younger sister, Ethel, with whom Weber would remain especially close, joined them eight years later. Weber spoke with tremendous fondness about her father, an upholsterer and decorator who had worked on the Pittsburgh Opera House. "We were great pals," she said, recounting his talent for telling "fascinating fairy stories," his penchant for waking her up early to see the sunrise, and his obvious pride once she began writing stories of her own. When he finished his work on the opera house, "mine was the first opinion he wanted," she recalled with obvious delight. To him she credited her artistic temperament and her talent for writing stories. "I don't remember when I did not write," she said. "Certainly I've written and published stories ever since I could spell at all." As a young girl Weber also had a flare for the dramatic, performing ballads at church and reciting historical narratives at school, often with significant embellishment. "I never studied," she explained, "but crammed at the 11th hour and dramatized the recitations of others. I was terribly impatient of book learning."³

Musical training was also an integral part of Weber's childhood, and at age sixteen she was already working as a concert pianist, sometimes touring with famed mandolinist Valentine Abt. She often told interviewers a story of how she had been startled one night when a piano key fell apart as she was playing. "The incident broke my nerve," she confessed. "When that key came off in my hand, a certain phase of my development came to an end."⁴ After a brief stint back in Pittsburgh teaching kindergarten, Weber

left again for New York City, eager for a career in light opera and armed with the address of a singing teacher given to her by a family friend. Her father did not approve, worried that the opera might lead her into the theater world he considered unsavory. But off she went nonetheless. "I was very green," she recognized later. "New York seemed a very large place to me."⁵ Setting up camp at the YWCA on 124th Street, she discovered that her singing teacher had left town for the summer. Without much in the way of savings and with only one good dress to her name, Weber lived a meager existence before finding a post as an accompanist at a girls' school, taking a room across the street with two friends from the Y. She took up voice lessons in the fall when her teacher returned, moving to a boardinghouse in Greenwich Village where she received free room and board in exchange for playing piano for other tenants. Her sister Ethel visited and was apparently very impressed.

But after the girls' father fell ill, Weber was called back home to help support Ethel's schooling—crying "tears of ice" all the way, she remembered.⁶ She offered to sing again in her church choir, but because she had appeared on stage, the deacons would not allow it. It is clear that, though for years associated with respectability and bourgeois refinement in her motion picture publicity, Weber's early independence and her dogged commitment to work on stage challenged reigning assumptions about what refined young ladies ought to do with their time. "If you have chosen a worldly career, don't pretend to be religious," her grandmother advised her, warning her against becoming a "hypocrite."⁷ Weber's break came when an uncle who was a theater producer in Chicago helped get her into musical theater. He alone among her relatives supported her creative ambitions, and she recalled him telling her that folks "out West" were more "broad-minded" about careers for women—an impression that surely must have stuck. With her uncle's help Weber joined the Zig Zag Company and toured with them through Pennsylvania and New England for six months. "It does not require much effort of the imagination," one writer later declared, "to see the earnest, ambitious little concert singer of twenty-five years ago in the magnificently poised, vibrantly magnetic Lois Weber of today."⁸

To "atone" for her disreputable life in the theater, Weber explained, she spent much of her spare time engaged in missionary work, providing entertainment in prisons, hospitals, and military barracks, including penitentiaries on New York's famed Blackwell's Island, and working with impoverished women in the city's urban tenement districts. She was determined, it would seem, to challenge her grandmother's assumptions about the incompatibility of entertainment and religion. As a seventeen-year-old in

Pittsburgh Weber had joined a “church army” group that toured the city’s red-light district with a small street organ and a hymnal—“a terrible experience for a young girl,” she later recognized.⁹ These encounters left a lasting impression on the filmmaker, for she later described how cinema, with its mass appeal, allowed her to overcome the limitations of working one-on-one with individuals, many of whom, she recalled, “spoke strange tongues.” By contrast, cinema’s “voiceless language” was a “blessing,” a medium that allowed her to “preach to my heart’s content.”¹⁰

When work with the Zig Zag Company dried up, Weber joined a touring production of the popular melodrama *Why Girls Leave Home* in Holyoke, Massachusetts. There she met stage manager Phillips Smalley. As Smalley later recalled, he asked her to marry him the very next day, and they wed just three weeks later at her uncle’s home in Chicago, though records indicate as many as three or four months elapsed between when the couple met and when they married.¹¹ Still, it was a hasty courtship. Weber was twenty-four at the time. Smalley, fourteen years her senior, had, according to one observer, “a certain well-built erectness of bearing; six foot in height; direct, brown eyes; sleek, black hair; his accent is slightly English, and his manner is the extreme of courtesy.”¹² Several years later the couple had a daughter, Phoebe, who died in infancy, their only child, though Weber never spoke publicly about the episode.

Unlikely to find work together on the stage, Weber and Smalley initially decided to pursue separate engagements, and Weber soon found work singing at the New York Hippodrome. But after being advised by the actress Ellen Terry, a friend of Smalley’s mother, never to separate from her husband, she declined the appointment and then, by her own recollection, spent two years on the road with him, writing scenarios in hotel rooms while he appeared on stage and waiting for her own opportunity.¹³ Like many other women of her generation, she “first became interested in pictures through writing scenarios,” as she put it. When she began to sell these stories, with but few connections in the business, Weber was delighted and “surprised . . . no little bit. Not that I doubted their meriting production,” she confessed, “but I imagined they had to be introduced to the scenario editor by some person with influence. I was wrong, and the check I received testified to the illusion under which I had labored.”¹⁴

To hear her describe it, Weber’s start in the motion picture business was almost accidental. “To keep my mind off the horror of our first separation,” she explained, “I went out to the Gaumont Talking Pictures. I wrote the story for my first picture, besides directing it and playing the lead. When Mr. Smalley returned . . . he joined me and we co-directed and played leads

in a long list of films."¹⁵ What is striking about this memory, apart from the offhanded way Weber characterizes her beginnings, is the fact that it was Weber, not Smalley, who initiated work in the movies, then still considered somewhat tawdry employment for theater folk; that she aimed to combine writing, directing, and acting from the start, not entirely uncommon for the time but still remarkable for the ambitious reach it suggests; and that Smalley followed *her* into the business, assisting Weber's far-reaching ambition from the outset. Indeed, Weber was forever grateful for the support her husband had shown in leaving his stage career to join her in the "movies," by all accounts a risky venture at the time. "My husband, who had a great deal of faith in me, left a splendid position on the dramatic stage, to act in [my scenarios]," she later recalled.¹⁶ Dissatisfied with the material they were given to work with, Weber recounted her frustration with hastily thrown-together scripts containing weak characterizations and thin plots, "insipid in conception and pathetic in sentiment"—material that, even then, did not live up to her ideas about the medium's potential. "No amount of clever acting can redeem a character poorly drawn, or a play that is hopelessly deficient in plot and execution," she pronounced in retrospect. "So I began to write scenarios around the personalities of Mr. Smalley and myself. It was not such a difficult matter for one with my experience in legitimate and motion picture drama to improve on the scenarios of that period."¹⁷

Recollecting her time at Gaumont, Weber described an easy transition from writing to performing and directing, her tendency to take the lead evident early on: "I wrote, or rather devised, the story as we went along. There was no technique, no settled method or procedure, and no one had had much experience. . . . My principal task was to synchronize the plot with the words and music of the record. As I knew more about stories, or thought I did, than anyone there, I took charge of the directing. I played in the picture too, of course."¹⁸ Weber's capacity for leadership and her desire to be fully engaged at all levels of production are obvious even in these earliest forays into motion picture work: she "knew more" than anyone else, "took charge" of directing, and "of course" acted in the productions as well. Her stage experience as a pianist and singer also seems to have served her well at Gaumont, where she made Chronophone films with synchronized sound-on-disk technology.¹⁹ Alice Guy Blaché, also directing at American Gaumont during these years, later remembered only that Weber "recorded several songs" for the Chronophone. Weber's account, however, suggests that her responsibilities were far wider ranging. Curiously, Weber makes no mention of Guy Blaché. But the seasoned filmmaker, who had

been directing for more than a decade at this point and was only a few years older than Weber, would likely have made a strong impression on the newcomer. As Guy Blaché remembered it, rather dismissively, Weber “watched me direct . . . and doubtless thought it was not difficult.”²⁰

In the end it was Guy Blaché’s husband, Herbert Blaché, then in charge at American Gaumont, whom Weber remembered. He gave her “every encouragement,” she recalled. “I was fortunate in being associated with broad-minded men. Both Mr. Smalley and Mr. Blaché listened to my suggestions.” Recounting how the trio worked “in perfect harmony,” she explained, “We brought our individual talents into an effective combination . . . [making] many original and successful photoplays.”²¹ Writing, performing, and directing, she was able to employ her gift for storytelling, her love of performance, and her ability to visualize entire imaginary worlds. After having been hampered by restrictive notions about careers that women ought or ought not to pursue, Weber must have been relieved to find such fulfilling work at Gaumont. “I grew up in the business when everybody was so busy learning their particular branch of the new industry,” she later explained, “that no one had time to notice whether or not a woman was gaining a foothold.”²² However she got there, Weber had discovered her true calling. “In moving pictures I have found my life work,” she pronounced in 1914. “I find at once an outlet for my emotions and my ideals.”²³

THE SMALLEYS AT REX

It was at the Rex Motion Picture Company that Weber and Smalley first became recognized as filmmakers of the first order. They joined the company in the fall of 1910, shortly after it had been formed by Edwin S. Porter and his partners, Joseph Engel, a theater owner, and William Swanson, a well-connected independent distributor and exhibitor. Porter, at this stage in his career, was considered “the dean of all producers,” a man whose innovations had helped transform motion picture storytelling throughout the previous decade.²⁴ Like many who had worked for companies affiliated with the powerful Trust—Porter spent his early career at Edison—he branched out on his own as opportunities for independent production improved with the ever-accelerating demand for films. In fact, during the first year Rex was in business, the number of films made outside the Trust by independent companies tripled. They had numbered a mere twenty titles in September 1910 when Porter formed Rex, but jumped to sixty releases the following year. Starting modestly, Rex began with one studio in a rented floor atop a six-story building in New York. By early 1912, a little over one

year later, the company occupied that entire building, now equipped with two complete studios and a third in preparation. Each studio was assigned its own producer and its own stock company of performers. Vast collections of props and scenery supported the outfit's productions.²⁵

Weber and Smalley began work on Rex's second film, which was actually the first to be released: *A Heroine of '76*, the story of an innkeeper's daughter (played by Weber) who discovers a plot to assassinate George Washington and dies saving his life. With twenty films completed by February 1911, Rex began a weekly release schedule with a considerable backlog of titles, allowing it to release fifty-six films its first year. Within a year Rex had tripled in size, and in January 1912 the company began releasing two films per week.²⁶ "We worked very, very hard," Weber recalled of her time at Rex. "I wrote the scenarios, Mr. Smalley selected the types, assisted in directing, and we both acted." Indeed, Weber began writing one scenario per week shortly after the couple joined the company and continued this prodigious output for at least another three years. It is difficult to verify the exact number of films the couple made during this period, but one account suggested that by early 1914 Weber had already completed more than two hundred pictures.²⁷

Beginning with *A Heroine of '76*, Rex titles were immediately celebrated for their artistic achievements. Rex films provided exhibitors with "quality of the dependable, consistent variety."²⁸ Rex films offered "the finest possible photographic technique, allied with a clear, convincing dramatic story, perfectly acted," according to *Moving Picture World*. Strongly written and carefully constructed narratives focused on a few well-defined characters marked Rex releases, not large-scale action and spectacle, demonstrating that it was "not necessary to out-Pathé or out-Selig" in order to succeed in the film business.²⁹ Writing in 1911 about "the civilizing value of the photoplay," Hanford C. Judson singled out Weber and Smalley's *Where the Shamrock Grows*, noting the "civilizing force" and simple "human dignity" evident in a strongly acted love story featuring a humble blacksmith and a lady of "the Hall."³⁰ Acting and scenario writing especially improved throughout the company's first year, *Moving Picture World* claimed—areas of Weber's distinct expertise.³¹ Trade commentators also praised innovative lighting and silhouette effects in many Rex productions and the overall quality of tinting and toning in their releases.³² Describing another early Weber film, *On the Brink* (1911), as "simply beautiful," *Motography* declared: "Any licensed manufacturer who is overweeningly proud of his photography had better go and see these smooth, clear, steady beautifully tinted pictures, and then decide to take a back seat until he can do as well.



Figure 4. Weber as featured in early publicity for the Rex Motion Picture Company. Author's collection.

Rex has shown Americans that *de luxe* photography is not a secret of the foreign makers."³³

Arguments about "quality" filmmaking in the early 1910s raised the specter of cinema's uplift and an appeal to "refined" (that is, middle-class) audiences, a cause invariably championed by industry trade papers. In Rex releases, trade critics saw the promise of cinema's future. It was presumed

(correctly or incorrectly), for instance, that bourgeois audiences brought little taste for action-adventure, slapstick comedy, or visual spectacle to the cinema, preferring instead tasteful dramas based on subtle human interaction, and that they might appreciate fine cinematography and color. Here, trade critics insisted, lay cinema's future. Values praised in these early Rex productions are those Weber would continue to emulate throughout her career. The company's emphasis on drama over action, for instance, was a philosophy Weber and Smalley would maintain in their filmmaking long after Porter's departure from Rex. Smalley echoed these sentiments in a 1914 interview, stressing the couple's interest in "smaller casts, closer focus" over action and spectacle.³⁴ The emphasis placed on character, story development, and cinematography at Rex meant that the company's titles did not always keep pace with other formal developments, as filmmakers began to explore closer camera positions and accelerated editing in the transitional era. Well into the early 1910s, Charlie Keil finds, Rex continued to rely on long-shot framings, along with a less verisimilar performance style suitable to such full-body views. Indeed, Rex was singled out as one of the few production outfits that had not pursued the "craze" for closer camera positions, with *Moving Picture World* twice praising the company's efforts to maintain "the full figure on the screen."³⁵ According to Keil's statistics, cutting rates were also considerably below the norm for these years, and well below those employed in Biograph releases.³⁶ Closer camera positions and more rapid editing are the formal innovations most associated with this transitional period, but Rex films demonstrated an alternate conception of sophisticated, quality filmmaking.

If Porter's taste for well-crafted narratives, skilled performances, and expert cinematography influenced Weber and Smalley, so too did his production methods. Although the quality of Rex releases was widely recognized within the industry, Porter's approach to filmmaking was not, as Charles Musser points out. Porter preferred a collaborative mode of production, popular in early motion picture days when he got his start, but increasingly out of step with an industry looking to streamline shooting methods in the early 1910s.³⁷ Porter also favored an artisanal approach that stood out against the move toward efficiency and rationalization in U.S. filmmaking. His habit of remaining involved at all levels of production from script writing to directing to developing the negatives and tinting the prints was a practice Weber would emulate throughout her career even as it pushed against the increasingly rigid dictates of studio filmmaking. The "devotedness, tenacity and application" that *Moving Picture World* noted in Porter's approach would be echoed in later accounts of Weber supervising every detail of her own productions.³⁸

Also notable was Porter's support for husband-and-wife filmmaking teams. After working successfully with Weber and Smalley for several months, Porter hired actress Marion Leonard and her husband, Stanner E. V. Taylor, to produce a series of vehicles for Leonard, evidently favoring a collaborative, egalitarian model of production not much in evidence beyond outfits like Solax, where Herbert and Alice Guy Blaché worked together on her productions.³⁹ According to Musser, Porter produced the Weber and Smalley films, while Taylor produced the Leonard titles. Clearly influenced by Porter's methods, Weber and her husband would continue to work under the joint signature of "The Smalleys" long into the 1910s when few others were working that way. Conditions at Rex offered the couple a unique combination of collaboration and independence: encouraged to work together on joint projects with a consistent team of performers and technical personnel, they were also apparently free to pursue whatever projects interested them without intervention from others in the company. The uniqueness of this arrangement was recognized in a 1926 profile of the director which noted that during these early years "Miss Weber and her husband were as independent as any famous stars are today. . . . In her long and varied motion picture career, she has practically never worked under the direction of anyone but herself."⁴⁰

Porter also played a crucial role in supporting women. Long after Weber and Leonard had left Rex, Porter continued to work with women in positions of equality, as Musser points out. His alliance with Mary Pickford on her early features, including *Tess of the Storm Country* (1914), particularly echoed his collaborations with Weber, for that film was adapted from a woman's novel, centered on a strong female character, and designed to appeal largely to female moviegoers.⁴¹ "I shall never forget Edwin Porter," Weber later told a reporter. "He is the most artistic person I have ever met. I miss him to this day, for there was never anything that couldn't be done when he was with us. Mr. Porter would always find a way."⁴² Calling Porter one of the "greatest masters of motion picture technique today," Smalley also noted his influence on their own productions: "I am sure those who understand his methods can recognize in our work touches that come from him."⁴³

Despite Porter's close association with early Rex releases and his evident influence on collaborators like Weber and Smalley, he did not remain focused on Rex for long. Throughout 1912, the company's second year in business, Porter frequently became involved with outside ventures. In May of that year he played an instrumental role in the formation of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company, an alliance spearheaded by Carl Laemmle

that brought Rex under the Universal banner with several other independents, among them Bison, Powers, and IMP (the Independent Moving Picture Company), in defiance of the Trust. Alongside the Universal merger, Porter's attention was also drawn to feature film production. In July of 1912 he formed a partnership with Adolph Zukor and Daniel Frohman to purchase American distribution rights to Sarah Bernhardt's *Queen Elizabeth*, an association that eventually led to the formation of the Famous Players Company, designed to support high-profile feature releases.⁴⁴ With Porter's attention frequently focused elsewhere, Weber and Smalley were increasingly left in charge of day-to-day operations at Rex. When Leonard and Taylor, the company's other primary producing couple, left in July 1912, Weber and Smalley solidified their stature as Rex's primary filmmaking team.⁴⁵

Porter formally severed his ties with Rex in October 1912, announcing his decision to devote his energies to Famous Players full-time and thereby free himself from "the weekly release routine" in the hope of making "bigger and better productions unhampered by time limitations."⁴⁶ His investment in producing fewer films of higher quality over a longer period of time must surely have been appealing to Weber and Smalley as well, for they had been making one title per week for nearly two years with little rest. In fact, in the months prior to Porter's official departure the couple took an extended vacation in New York's Catskill Mountains, purportedly because Weber had been working too hard and needed rejuvenation. Upon returning to New York City in October 1912, they did not immediately resume production at Rex. Possibly uncertain about the company's future in the wake of Porter's departure and the Universal merger, they were also likely scouting opportunities of the sort Porter had himself found outside Rex. Several publicity items focusing on the couple appeared in the trades that month, suggesting that, swayed by Porter's move to Famous Players, they may have been eager to promote their own talents to other fledgling feature outfits, perhaps eager themselves to break out of Rex's weekly release schedule. *Moving Picture World* announced that Weber and Smalley were "ready to resume" work in a manner that implied the two were scouting new opportunities; and *Photoplay* profiled both of them in its "Player's Personalities" column that same month.⁴⁷ Although the couple still marketed themselves as a team and were still often referred to as "The Smalleys," Weber emerged in press accounts as the driving force behind their productions. Her work as a gifted scenario writer and director was singled out in the *Moving Picture World* report, for instance; and she alone was the focus of an in-depth half-page profile in that paper the following week. Entitled "Lois Weber on Scripts,"

the piece drew singular attention to her writing and producing talents, quoting her authoritative views on the subject.

These profiles marked a decisive shift for Weber, who had previously been promoted only as a “leading lady” of the Rex stock company, without reference to the writing and directing roles she took on behind the scenes. Weber’s picture, for instance, had been featured in *Moving Picture World* in April 1911, just as several companies began to promote their stable of performers.⁴⁸ Such publicity was typical, for it was often female players who carried the banner for their companies. “Sending pictures of beautiful women to the press was a time-honored way for the newer production companies to get some publicity,” as Eileen Bowser points out.⁴⁹ By late 1912, however, Weber had begun to shift this attention away from her role as performer toward her other creative talents as writer and director, always conscious also of crafting a reputation associated with high-minded productions.

Despite the intensity of the couple’s promotional efforts in late 1912, they did not ultimately result in a contract with another outfit. So after their sojourn in the Catskills, Weber and Smalley rejoined Rex, but they did so with a higher profile, greater creative control, and a new studio environment. Now in charge of the Rex brand, early in 1913 they moved west to begin production at the new Universal City facilities then under construction on the outskirts of Los Angeles. “When Mr. Porter left to go to the Famous Players,” Weber later recounted, “he was nice enough to tell Mr. Laemmle that he left the Rex in capable hands, meaning Mr. Smalley and myself.”⁵⁰

Shortly after the Universal merger that previous summer, the company had purchased a large tract of land east of Los Angeles and had begun constructing state-of-the-art production facilities, part of a general move westward during these years as U.S. film production increasingly clustered around Los Angeles.⁵¹ Rex’s facilities were considerably enhanced by the move to Universal City. Not only were Weber and Smalley given an elaborate suite of offices and dressing rooms, but the company could now rely on the extended services at Universal, which included facilities for set construction, miniature modeling, costume design, and editing—not to mention an entire department devoted to publicity.⁵² Even so, the small-scale production methods Weber and Smalley had refined while working in New York were still supported at Universal City, despite the studio’s grandeur. Perhaps because they themselves worked at all levels of the filmmaking process (writing, performing, directing, editing), they were able to retain many of the earlier methods associated with “craft” filmmaking, while also taking advantage of the extensive facilities available on the Universal lot. Southern California also afforded ample opportunities for location shooting, and the

couple frequently took actors and crew outside Universal City to shoot scenes in Laguna Beach and Riverside and as far north as Monterey.⁵³

Even within Universal City, Weber and Smalley continued to run Rex like a small repertory company, releasing two films per week on Thursdays and Sundays and working with a consistent group of performers and with their main camera operator, Dal Clawson. In early 1913 when the couple first arrived at Universal City the studio was “was very strong on teams,” according to I. G. Edmonds. “Groups developed almost into stock companies with the same director, actor, actress, and supporting cast.” Alongside Weber and Smalley were several other successful male-female production teams, including Francis Ford and Grace Cunard, Pauline Bush and William Dowlan, Dorothy Phillips and William Stowell, Rosemary Theby and Hobart Henley, and Robert Z. Leonard and Ella Hall.⁵⁴ Among these teams, Weber and Smalley quickly became “the mainstay of the producing force.”⁵⁵

Weber spoke of how, working with a consistent group of actors, she tailored her scenarios for individual types in her company.⁵⁶ Sixteen-year-old Ella Hall worked frequently with the couple during this period, after having worked at Biograph and Bison. She credited Weber with giving her a deeper understanding of acting, saying that without the director’s guidance “I really don’t think I should be where I am today.”⁵⁷ Husband-and-wife team Rupert Julian and Elsie Jane Wilson also joined the company in the fall of 1913, after having worked on the stage. Julian began playing male leads in many of the couple’s productions shortly thereafter and would be cast in the role of Antonio in Weber’s first feature, *The Merchant of Venice*, early the following year. Like several others who worked with the couple in these early days, both Julian and Wilson would themselves later go on to directing.⁵⁸

After they returned to Rex, Weber and Smalley were increasingly identified as individual artists responsible for the brand. If Rex releases had been praised for their quality from the start, it was now understood that Weber and Smalley were responsible for this artistry. Universal promoted the couple’s return to the studio with trade notices and ads announcing that “the Rex has ‘come back’” and “Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley Are Again with the Rex” in pictures “written, directed and acted by themselves.”⁵⁹ Critics also took notice. Beginning with the release of *His Sister* in February 1913, the couple was mentioned by name much more consistently in reviews, with one writer noting their “characteristic style” and another reporting that their work had been “attracting attention.” So identified were they with its Rex brand that Universal sometimes referred to the company as “Rex (Smalley)” and trade commentators described films

"made by the Smalleys" or "The Smalley-Weber Company."⁶⁰ If brands like Rex were an important marketing tool for the fledgling Universal Film Manufacturing Company, especially prior to the full bloom of the star system, as Mark Garrett Cooper stresses, then Weber and Smalley's personal association with the brand pushed at the limits of these strategies.⁶¹ Even so, characterizing individual filmmakers as expressive artists aided the industry's larger bid to elevate its cultural stature, as Charlie Keil reminds us.⁶² Weber and Smalley, with their pedigreed reputations already in the works, were tailor-made for such publicity.

Even as the Smalleys' imprimatur became increasingly identifiable, Weber's scenarios were singled out for praise. Indeed, she was usually given primary credit for the success of Smalley productions even in these early years. This began to happen relatively early in the couple's tenure at Rex; publicity for the late 1911 film *The Martyr*, for instance, described it as having been "written and acted by Miss Lois Weber."⁶³ Few other titles released then by any company were identified as the work of an individual writer or producer. Rex's "reputation for novel, out-of-the-ordinary stories containing a vital 'punch,'" could be directly traced to Weber; one newspaper item suggested, calling her "one of the most gifted scenario writers in the field."⁶⁴ She had become "famous through filmdom for her ability to inject psychological power into her writings," another observer reported, and was famed, according to one more, for her "fertile brain."⁶⁵ By 1914 *Moving Picture World* would declare, "Something substantial is always to be expected from the pen of Lois Weber."⁶⁶

Growing recognition of Weber's authorial signature at Rex had much to do with the new respect accorded scenario writers during these years. With the industry's drive toward greater standardization in the single-reel format and increasing rationalization of filmmaking in studio hierarchies, scenario writing became an important cornerstone of production, as Janet Staiger has demonstrated.⁶⁷ By 1911 many manufacturers had established scenario departments with a staff of writers and editors. This marked a clear break from earlier years when filmmakers would have crafted (or improvised) scenarios, then shot and directed the action themselves. The following year U.S. copyright law officially recognized film scenarios as distinctly authored works.⁶⁸ The demand for scenarios allowed many women like Weber to enter motion picture work during these years, often transitioning smoothly from acting to writing, as did contemporaries like Gene Gauntier and Jeanie Macpherson. To hear Gauntier talk, it is as if the secretarial role of jotting down ideas on paper for the group, casually foisted upon women, quickly evolved, without anyone really noticing, into an extremely valuable and



Figure 5. Weber at her writing desk. Courtesy of the Martin S. Quigley Collection, Georgetown University Library.

respected craft, though Weber's own narrative suggests a more calculated effort to garner creative control.⁶⁹ By the 1920s virtually all of the top-drawer screenwriters were women, including Macpherson, June Mathis, Frances Marion, and Anita Loos. Estimates suggest that half of all scripts written in the silent era were by women, a percentage much higher than in any other period in history.⁷⁰

Throughout her career Weber presented writing, not performing or directing, as her formative creative experience, evident in her recollections of writing and storytelling as a child, and in the way she often framed her acting and directing work through her writing. Even as Weber assumed greater control as a director at Rex, it was her scenarios that signaled the couple's artistic signature, as we have seen. Indeed, both she and Smalley continued to consider Weber's scenarios the central act of authorship in their collaborative productions. Her husband referred to their codirected films as "Mrs. Smalley's pictures," indicating the overriding influence of her artistic vision.⁷¹ It was certainly not uncommon in this era to assign sole authorial status to the scenario writer, as Charlie Keil has pointed out, but in Weber's case it seems as much the privileging of one form of labor over another as it was a recognition of her creative dominance on projects in which she also costarred and codirected with Smalley.⁷² For Weber, writing remained paramount. "I cannot be happy to direct someone else's story. That would be only half a creation," she later explained.⁷³ It is clear that Weber saw *writing* as her primary artistic endeavor during these years—and that the work that came afterward in casting, set decorating, location scouting, acting, directing, and editing was all done to ensure the integrity of her initial creative concept. Of all these tasks, writing was the one she pursued on her own.

Weber's screenwriting also defined much of her public persona during the Rex years, for she used her growing reputation to speak in published interviews about her goals for the industry. Here she articulated a highly activist role for scenario writers. Resisting the trend toward standardization, Weber bristled against formulaic plots that relied too heavily on happy endings or climatic sequences improbably engineered through murders, thefts, suicides, and elopements. "Don't let us all cut out after the same pattern," she cried.⁷⁴ Instead, she presented herself as a strong advocate of "artistic" pictures unwilling to bend to commercial demands, particularly calls from theater managers to provide happy endings. "The ending should not interfere with the artistic features of the play," she insisted. "If it is necessary to bring tears to the eyes of the public, in the last act and the last scene, in order to carry the artistic idea and the dramatic force of the production, do it by all means!"⁷⁵ she advised other writers. She also spoke out against artificially plotted stories, making the case, instead, for "the value of simple themes in pictures"—well-told stories "moved simply and with dignity."⁷⁶ Rather than leaning too heavily on plot devices, Weber said, she drew stories from her own life experiences and incidents she read about in the press, rejecting highly fabricated photoplay storylines.⁷⁷ Along with Anita Loos, Weber was also an early proponent of intertitles, advocating that they be employed to furnish not just expository information but also more poetic musings.⁷⁸

Weber's strong advocacy for scenario writers did more than draw attention to this newly identified craft, giving the profession weight and depth; she also articulated a forceful view of quality motion pictures. The best prospects for quality motion pictures resided with screenwriters, Weber seemed to insist. Throughout this discourse Weber positioned herself in opposition to many other forces within the industry: exhibitors who demanded easy material for their viewers, directors and studios who changed writers' material, and poorly attuned audiences. "The person who applauds loudest at an entertainment is not necessarily the best judge of its merits," she claimed. In fact, she added, "few people of superior minds lean toward noise." If manufacturers and exhibitors listened only to "the rabble," quality pictures would never get made, she said, betraying a marked class bias.⁷⁹ "Too often, I am obliged to sacrifice some effect, artistic or dramatic, to make the picture end happily," she said,⁸⁰ bristling against studio restrictions, a precursor to the kinds of censorship she would face later in her career. It is one of the few indications we have that circumstances at Rex were anything short of an extremely satisfying, if exhausting, creative experience.

Weber's efforts to professionalize screenwriting were not always recognized within the industry, however. Torey Liepa reports that when a group of photoplaywrights dined together at Henderson's Restaurant on Coney Island in August 1912, at perhaps their first professional gathering, women were barred from the event. Incensed, Weber wrote a letter of protest to Epes Wintrop Sargent at *Moving Picture World*, author of that paper's column "The Photoplaywright" and one of the evening's organizers. Apologetic and effusive in his praise for Weber, whom he called "a high-degree playwright" and later a "writer of strength and versatility," Sargent promised to invite "the ladies" to subsequent meetings. Although Liepa found that the group did meet again at various New York-area restaurants, it is not clear whether Weber attended.⁸¹ When the Photoplay Authors' League formed in early 1914, however, Weber was prominent among its founding members, which also included Loos and D.W. Griffith.⁸²

Celebrated for her ability to craft quality scenarios, Weber also began to receive notice for her talents as a director. As early as June 1913 certain films, including *Suspense*, billed as "a picture by Lois Webber [*sic*]," were identified in the trades with her individual signature.⁸³ Even Smalley proudly admitted that it was his wife, not he, who "personally supervised" all of their pictures from conception to completion.⁸⁴ "She is as much the director and even more the constructor of Rex pictures than I," he told one interviewer; to another he said, "I want to give as much credit as possible for the pictures we make to Mrs. Smalley."⁸⁵ Anyone who doubts that

Weber's authorial voice began to emerge from her husband's during these early years need only look to films Smalley was directing independently for the Crystal brand at this same time, mostly comedies starring Pearl White and Chester Barnett. Without Weber's voice, the scripts were one-dimensional and repetitive. Without Weber's input, the staging and compositions were minimal and, apart from providing legibility, did not serve the storytelling particularly well. Press accounts usually failed to mention the name of the director behind the action.

Weber herself stressed her own command of the couple's productions. "I had only one copy of the story," she recalled, "and everyone had to run to me to find out what it was all about. Mr. Smalley got my idea. He painted the scenery, played the leading role and helped direct the cameraman."⁸⁶ Leading a reporter through Universal City in early 1914, Smalley discovered Weber in the editing room. The reporter pronounced himself

agreeably astonished to find Miss Lois Weber in the costume she wore when I left her earlier that day. Clustered round her was a huge pile of what seemed to me to be interminable miles of snake-like film. . . . If anyone imagines that the life of a director is one of ease, one should drop in some evening after the usual working day is done, and see these men [and women] busily going over yard after yard of film with the expert assemblers, instructing, suggesting and giving information relative to how their films should be pasted together. Many nights in the week these men [and women] are engaged there until midnight.⁸⁷

Another visitor to Universal around the same time found Weber at the center of activity, beset by queries from all manner of personnel. "Every face lights up with a smile as she passes through the rambling quarters of the company . . . always a hand is laid confidently on her shoulder when one approaches to speak to her."⁸⁸

The respect Weber commanded on the Universal lot is evident in her appointment to the post of mayor of Universal City in September 1913. Weber had run for the position on an all-female, suffragist ticket earlier that spring, shortly after California granted women the right to vote, well before most other states in the nation.⁸⁹ "Hurrah for Lois Weber and woman's suffrage!" *Motography* declared.⁹⁰ Weber, along with running mates Ethel Grandin for prosecuting attorney and Laura Oakley for chief of police, attracted national press attention, and not a little ridicule. Reports, predictably, lampooned the feminist ticket, with the *Los Angeles Examiner* noting that Universal City's "scenic beauty" had been "perturbed" by "vociferous election speeches, soap box oratory and woman suffragist campaigning."⁹¹ Weber initially lost the election to studio manager A.M.

Kennedy, but took over as mayor when he left the studio later that summer. "There is but one woman mayor in the world," the *New York Telegraph* announced, making Universal City "the only bona fide woman's sphere on the map, where women do all the bossing, and where mere man is just tolerated—that's all, just tolerated." Noting the community's female chief of police, the paper took delight in imagining costumes a female police force might don: "caps, blouses, short skirts, and black silk stockings with thirteen gold buttons down the side," it speculated.⁹² For her part, Weber used the office to articulate her vision of quality cinema, masking the radical dimensions of this stance in a more conventional role associated with middle-class female reformers. "Cleanliness in municipal rule and cleanliness in picture making will be the basis of my endeavors," she declared, strongly echoing conservative suffragist rhetoric at the time. Female candidates and a woman's electorate could "clean up" corrupt political machines and introduce progressive social reforms, they proclaimed.⁹³ Echoing such rhetoric, Weber suggested that female leadership at the studio (and behind the camera) could bolster the fledgling "better films" movement run by clubwomen across the country. Later in life, she would quip, "Why, all the President of the United States has to be is a good housekeeper."⁹⁴

In October 1913, shortly after she became mayor, Weber was the subject of a lengthy profile in *Universal Weekly*, a publication distributed to Universal's exhibitors and exchanges throughout the country.⁹⁵ Here too Weber's commitment to quality, socially responsible filmmaking was stressed over and against any feminist ardor that might have been suggested by her suffragist electioneering. Under the heading "A Rare Combination of Beauty, Genius and Kindness," the article stressed Weber's talents as a screenwriter and director alongside her philanthropic role in Los Angeles, her background in "church army" work, and her experience as a stage actress and concert pianist—all traits associated with bourgeois feminine refinement that Universal was presumably quite happy to have as its public face in 1913.⁹⁶ Weber's mayoral post was only one of many high-profile missions she began undertaking after the couple's move west. Branching out into the larger Los Angeles community, she began to fashion herself as a spokesperson for the industry, addressing the Woman's City Club of Los Angeles in September 1913; her speech, "The Making of Picture Plays That Will Have an Influence for Good on the Public Mind," received considerable publicity in local newspapers.⁹⁷ Here Weber aligned herself with the drive toward quality motion pictures and a particularly middle-class concern with commercial recreation activities. But in tackling the question of films that might "influence" the "public mind," Weber also indicated her early interest

in films of social conscience. Clearly she was aware not only of cinema's budding role in popular culture but also of the importance of her own profile as activist bourgeois clubwoman. Weber here modeled a class- and gender-specific approach to cinema, embodying from within the industry a respectable, bourgeois femininity that exhibitors sought in their patrons and, more than that, the type of women whom the industry sought to impress because they were the medium's most vocal critics.

A national profile began to emerge for Weber in the fall of 1913, then, well before most other filmmakers or screenwriters had achieved any kind of notoriety. Featured in Gertrude Price's nationally syndicated newspaper column as "director of the Rex company" in September 1913, she was celebrated as "one of the very few women in the business."⁹⁸ Price, as Richard Abel has documented, consistently focused on powerful female figures in the early movie business—Alice Guy Blaché and Nell Shipman had also been recently featured in Price's column.⁹⁹ Price was part of a network of female journalists who wrote consistently about women's work in early Hollywood, helping fashion what Hilary Hallett calls "women-made women" for their female readers.¹⁰⁰ In Price's hands Weber was presented as someone who cared deeply about the industry, was an expert in her field, and whose artistic ambitions often bristled against the commercial demands of the medium. A similar piece in the *Nashville Democrat* also noted Weber's unique status as "one of the very few women directors" in the business.¹⁰¹ By March of the following year, Bertha Smith profiled Weber as an "Interesting Westerner" in *Sunset* magazine, the filmmaker's femininity and commitment to cinema's uplift stressed in equal measure with the respect she commanded at Universal.¹⁰² So while the novelty of Weber's position was invariably noted throughout this early publicity, she used her standing as a woman director to ground her claims for quality filmmaking and to embody a creative role for women behind the scenes other than that of performer. Female filmmakers like Weber, these profiles insisted, brought a distinct vision to filmmaking and a distinct mode of working in the industry.

Weber's work in motion pictures challenged reigning assumptions about suitable occupations for young women of her generation, but Weber found in the fledgling industry a platform for her creative impulses and her Progressive sensibilities. Despite initial attempts to frame her only as a "picture personality," Weber cultivated a voluble public persona. She argued for quality filmmaking based on character development and nuanced storytelling; she was instrumental in the professionalization of screenwriting; she fought hard to ensure female leadership in the industry, whether as part of the newly formed Photoplaywrights League or as mayor of Universal

City; and she used her growing renown to build bridges to women's organizations. She persuaded clubwomen that women working behind the scenes in Hollywood could steer the cinema toward "uplift," while also demonstrating to Hollywood that female leadership was as essential to its success as its feminine constituency in communities around the country. As Smalley would later remind a reporter, his wife had "fought every step of the way, and fought hard," to attain her position in the industry.¹⁰³

A FEMININE HAND

If Weber was positioned as a signal feminine voice within the film industry, a voice of uplift and propriety, how might this persona be manifest in her film work? Looking closely at her early films, it becomes clear that however much Weber's feminine hand might have been associated with refinement, the subjects she took on at Rex demonstrate a radical approach, particularly to gender, that challenged notions of genteel uplift and the matronly persona with which she was so often associated. Indeed, the viewpoint Weber brought to her scripts, her performances, and her direction at Rex often produced sophisticated critiques of bourgeois institutions and gender norms. So we must look again at the screenwriting methods she espoused in interviews. When Weber disparaged happy endings in favor of more complicated plots, she was not simply rejecting filmmaking formulas; she was calling for a wholesale rethinking of tropes surrounding heterosexual romance that, even then, governed cinematic narratives. When she advocated nuanced character development over action and spectacle, she was not simply rejecting a penchant for sensationalism; she was demanding that we rethink roles typically assigned to men and women on screen. This undercurrent of Weber's comments may not be immediately discernable from her interviews, but it emerges clearly in an examination of the work itself.

Weber's Rex scripts are concerned almost exclusively with central female protagonists who frequently lead quite unconventional lives, roles that Weber herself usually played on screen. After starring as the innkeeper's daughter who thwarts George Washington's assassination in Rex's first offering, *A Heroine of '76*, she played an opium addict in *The Dragon's Breath* (1913); a single mother who works to support a child and her younger sister in *Woman's Burden* (1914); a woman on trial for murder in *The Final Pardon* (1912); a "human spider" who "causes good men to commit terrible crimes" in *The Spider and Her Web* (1914); and in *On Suspicion* (1914) a bride who jumps from a speeding car where she has been handcuffed to a detective hired by her father to prevent her from eloping with

her fiancé.¹⁰⁴ In other plots, Weber tackled unconventional gender roles more directly, showing how women living outside rigid feminine norms could be persecuted or ostracized. *The Greater Christian* (1912) tells the story of “the sufferings of a woman who led an unconventional life, and was spurned by her pious friends,” according to Rex publicity.¹⁰⁵ Rejecting her previous life as a “sport” and her “sporty friends,” the heroine joins the Salvation Army, reforms her life, and becomes a governess. When a local minister proposes marriage, she feels compelled to reveal the truth about her past. Instead of accepting her, he exposes her to her employers and rejects her. In several other plots, heroines become the targets of malicious gossip and scandal, victims of restrictive ideas about feminine propriety. In *His Sister* (1913), Weber played a young woman whose engagement to a local minister is nearly derailed by a “trio of female scandal mongers” who spread unseemly rumors about her male living companion, a man who turns out to be her brother.¹⁰⁶ Weber and Smalley played Lois and Phil in *The Power of Thought* (1912), two lovers threatened when an interloper spreads rumors of Lois’s infidelity. Believing her sweetheart has died in a dual defending her honor, Lois dies “a martyr to cruel imagination,” leaving Phil to find her body.¹⁰⁷ Weber again took the role of a woman victimized by gossip in *Troubled Waters* (1913), playing a sailor’s wife who teaches knitting in hopes of surprising her husband with some extra income, only to find that a local gossip arouses her husband’s jealousy with unfounded accusations.¹⁰⁸

Male-female relationships also stood at the heart of many of Weber’s scripts, with she and Smalley assuming lead roles in virtually all of these productions. While romance would have been a common trope in other contemporary screen stories, Weber’s Rex films demonstrate a repeated fascination with heterosexual alliances that transgress racial, class, or moral boundaries and with stories that focus on marital discord, rather than courtship and romance. Male volatility, jealousy, and even domestic violence figure in many of these scenarios. These are not, then, simple tales of uplift and highbrow culture. Weber evidently had a more complex understanding of cinema’s audience in mind. The wife of an abusive miner in *Through Strife* (1913) attracts the attention of a young suitor but, respecting her wedding vows, refuses to leave. Misunderstanding their relationship, the husband shoots the would-be lover and drags his wife back to their cabin, where he intends to kill her. The lover, though injured, manages to intervene, stabbing the husband to death in an ensuing struggle.¹⁰⁹ In *His Brand* (1913), a film that contained “too much brutality” according to *Moving Picture World*, a husband brands his wife with an “S” after becoming jealous of her sophisticated male friend.

Unbeknownst to him, the brand also marks his unborn son, a fact discovered only when the boy is fifteen and wildly afraid to brand cattle.¹¹⁰ A colonel and his estranged wife are the subjects of *In the Blood* (1913). To escape her husband's violent temper, the woman finds company with a young lieutenant but becomes embroiled in scandal after he commits suicide. Banished, she watches from afar as her husband tries unsuccessfully to raise their daughter, then connives a ruse to get the girl away from him. She does a good job of raising the girl in the end, and when the husband visits and recognizes how wrong he has been, the family is reunited.¹¹¹

As *Through Strife* illustrates, courtships that do figure in Weber scripts are often relationships that transgress the boundaries of adultery, even sometimes of race and class. In *The Pursuit of Hate* (1914), Weber plays a woman who falls in love with a married man who has abandoned his wife. When the wife tracks down the adulterous couple, Weber's character convinces her to leave them alone, saying, "If you hate him, you will be glad he left you and if you love him you will sacrifice yourself for his happiness and leave him alone."¹¹² Romance crosses both marital and racial lines in *Civilized and Savage* (1913), in which Weber plays an exoticized "native" woman who nurses a white man back to health after his own wife has abandoned him, then falls in love with him.¹¹³ Siding with its heroine, the title seems to provide an ironic commentary on who among the characters might be considered "civilized" and who "savage." In *The Troubadour's Triumph* (1912), set in Elizabethan England, a young woman about to wed a knight falls in love with a humble troubadour, learning only in the end that he is in fact a nobleman.¹¹⁴ Transgressive female sexuality figures in several other plots as well. In *The King Can Do No Wrong* (1913), Smalley plays a soldier who watches as his wife (Weber) and their daughter fall prey to the attentions of a king and his son.¹¹⁵ *Fallen Angel* (1913) depicts "the regeneration of a woman living unwedded with a man of means," according to Universal publicity.¹¹⁶

Artistic characters—painters, singers, actors, and poets—figure frequently in Weber's Rex scripts, often representing lifestyles that fall outside the parameters of bourgeois domesticity. Errant masculinity, particularly in the form philandering husbands, is often colored by an artistic personality in these scenarios. In *James Lee's Wife* (1913), Weber's adaptation of Robert Browning's poem, the director plays an artist's wife living in the south of France who discovers that her husband, played by Smalley, has fallen for a young "peasant girl," whom he is painting. After first contemplating suicide, the wife finds solace in religion, with her faith ultimately setting an example for her husband. Realizing his mistake, the painter

makes amends in the end, kneeling beside his wife to pray.¹¹⁷ In *Lost Illusions* (1911), a young woman infatuated with a local painter nearly destroys her own marriage in pursuit of him, before finding out that he too is also married—another example of Weber's tendency to use artistic characters as a means of figuring complexities in bourgeois family life.¹¹⁸ In another instance, 1913's two-reel film *Shadows of Life*, released just before *James Lee's Wife*, Weber takes an opposite tact and offers the artistic life as an escape from a stultifying marriage. Still favoring a feminine perspective, Weber shifts the focus from the philandering artist's wife to that of a married woman attracted to a sensitive artistic mate. Here Weber plays a woman whose husband, played by Rupert Julian, has married her only for her money. Disgusted with their hollow life, she becomes attracted to a wandering musician, played by Smalley. Her husband, in the midst of an affair with another woman, played by Cleo Madison, tries to kill his wife by staging a riding accident. When she is crippled instead, the musician rescues her and plays for her daily.¹¹⁹ With the narrative unable to imagine either a happy reconciliation for the original couple, or an extramarital alliance between the woman and the musician, her death in the end provides the only means of closure.

In *Fine Feathers* (1912), explored in more depth later in this chapter, Weber provides yet another view of this same subject, that of the young artist's model attracted to her employer—the perspective missing from *James Lee's Wife*. By eliminating any suggestion that the artist in *Fine Feathers* is married, Weber provides fewer complications for the plot and a less morally ambiguous role for her heroine, his model. But in doing so, she also shifts the terms of inquiry, for whereas marriage had served in her other scenarios as the foil for artistic liaisons (good and bad), in *Fine Feathers* marriage is collapsed onto artistic flirtation in a manner that asks us to question the very institution itself.

In *From Death to Life* (1911) the "artist" portrayed is actually a scientist in ancient Greece intent on turning flesh to stone. If the film offers a cautionary tale about scientific experimentation, especially the temptation to control life and death, it also furnishes a lesson about the dangers of ignoring a feminine point of view, here associated with compassion, humanity, and respect for the powers of creation. In the opening scene Aratus (Smalley) banishes his wife (Weber) from his lab, where he is perfecting a potion to freeze flesh. Stop-action camera work shows how he turns a live fish and a rabbit to stone, even freezing the calla lily his wife brings him. Aratus remains blind to the inhumane consequences of his experimentation until his wife inadvertently falls into a bath of his solution and is turned to stone

herself. He worships her statue, now frozen on a pedestal, until it become clear that the effects of his potion are temporary and she comes slowly back to life, her husband now chastened in his quest to control life.

So few of these films survive that it is difficult to gauge their visual impact, though reviews consistently praised the films' sets, locations, and cinematography. It is clear from written descriptions that Weber's screenplays sought to convey interior psychological states on screen in a manner highly innovative and unusual for its time. In *Angels Unaware* (1912), for instance, a husband and wife decide to separate and divorce, but agree to keep up appearances while his parents visit. During the visit the husband's father asks them about their courtship, prompting fond memories from each. *Moving Picture World* described a "mirror of their souls, they see a vision . . . a vivid vision of the happy day of their courting and the tender truth of their troth."¹²⁰ Many such titles, as *Angels Unaware* shows, had spiritual components. In *The Haunted Bride* (1913) Weber plays an affluent young woman who has spurned her tutor's affections to marry another man, only to be plagued by constant visions of the rejected tutor on the verge of suicide.¹²¹ In *The Triumph of Mind* (1914) a woman whose husband has been falsely accused of murder consults a psychic, played by Weber, who visits the true killer. Describing to him the visions she has had of him committing the crime, the psychic then encourages him to imagine the hangman's noose, eventually prompting him to confess.¹²²

While it is not clear how exactly such "visions" might have been rendered on screen, whether through double-exposure, matte shots, or parallel editing, Weber evidently sought to convey interior psychology through cinematic, rather than performative, means. In *The Rosary* (1913), an adaptation of a popular song about undying love, a man's memories of his beloved are framed within a circular rosary pendant in a series of matte shots that echo the song's lyrics:

The hours I spent with thee, dear heart
Are as a string of pearls to me.
I count them over ev'ry one apart,
My rosary, my rosary.

Double-exposure work was particularly notable in *The Bargain* (1912), a film that could "take its place with any film d'art that has been produced," according to *Moving Picture World*.¹²³ A young woman, played by Weber, deserts her impoverished fiancé and marries a wealthy man in order to satisfy her mother's social ambitions. The husband turns out to be "a drunkard and a brute," while the woman's sister lives happily, if humbly, married to the suitor she had rejected.¹²⁴ A final shot of the unhappy

woman abandoned in her beautiful home is overlaid with the image of a birdcage. "By this trick of photography," the *World* notes, "the moral of the story is told without words in one of the cleverest and strongest ways imaginable."¹²⁵ Helping with such technical experiments would likely have been Dal Clawson, a Universal cinematographer who worked with the couple during their Rex years and who joined them later at Bosworth, returning with them to Universal, then eventually working at Lois Weber Productions. The couple credited Clawson with the early effectiveness of their photographic techniques.¹²⁶

Increasingly complex film narratives in this period, as Charlie Keil has demonstrated, often devoted more attention to developing characters' emotions and inner psychology; this was particularly true of "quality" dramatic productions aimed at highbrow audiences, such as the Rex films. Closer camera positions and more nuanced performance style aided such portrayals, but Keil emphasizes that because acting styles were so much in flux during these years, other means of conveying interior psychology were often favored. Characters' "visions"—memories, fantasies, fears—were frequently presented as a means of developing their personalities and their motivations.¹²⁷ Weber favored this method a great deal, and appears to have done so more with double-exposures than with editing or dissolves. Since Rex productions retained relatively long camera positions even into the early teens, it is even more understandable that Weber would have resorted to using visions, since her camera operators were less prone to experiment with closer framings.

Tom Gunning's influential argument that Griffith's films from this same period demonstrate a textual address to middle-class viewers that complements the industry's wider bid to increase middle-class patronage might also be applied to Weber and Smalley's work at Rex, but in a slightly different fashion.¹²⁸ If Griffith primarily used editing to convey interior psychology, Weber and Smalley explore a range of other cinematic devices, such as double-exposure, to convey character's thoughts and emotions. While the initial aim of such techniques might be similar, the final effect is quite different. In Weber's case, the arsenal of cinematic techniques used to address middle-class audiences furnishes not Victorian morality and anti-feminism, as it does so often with Griffith, but rather a critique of the very institutions upon which cinema's imagined bourgeois viewers depend: heterosexual marriage, feminine propriety, and class privilege.

Weber's view of cinema's potential impact during these years is perhaps best seen in the film *Eyes That See Not* (1912), the story of a selfish, wealthy woman who is transformed through her work for social justice. A

mill owner's wife, she is confronted in her home by the leader of the mill workers' union, who shows her the shocking conditions under which he and his family live. Reformed, she donates her jewelry to feed impoverished workers and their families.¹²⁹ The title *Eyes That See Not* evokes the willful blindness of privileged characters like the mill owner's wife, but also the physical and structural barriers between classes, between industry and society, between workplaces and domestic spaces, that prevent her from recognizing the inequity that supports her lavish lifestyle. The title also plants the idea that cinema itself might be a particularly privileged visual instrument, capable of simultaneously visualizing *and* breaking down economic and class barriers. This was an early indication, perhaps, of the power Weber believed was vested in movies and moviegoers alike.

If Weber's Rex scripts illustrate her interest in developing complex, unconventional, and varied female characters and in complicating male-female relationships and institutions like marriage, three of her films stand out for their uniquely reflexive examination of female representation. *Fine Feathers*, *Japanese Idyll* (1912), and *Suspense* (1913) interrogate the reproduction, circulation, and commercialization of female imagery in painting, photography, and cinema, respectively. Evidence we might glean from Weber's other scripts of her interest in representations of women is corroborated quite directly by these three surviving prints.

In *Fine Feathers* Weber plays Mira, a young woman who begins work as a cleaning woman for an artist, Vaughn (Smalley), after he rescues her from a life of poverty and abuse in her father's shoemaking shop. When Vaughn returns home to his studio late one evening and glimpses Mira sitting in the moonlight, he decides to paint her portrait—a portrait that eventually secures his fame. The two develop a romantic relationship that falters when Vaughn initially refuses to marry her, but he appears to relent in the end, sparing Mira a life alone with her violent father.

Working within a familiar melodramatic terrain, *Fine Feathers* introduces themes of urban poverty, economic and sexual exploitation, and victimization as a means of contributing rather pointed commentary on the plight of women in traditional workplace and familial relationships. Exploited by her abusive father, Mira is understandably attracted to the seeming glamour and sophistication of the world of artists and wealthy patrons in which Vaughn circulates. But she, and we, learn of a parallel form of exploitation there, based first upon Vaughn's commodification of her image in his award-winning paintings, then later upon his sexual exploitation of her economic dependency. What appears to be a fairly simple, even clichéd, story—impoverished young woman falls in love with an exploitive

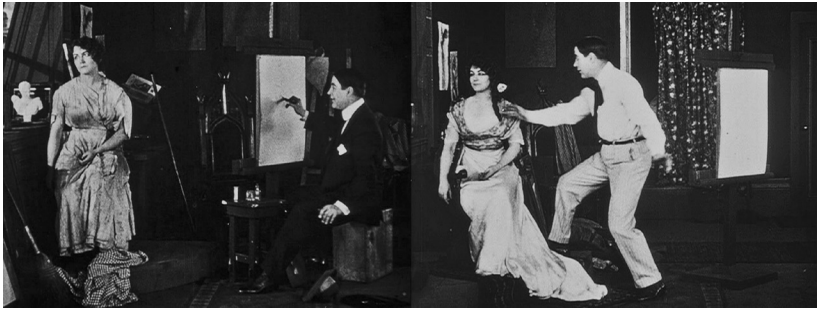


Figure 6. In *Fine Feathers* (1912) Vaughn (Smalley) paints two portraits of Mira (Weber), showing her transformation from maid to companion and ensuring his own fame. Frame enlargements.

artist-employer—becomes a vehicle for a much broader interrogation of marriage, heterosexuality, and class, a critique that emerges as much through the film's visual systems—its use of space, composition, sight lines, and gesture—as through its narrative trajectory.

Fine Feathers revolves quite self-consciously around the manufacture and marketing of a woman's image. The painter Vaughn translates his private vision of Mira—caught unaware in his studio at night, disheveled and (presumably) sweaty from work, glistening in the moonlight—into a life-size painting on exhibit in public. In making available to others a scene that only he has been fortunate to witness, Vaughn asserts his privileged, proprietary role over Mira, while turning her into an object of exchange for other men. But Mira herself also intervenes in the production of her portrait. Alone while cleaning Vaughn's studio, she becomes curious about the painting and pulls back a curtain to reveal it, only to be disappointed to see that Vaughn has painted her in ragged clothes. Imagining another kind of image for herself, Mira tries on a beautiful robe lying nearby and fantasizes about wearing it in a portrait. When Vaughn returns with the good news that his work has been selected for an exhibition, he catches her modeling the dress in front of the mirror, then decides to paint her this way as well, creating a second, matching portrait for the show entitled "Fine Feathers," a reference to the performance of gentility she enacts. The sight lines captured in the composition when Vaughn returns home register all of the dynamics of their relationship: Mira's self-adoration in the mirror is "caught" by Vaughn's gaze across the width of the frame; it is his view that structures the scene, his gaze we are encouraged to trace across the screen, and his gaze that is ultimately captured in the finished painting. Mira's

second, "Fine Feathers" portrait foregrounds her own performance much more, both her performance of class mobility and her exhibitionist desire to sit for the portrait.

If at first the second canvas might seem to indicate Mira's growing influence over the circulation of her image, in fact the portrait's continued replication only reinforces her commodification by suggesting that her likeness is infinitely reproducible. Shots of Mira standing in front of the two life-size portraits at the art exhibition emphasize this point further by drawing attention to the multiplication of her image within the frame. Moreover, in painting her portraits and circulating them publicly, Vaughn assumes control of her image, fashioning her as an object of fascination and lust for other men. The film's narrative structure underscores the degree to which Vaughn's success is derived from the two paintings of Mira, since scenes of his first being accepted for the exhibition and then winning the competition are intercut with the scene when he first decides to paint her portrait, then the scene when he decides to paint the second, matching portrait of her in "fine feathers."

Vaughn's economic exploitation of Mira's image is bound up in his subsequent sexual exploitation of her as well, a point the film makes clear when he buys her a dress to celebrate the success of his art show. The dress, and its association with masquerade, lays bare the linked economic and sexual exploitation at the core of Vaughn's interest in Mira. It marks the shift in their relationship from employer/employee and artist/model to lovers, for in the next scene we see Mira wearing the dress as the couple prepares to entertain Vaughn's patron Beyer (Charles DeForrest), assuming the mantle of the bourgeois housewife even though the couple has not married. Mira's romance with Vaughn is also articulated by her movement through his apartment. As she evolves from maid to model to lover, Mira penetrates deeper into his living quarters, moving from his public teaching studio to the smaller private painting studio adjacent, then from his front parlor to (we presume) his bedroom, with the lateral trajectory of her movement mirroring the circulation of her portrait in the art world. The exchange of her image, in other words, is matched by the very real (sexual) effects on her body.

That this shift in the couple's relationship pivots on the dress is an ironic reversal of the earlier episode in which Mira had fantasized a more glamorous self-image by donning a costume in Vaughn's studio, the "fine feathers" in which he will ultimately paint her. Then she had been playing with class masquerade, showing how malleable social boundaries might be; here she is masquerading as married, a fact that outrages Vaughn's patron Beyer

when he discovers she is not wearing a wedding band. Humiliated by Beyer's questions, Mira asks Vaughn to marry her and thereby "legitimate" their sexual liaison. When he refuses to do so, she leaves, casting off the dress and, in doing so, rejecting both her role as surrogate spouse and the artificially highbrow persona Vaughn has created for her through costume and paint. Such a masquerade, the film suggests, has necessitated the erasure of Mira's class and ethnicity. Indeed, the "fine feathers" she had longed for are false: one cannot simply pretend to be an elegant lady in order to transcend one's class and ethnic background any more than one can perform a semblance of marital propriety to mask a carnal relationship.

Mira's only other option would be to marry Beyer, who has fallen in love with her through Vaughn's portrait. Aghast when he discovers that Vaughn has not married and therefore "legitimated" Mira, Beyer offers to "educate" her on his own. Much older and wealthier than the other two characters, Beyer, as his name suggests, merely reinforces the idea that Mira can be bought and sold as a commodity, much like Vaughn's paintings, for the older man offers her only financial security and one-sided adoration based on Vaughn's idealized rendering. Mira is pinned between two men, then, both of whom take advantage of her for different reasons and in different ways, an entrapment that is further complicated when details of her family life are revealed in the film's final scene. With the emphasis placed on propriety in marriage, instead of romance, attention falls on the nature of the contract between Mira and Vaughn, rather than on any love they might feel for each other. In fact, marriage, or its masquerade here, is presented as nothing more than the evolution of Mira's role from cleaning obligations in the backroom to hostessing obligations in the front room and (unspoken) sexual obligations in the bedroom. All of this is accomplished with a quick change of costume, we are told, an act that only enhances the trope of masquerade.

The ending, in which Vaughn discovers that he loves Mira only after she has left, and after he has witnessed her being attacked by her abusive alcoholic father, does not cover over the obvious contradiction here: in marrying Vaughn, she only trades one form of exploitation for another (albeit lesser) one. On the one hand, *Fine Feathers* promotes a fairly conservative message: a couple cannot pretend to be married when this is not the case; a woman risks being morally "ruined" if she engages in marital "privileges" without benefit of clergy. On the other hand, the film appears rather cynical about marriage, presenting it quite unabashedly as a contract between a man and a woman in which the latter agrees to sexual activity in exchange for financial security, surrendering her independence to become the man's

property, circulating in society at his will. This, the film suggests, is only a slightly better arrangement than living with one's abusive father.

Released just six months after *Fine Feathers*, *A Japanese Idyll* offers a similarly self-conscious meditation on the reproduction and commodification of the female image, on male and female desire, and on the use of voyeurism and exhibitionism to control diegetic space. In this case, the context is photography rather than painting, but again the story foregrounds a struggle for control over the circulation of a woman's portrait. Set in Japan, the film depicts Cherry Blossom's efforts to wrest herself from a marriage to an older man in order to escape with the beau she has secretly been meeting in her back garden. Without ever meeting or seeing her in person, a wealthy merchant has fallen in love with Cherry Blossom after glimpsing a portrait that has been secretly taken of her by a Western photographer and circulated on commercial postcards. The merchant proposes the idea of marriage to her parents, who are delighted. Unbeknownst to them, Cherry Blossom has overheard the plan, for she has been courting her lover on the porch just outside the room, separated only by a shoji. Eager to get rid of the merchant, Cherry Blossom scares him away upon their first meeting by wearing Western clothing borrowed from her American friend and making "ugly" faces, thereby freeing herself to elope with her sweetheart in the end.

Photography and desire are foregrounded from the outset. Scenes of the wealthy merchant gazing adoringly at Cherry Blossom's postcard are intercut with those of her meeting her sweetheart in the garden at night, creating a juxtaposition that clearly poses the merchant's idealization of her image, frozen apart from time and space, against the reality of her own desire. It poses an Orientalist exoticization of Cherry Blossom dependent on isolating and commercializing her image, against her own agency. Yet all three men—the Western photographer, the infatuated merchant, and Cherry Blossom's lover—are linked in their voyeuristic relation to her. Both the photographer and the suitor watch her, unseen, from identical vantage points in her garden, then the merchant falls in love with a photo taken from this same view. So even as the film ostensibly distinguishes between each man's interest—pure commercialism on the part of the photographer, blind passion on the merchant's part, and "true" love on the suitor's part—in fact each man objectifies Cherry Blossom in a similar manner. By capturing, then marketing, her image, the photographer commodifies an experience both he and her lover have already had.

By setting the story in Japan, the film makes a further commentary on the racial dynamics of this situation. The Western photographer exoticizes Cherry Blossom and freezes her image, ironically marketing this very por-



Figure 7. Cherry Blossom's image circulates among male hands on a commercial postcard in *A Japanese Idyll* (1912). Frame enlargement.

trait of racial exoticism back to a Japanese man. It is not until the merchant sees her outside her exoticized Orientalism—when she dons Western dress and makes unflattering faces—that he can shed his infatuation. With a white woman in “yellow face” playing Cherry Blossom, the film engages a further level of masquerade. There is nothing at all “real” about the eroticized, Orientalized female image that circulates.

In a film about secrecy, exhibitionism, and voyeurism, both diegetic space and screen space become especially significant. Three adjacent spaces at Cherry Blossom's home are delineated: the exterior garden where she meets her lover, the interior room where the family gathers to meet guests, including the wealthy merchant, and the rear porch that straddles these two realms, separated from the house only by a shoji. Cherry Blossom is the only character who navigates all three sites. Her lover never enters the house; her parents never step outside to the garden; and the merchant remains indoors. This gives Cherry Blossom an element of control that other characters lack. The thin shoji that separates indoors from outdoors becomes a crucial prop that she employs to control space: early in the film she uses it to conceal her secret love trysts from her parents, at one point

even canoodling with her sweetheart while the parents broker a deal with the merchant just on the other side of the screen. Later she sneaks through the screen to escape outside and meet her lover for their planned elopement.

Ironically, Cherry Blossom's savvy navigation of these spaces also makes her the most vulnerable to being watched unseen, for ultimately, *A Japanese Idyll* is about relative hierarchies of seeing and knowledge. Cherry Blossom is objectified, without her knowing, by both the photographer who snaps her picture unaware and the merchant who falls madly in love with the image. In both cases, seeing without being seen oneself confers a certain amount of power on the voyeur. But Cherry Blossom succeeds in reversing this dynamic, first by taking charge of her own representation in such a manner that she scares off her would-be husband; then by successfully concealing her love affair from her parents and thereby allowing herself to elope in the end. In both cases she is able to control who sees what, when. Although the ending does not deliver as radical a critique of marriage and domesticity as seen in *Fine Feathers*, *A Japanese Idyll* pursues an even more self-conscious exploration of the particularly cinematic representations of femininity through its use of racialized performance and diegetic screens and its elaborate play on seeing and being seen.

If *Fine Feathers* and *A Japanese Idyll* demonstrate Weber's self-conscious exploration of the circulation of female imagery in painting and photography, *Suspense*, her best-known Rex film, takes on *cinematic* figurations of femininity, reworking one of the era's most pervasive celluloid tropes—the last-minute rescue drama perfected by D.W. Griffith at Biograph. Drawing on a rich intertext, *Suspense* assumes viewers' familiarity with Griffith's formula: a young mother and her infant are isolated in a "lonely villa" far from town where they face a male intruder penetrating the farthest reaches of domestic space. The film's generic title condenses Griffith's well-worn plotline to its elemental component—suspense—in order to investigate how tension is created in and around domestic environments and female victims. Innovative and unaccustomed camera positions significantly complicate the visual syntax of last-minute rescues, best known for their clear delineation of spatial and temporal topographies. One might even suggest that the unusual camera angles so often noted in *Suspense* become a means of destabilizing the logic enforced by parallel editing, skewing the strict binarism that had come to characterize so many race-to-the-rescue films. If Griffith's rescues employ dazzling intercutting, the epitome of a "narrator system" Gunning sees evolving in this transitional era, *Suspense* demonstrates the storytelling potential of composition, evoking a narrator's presence in a manner wholly different from Griffith's.¹³⁰ *Suspense* does not have nearly



Figure 8. A mother's point of view of the intruder entering her "lonely villa" in *Suspense* (1913). Frame enlargement.

the shot count of a Biograph rescue, as Keil has documented, yet he notes how strikingly original the film remains. Its overhead and extreme high-angle compositions, its triangulated matte shots, and its use of moving camera work and diegetic mirrors, all place *Suspense* well beyond filmmaking norms at the time; in fact, Keil deems it "one of the most stylistically outré films of the transitional period."¹³¹ That Weber should demonstrate such virtuosity through and against her main rival's celebrated formula, while playing the distressed heroine herself, suggests that she embraced the potential of her own cinematic authorship to craft alternate visions of femininity onscreen.

Fine Feathers, *A Japanese Idyll*, and *Suspense* testify to the evolving visual and narrative sophistication of Weber's work, developments that were echoed in the increasing length of her films, for her tenure at Rex coincided with a rapid evolution of multireel films in the United States. Universal brands were, proportionately, among the most active producers of multireel titles in the early teens, comprising fully one-third of the studio's output by late 1914. In fact, the number of three- and four-reel films released by Universal that year was exceeded only by companies devoted

exclusively to feature film production.¹³² Weber and Smalley began making two-reel films early in the spring of 1913, likely influenced by outfits pioneering the multireel trend in the United States, among them Porter's own Famous Players. In April alone they released two two-reel pictures, playing the leads in both films: *Until Death*, about a woman's love for two brothers, and *The Dragon's Breath*, about the wife of a college professor who unwittingly becomes addicted to opium after she cares for their Chinese servant.¹³³ *Moving Picture World* applauded this move, noting that the couple was "giving much attention to two-reel subjects, and with much success."¹³⁴ Several other two-reel pictures followed that year, including *Fallen Angel* in July and *Shadows of Life* and *Thumb Print* in October.¹³⁵ The couple's first three-reel production, the historical drama *The King Can Do No Wrong*, was released in June, with Weber and Smalley once again playing lead roles.¹³⁶ Their second three-reel picture, *A Jew's Christmas*, released for the holiday season in 1913, was promoted heavily by Universal and drew considerable attention. A contemporary story of prejudice and family reconciliation, Weber's script tackles a broad social issue through the lens of one family's tragedy, a model she would continue to exploit in her later social-problem films. Her venture into longer, more complex narratives allowed Weber to explore more substantial social themes and to craft stories with plot arcs spread over a number of years.

A Jew's Christmas centers on Weber's character, Leah, the daughter of a conservative rabbi, played by Smalley. When Leah falls in love with the floorwalker in a department store where she works, her father ejects her from their home because her beloved is not Jewish. Leah chooses to marry the man anyway and does not see her family for years. After Leah's husband is disabled in an accident and can no longer work, the couple find themselves living in a tenement with their young daughter, making flowers to earn a living. Unbeknownst to all, Leah's parents live next door, and her father strikes up a friendship with the little girl, unaware that she is his granddaughter. When the girl mentions that she's never had a Christmas tree, the old rabbi buys her one, then discovers the truth about her identity. Forced to abandon his religious prejudices, he welcomes Leah back into the family. As *Moving Picture World* declared, "The ties of blood overbear the pride and prejudice of religion." Although the film's theme is religious intolerance, a theme to which Weber's scripts would frequently return, here the rabbi's prejudice, rather than anti-Semitism, is central. It is the Jew who must recognize the humanity of Gentiles, not the other way around. It is he who must accept Christian traditions, not they his. The message is inclusiveness, tolerance, and mutual respect, but the work must be done by Jews, not



Figure 9. The rabbi (Smalley, center) orders his daughter Leah (Weber, left) out of the house in *A Jew's Christmas* (1913). Author's collection.

Gentiles. Universal was evidently sufficiently concerned about the subject to screen a print of *A Jew's Christmas* for a group of New York rabbis. *Moving Picture World* reported that the clergymen “were pleased with the story, with its treatment and with the fidelity with which the producers had followed Jewish ceremonies and customs, but were inclined to look with disfavor on the title.” Although the paper’s reviewers surmised that Jewish audiences might take offense at the film, they characterized it as “educational in its scope,” presumably referring to its effect upon non-Jewish viewers.¹³⁷

After seeing what Weber and Smalley had accomplished with the three-reel production of *A Jew's Christmas*, Carl Laemmle gave them their first opportunity to make a feature film, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. It would be the most ambitious project the studio had ever attempted.¹³⁸ The couple began production on the film in December 1913, three years into their tenure at Rex, just as another early Universal feature, the sensational *Traffic in Souls*, was at the height of its popularity.

With *The Merchant of Venice* Weber became the first woman in America to direct a feature film. Although she had adapted two Robert Browning poems for her Rex shorts, *The Light Woman* and *James Lee's Wife*, she had never attempted such an ambitious literary adaptation. In fact, *The Merchant of Venice* was relatively unique in Weber's screenwriting career. With the exception of her adaptation of the opera *The Dumb Girl of Portici* two years later, never again did she adapt Shakespeare or other highbrow literary sources, preferring instead scenarios adapted from newspaper stories or popular fiction. Why, then, might *The Merchant of Venice* have appealed to Weber as a source for her feature debut? Certainly she and Smalley were not the first to bring the play to the screen. Vitagraph, famed for its one-reel Shakespeare offerings, had released a version in 1908, and Thanhouser had produced a well-received two-reel version in 1912.¹³⁹ It is possible to surmise that the play appealed to Weber, if not for its novelty, then for more particular reasons: the pivotal role of Portia, which she would play herself, allowed Weber to continue her interest in female-centered narratives, even while dabbling in literary classics not always associated with such prominent female leads. Portia is a particularly active heroine, disguising herself as a man to serve as an attorney during the climactic trial sequence, and ultimately freeing her husband's friend from his onerous contract with Shylock. Portia's plea that morality ought to triumph over the letter of the law would likely also have appealed to Weber, as would the play's treatment of bigotry. Although it is not certain how much control Weber and Smalley had over choosing material for their first feature, it is safe to assume, given the degree of freedom they already enjoyed at Universal, that they had considerable say in the matter. *The Merchant of Venice*, then, offered Weber a means of working on a big-budget feature production, while also continuing thematic and narrative preoccupations of her earlier work.

By the time Weber and Smalley took on *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespearian adaptations were not new to the screen. In the five years prior, some thirty-six American Shakespeare films had been released, with many more titles imported from overseas. As William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson point out, Shakespeare was associated with highbrow culture generally, and screen adaptations were embraced with particular enthusiasm by the film community as educational and uplifting.¹⁴⁰ By the early 1910s, however, even though filmmakers were exploring the new possibilities of multireel productions, fewer adaptations of Shakespeare were being made. *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, was the only American Shakespearian film released in 1914. By the next year, no adaptations were made at all.¹⁴¹

Adapting Elizabethan drama for the silent screen presented scenario writers with a considerable challenge, arguably even more so in complex multireel films, since so much “action” is conveyed only through spoken dialogue. Weber tackled the problem by staging events that are only recounted by characters in the play’s verse, thereby considerably reworking the drama.¹⁴² Her script also radically condensed the play into some forty minutes, though this was longer than many earlier Shakespearean films. Such condensation enhanced the play, according to *Moving Picture World’s* Hanford C. Judson, who felt that within the “narrower compass of four reels,” comparisons between different elements of the play were brought into greater relief; he pointed in particular to the way Weber’s adaptation highlighted comparisons between Portia’s love story and Jessica’s affair, and praised the “wisdom” of Weber’s use of “quick strokes” to sketch in supplemental scenes. Judson, however, was less optimistic about what happened to characterization in the screen adaptation, and was concerned particularly that the subtle interplay between Shylock’s outward actions and his thoughtful speeches was lost, even while commending Smalley’s performance in the role.¹⁴³

Weber and Smalley based much of the look of their production on existing material, in particular a 1909 edition of the play illustrated by Sir James Dromgole Linton (1840–1916), a preeminent Victorian artist and past president of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour.¹⁴⁴ Many of the costume designs bear strong resemblance to those illustrated in Linton’s volume, though Linton’s settings and stagings themselves do not appear to have been replicated in the Rex production. Weber and Smalley’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* seems to have conformed to the broad outlines of other screen adaptations of the early teens, which, according to Uricchio and Pearson, tended to rely on key scenes and phrases already familiar to viewers in condensed versions of plays circulating in other media. Films further emphasized visual spectacle through elaborate costumes and stagings, often basing visual compositions on painterly renditions of the story.¹⁴⁵

Universal promoted *The Merchant of Venice* as a “Special Release” outside its regular program. That meant that exhibitors would have to pay extra to show *The Merchant of Venice*, but the company assured theater owners that such an offering would “draw new patrons to your house,” which would, as a result, “gain a prestige it never enjoyed before.” Touting the film’s “sumptuous settings, wonderful costumes, beautiful photography” and the “tremendous expense” of its production, Universal offered a special line of promotional materials designed to convey a similar message



Figure 10. Weber (left) played Portia and Smalley (right) played Shylock in her first feature film, *The Merchant of Venice* (1914). Author's collection.

to theater patrons: colored lithograph six-sheets, window cards, and various smaller posters.¹⁴⁶ Smalley himself traveled to New York to promote the film, attending a screening at Universal with members of the trade press, and claiming that the film represented the best work he and Weber had done for the screen.¹⁴⁷ Though united in their praise of Weber's screen adaptation, contemporary commentators worried nonetheless about the suitability of presenting Elizabethan drama to cinemagoers, with both *Moving Picture World* and *Variety* expressing concern for the "average spectator."¹⁴⁸ The latter was concerned that without explanatory titles such viewers might find the complex plot "a little mystifying," though Judson praised Weber's adaptation for its ability to cater to "average" viewers by concentrating on Portia's love story, while he still declared its utmost value to "the thoughtful mind." One hears in trade discourse echoes of a broader uncertainty about cinema's future and its audience, so much in flux in early 1914. Could the cinema move toward such sophisticated material in such a "scholarly and dignified production," as Judson called it, while still pleasing its core audience? Commentators were emphatic in embracing the complex possibilities of cinematic narration, while they were also clearly leery about the medium's current social audience. They noted a tension between their

faith in the medium's aesthetic sophistication and the realities of contemporary moviegoers.

The Merchant of Venice was itself also a problematic text. In one of her first brushes with censorship and controversy, issues that would dog Weber throughout the following years, *The Merchant of Venice* encountered trouble with the Chicago Board of Censorship when a prominent rabbi in that city objected to the portrayal of Shylock. "More than any other book, more than any other influence in the history of the world," he argued, Shakespeare's play was "responsible for the creation of a world-wide prejudice against the Jew." After hosting a private screening for prominent Jewish community leaders at City Hall and inviting their commentary, the Chicago Board elected to pass the picture.¹⁴⁹ Although no particular mention was made *A Jew's Christmas* in this controversy, one can imagine that the portrayal of Jewish intolerance of Christianity in that earlier Weber film would have added fuel to the critique of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Despite the praise Weber and Smalley received for *The Merchant of Venice* and the success of other early Universal features such as *Traffic in Souls*, Laemmle remained skeptical of a film program based entirely on such titles and lambasted the trend in the house organ *Universal Weekly* and in fliers sent to individual exhibitors. His argument was mainly economic: Universal could supply a week's worth of varied programming for a little more than double what many feature outfits were charging for one day's rental of a feature. "The heart and soul, lungs and liver, backbone and stamina, brains and brawn of the moving picture business is THE SCIENTIFICALLY BALANCED PROGRAM," Laemmle wrote. "The exhibitor who is building for the future ought to see by now that every time he indulges in so-called 'features' he is spending his money for fluff that will never get him anywhere or anything."¹⁵⁰ Rather than selling individual film titles, the company marketed "The Universal Program," guaranteeing exhibitors four-reel programs with daily changes for \$105 per week. Programs generally consisted of a two-reel drama, a one-reel comedy, and a one-reel "general interest" subject that might contain an educational title, a drama, or a cartoon. Universal charged more than any other studio for its weekly program, save those producing feature films.¹⁵¹

Even following the success of *The Merchant of Venice*, then, Weber and Smalley continued to produce one- and two-reel shorts for Universal, making occasional three-reelers like *Helping Mother* (1914). But they did not return to feature productions. In fact, Anthony Slide speculates, with good reason, that the couple ultimately left Universal in August 1914 in search of improved opportunities for feature filmmaking.¹⁵² When they were not

selected to produce Universal's four-reel adaptation of Clara Louise Burnham's Christian Science novel, *The Open Shutters*, a script that Weber had penned and a project likely very close to her heart, they seized an opportunity to leave Universal and join the upstart feature company Bosworth, Inc.¹⁵³

But the three years Weber and Smalley had spent at Rex and Universal proved an invaluable education. They fostered a collaborative mode of production they would maintain for many years, sharing directing, producing, and editing chores, even as Weber assumed a more dominant role in the partnership. They operated a kind of repertory company, working with a consistent troupe of performers, several of whom would later direct films themselves. Weber honed her screenwriting craft to great acclaim, later remarking that the "hard apprenticeship" of writing one scenario a week had proved "an excellent mental exercise" that sharpened her writing talents immeasurably.¹⁵⁴ Screenwriting also facilitated Weber's move into directing, as she began to assume greater creative control of her projects. As mayor of Universal City, Weber certainly took on an increasingly prominent role at the studio, but she also became the face of feminine uplift in Hollywood, and a face of modern femininity more generally. Her public comments on the industry, and on screenwriting in particular, suggest, however, that she was much more than the matronly do-gooder some thought her to be at the time—a role into which subsequent historians have willingly cast her as well. The films Weber and Smalley produced at Rex, while continually noted for their exceptional cinematography, well-crafted staging, nuanced performances, and original narratives, were also advancing quite radical critiques of gender roles, patriarchal institutions, and even mass culture itself. They are evidence of the commanding role that Weber envisioned for the medium, and its viewers, just as cinema began to assume its role as the nation's premiere commercial entertainment.

"YOURS SINCERELY, LOIS WEBER"

Weber and Smalley joined Bosworth, Inc., on August 1, 1914, signing a lucrative contract that guaranteed them a salary of \$500 per week, plus a percentage of the profits generated by their productions. One report suggested Weber's salary would amount to \$50,000 a year.¹⁵⁵ Likely more important than the financial terms of the agreement was the fact that Bosworth offered an opportunity to focus on feature films, rather than the one- and two-reel productions still at the heart of the Universal program. In fact, with the exception of *The Traitor*, the couple's first production at

Bosworth, all films Weber and Smalley made at the company were four- and five-reel features. Multireel films allowed Weber to create more complex narratives with more fully developed characters and themes. In doing so, she showcased her authorial signature more than ever—a signature distinctly feminized.

Bosworth, Inc., had been formed a year earlier by Hobart Bosworth, a former stage actor and director who began working in motion pictures in 1909, starting first with Selig in Chicago. After writing, directing, and acting for various companies, he formed his own organization in August 1913, initially designed to produce adaptations of Jack London novels. London had sold Bosworth rights to all his existing and future work. Bosworth's first production, an adaptation of London's *The Sea Wolf* released in 1913, was the first seven-reel feature produced in the United States. Made on a budget of \$9,000, the film grossed \$4 million, allowing Bosworth to set up his own studio. Bosworth's partner in the venture was oil millionaire and Los Angeles financier Frank Garbutt, a man who believed cinema superior to the stage in its ability to convey real action and its democratic guarantee of an identical experience for all paying customers. Garbutt's daughter Melodie served as the company's secretary.¹⁵⁶ Bosworth was explicitly formed, then, to focus on the production of quality features. Trade ads proclaimed the company's interest in "powerful stories with unusual possibilities for screen visualization" that would "uphold the highest standard possible."¹⁵⁷

With this goal in mind Hobart Bosworth, along with Jesse L. Lasky of the Lasky Company and Adolph Zukor of Famous Players, had also been instrumental in the formation of Paramount Pictures in May 1914. Declaring their "desire for the uplift of the industry and the further prestige of the feature film," the three men founded Paramount with the aim of centralizing, streamlining, and ultimately increasing distribution of feature films nationwide.¹⁵⁸ Bringing together local distributors from different regions, Paramount was able to guarantee production companies higher advances than they would have received through individual-states' rights contracts—usually in the neighborhood of \$20,000—thereby encouraging more ambitious film productions. Paramount also paid for the cost of film prints and trade advertising. The company quickly established a reputation for itself based on quality releases.¹⁵⁹ Bluntly referring to the associates as "high-brows," *Moving Picture World* professed the alliance "the greatest feature program every conceived."¹⁶⁰ As Rob King points out, Paramount was incredibly successful at "leveraging cultural capital into industrial might" with a business model that foretold the rise of vertical integration a decade later.¹⁶¹

Weber and Smalley signed with Bosworth just two weeks after the formation of Paramount was announced, suggesting their keen interest in the company's objectives. Shortly after their arrival, Paramount commenced a national advertising campaign, beginning with a two-page spread in the *Saturday Evening Post*, followed by full-page ads in subsequent editions of the *Post* and other mass monthlies.¹⁶² Paramount assured exhibitors these ads would reach not only those patrons who already frequented "the better grade of motion picture shows," but also those who did not and might be convinced that they could see the equivalent of a "two dollar show" for as little as a dime.¹⁶³ Stressing the "cultured" audiences Paramount pictures were imagined to attract, ads featured patrons attending theaters in top hats and furs, driven there in chauffeured automobiles.¹⁶⁴ Showcased in omnibus Paramount advertisements, Weber's Bosworth productions were advertised alongside some of the most prestigious pictures of the day, including Mary Pickford's *Mistress Nell* (1914) and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Girl of the Golden West* (1915).

King describes 1914 as a "threshold" year for the film industry: feature films were on the rise—production increased over 500 percent that year alone—and new distributors were created to handle multireel productions, while elaborate "picture palaces" were constructed to showcase quality features for upscale audiences. Paramount was at the forefront of this evolution.¹⁶⁵ Signaling this trend in the fall of that year, *Moving Picture World's* Louis Reeves Harrison announced that "demand for strong features" was "far outrunning supply."¹⁶⁶ By the new year, his colleague Stephen W. Bush noted a sea change in the industry, with power shifting away from "cheap men with cheap ideas" and into the hands of "men who strike at the highest possible aims in quality of plot and acting and photography," men committed to "the high class motion picture." Audiences were more appreciative than ever, he said, of such productions.¹⁶⁷ Weber was one of those men.

Signing Weber and Smalley to Bosworth was "about the first move" Garbutt made after the formation of Paramount, one report concluded.¹⁶⁸ If the two filmmakers were eager to be affiliated with a company producing quality features, Bosworth and Paramount were equally interested in promoting this ideal through the couple. From the beginning of their association with Bosworth, Weber and Smalley were marketed as movie personalities. Details of Smalley's background, often outrageously embroidered, were frequently cited: his pedigree dating back to Lafayette; his training at Oxford, in Sir Henry Irving's dressing room, and on stage with Mrs. Fiske; his education as a lawyer at Harvard; and his supposed friendship with the king of England all featured prominently in Bosworth press coverage.¹⁶⁹

Weber, considered the company's "principal director," was cast as a leading filmmaker of her generation, "second only to D.W. Griffith."¹⁷⁰ Essential to all of these promotions was the vision of a married bourgeois couple working together on all aspects of their productions. "Rarely, if ever has it been given to one couple to combine the unusual talents and remarkable qualifications" represented in the two.¹⁷¹ Banner ads for the Paramount lineup that had previously stressed Lasky's association with theater legend David Belasco, Famous Players' association with noted Broadway producers the Frohman brothers, and Bosworth's Jack London franchise now promoted Bosworth's association with Weber and Smalley. Not only were they singled out, but they were also allied with top feature filmmaking outfits and the uppermost echelons of the theater world.¹⁷² Rarified company indeed.

Bosworth, in the midst of constructing a vast new studio complex, offered Weber and Smalley ideal conditions for feature filmmaking. Located on North Occidental Boulevard in the Wilshire neighborhood of Los Angeles, the new Bosworth studio was among the best production facilities on the West Coast, according to *Moving Picture World*. It included a sixty foot-by-ninety foot glassed-in stage equipped with a lighting system for year-round shooting, adjoining dressing rooms with full showers, a large property room, a carpentry shop, and a lab capable of processing 20,000 feet of film per day.¹⁷³ The following spring the studio was expanded even further to include a 2,500-square-foot addition to its glass-covered main stage, more dressing rooms, and a new scene dock with two new large paint frames for backdrop—a renovation that effectively doubled the property's floor space.¹⁷⁴ In accordance with the company's stated policy to present pictures "with unusual faithfulness to detail," Bosworth productions also often traveled to far-off locations to ensure realism.¹⁷⁵ All of this must have appealed tremendously to Weber and Smalley.

In addition to Hobart Bosworth, whom the couple evidently admired, and his wife, Adele Farrington, whom they had already directed at Rex, Weber and Smalley soon found themselves in the company of other notables from the theater world. After a trip to New York in November 1914, Garbutt signed several famed stage personalities, including James K. Hacket, Dustin Farnum (who would later star in *Captain Courtesy*), and Macklyn Arbuckle (whom Weber would later direct in *It's No Laughing Matter*). Garbutt also signed stage comedienne Elsie Janis. Janis, who wrote most of her own material, had never appeared in films, but soon relocated to Los Angeles with plans to star in two pictures she had written herself.¹⁷⁶ Weber and Smalley would later direct one of these projects, *Betty in Search of a Thrill*. Garbutt's main achievement was signing noted theater producer

Oliver Morosco, with whom he formed the Oliver Morosco Photoplay Company, a move one observer declared to be “further indication of the remarkable development of the feature film,” one that “attaches greater prestige to Bosworth, Inc.”¹⁷⁷ Morosco’s stage properties would now become available for films. Weber and Smalley, who had often stressed the importance of theatrically trained actors and directors in the cinema, now found themselves in ideal company. Dal Clawson, their cinematographer from Rex, also joined the couple at Bosworth, where his innovations in cinematography served Weber’s ambitious program of features.

A young Frances Marion also arrived at Bosworth in the fall of 1914 when Weber was in production on her first film, *The Traitor*. Marion remembered “a tall woman with classical features” who “seemed to glide rather than walk, her head held high and tilted slightly backward.”¹⁷⁸ After assuring Weber that she preferred to work “on the dark side of the camera,” rather than as an actress, Marion served as Weber’s assistant, doing “whatever needed doing,” according to biographer Cari Beauchamp. This included writing press releases, cutting film, assisting with set decoration and continuity, and even serving as stunt double on *Captain Courtesy*. Out of this experience the two women became lifelong friends; the aspiring screenwriter developed a “deep respect” for Weber’s abilities and a “fierce loyalty” to her mentor, Beauchamp reports.¹⁷⁹

At Bosworth the couple’s working methods appear to have begun to vary. At times they worked together as they had at Universal, with Weber writing original scenarios and both of them acting on screen together and collaborating on the direction and production, even as Weber’s authorship became more pronounced. Yet, in addition to codirecting and costarring in films written by Weber, such as *Sunshine Molly* and *False Colours*, the couple also directed separately (Weber on *It’s No Laughing Matter* and Smalley on *Betty in Search of a Thrill*)—projects in which neither appeared on screen. Weber also directed *Captain Courtesy*, though neither she nor Smalley appeared in the film and she was not credited with adapting the novel for the screen.

False Colours, a five-reel feature released in December 1914, afforded Weber a chance to demonstrate her full potential. Rooted in themes and techniques she had been exploring in her Rex shorts, the film’s expanded length, along with additional resources available to her at Bosworth, allowed Weber to craft a more complex script enhanced by complicated visual effects using superimpositions and character doubles. Set in the theater world, *False Colours* uses a backstage setting to explore the performative dimensions of femininity and role-playing in heterosexual relationships. While

considering ideas of performance, impersonation, and substitution in its diegetic story, the film also explores these issues at a cinematic level through dual casting and double exposure. It is an ambitious production, an indication of how constrained Weber had been by the Universal program.

Smalley plays famed stage actor Lloyd Phillips, who gives up the profession after his beloved wife dies in childbirth.¹⁸⁰ He rejects the daughter born that night, leaving Dixie (Dixie Carr) to be raised by his housekeeper, Mrs. Hughes (Adele Farrington). Hughes squanders money intended for Dixie's education on her unscrupulous son Bert (Courtenay Foote), so Dixie flees the household and becomes a successful actress in her own right. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hughes's son Bert has married Flo Moore (Weber), the daughter of a wardrobe mistress devoted to Phillips's career (also played by Weber). Bert and Mrs. Hughes convince Flo to pose as Dixie when her father, hearing of his daughter's stage success, finally comes looking for her. Thinking she is his daughter, Phillips soon becomes fond of Flo, but when the ruse is revealed, Flo flees home to her mother in disgrace. Flo and Phillips are finally reconciled when Mrs. Moore, near death, asks Flo to take him the scrapbooks she has lovingly compiled throughout his career. Admitting their love for one another, Flo and Phillips are able to marry after the nefarious Bert Hughes dies in a botched robbery attempt. Although Flo had been originally cast as Phillips's daughter Dixie, a part she resisted, she now steps happily into the role of his wife. Dixie, too, is reconciled with her father in the end.

Phillips's growing affection for Flo is crystallized during two scenes in which her image is superimposed over photos of his dead wife. Early in the film Phillips's enduring love for his departed wife is evoked as he imagines her presence in ghostly, superimposed images. These compositions place Phillips in the same frame as his (spectral) wife, emphasizing his imagined relation with her through sight lines within the frame. Toward the end of the film, Flo literally takes over as the object of Phillips's "screen" fantasy. In the climactic moment, Phillips is pining over a photo of his deceased wife when Flo's image is suddenly superimposed over the other woman's, Flo's profile matching the wife's exactly. Flo then turns her head to face forward and smile at Phillips, seeming to bring the photo and his preserved fantasy to life. Double-exposure condenses in one image the overlay of past and present, death and life, mother and (imagined) daughter, former wife and present lover. The fact that Weber herself plays this role, that Weber herself turns to look directly into the camera, serves only to remind us of her authorial hand.

But this overlay is complicated still further. By falling in love with Phillips, Flo does more than assume the place of his deceased wife; she also



Figure 11. Weber used superimposition and dual casting to explore issues of gender performativity in *False Colours* (1914). Frame enlargement.

mirrors her own mother's long-held secret attraction to the actor, a fact only reinforced by having Weber play both roles. Overlaid diegetic and extradiegetic elements of performance and doubling in *False Colours* are almost too intricate to map. Weber, the off-screen writer and director, plays a woman (Flo) who is impersonating another woman (Dixie), who is herself a noted actress. While standing in for Dixie, Flo plays out her mother's infatuation with Phillips, at the same time as she takes the place of his deceased wife. Simultaneously Flo, Dixie, Mrs. Moore, and the late Mrs. Phillips (virtually all of the female characters in the story), and the film's author, Weber very self-consciously inhabits multiple roles both in front of and behind the camera.

Some indication of Weber's working methods as a director can be gleaned from two significant differences between Weber's original script and the finished film. First, scenes in which Phillips recalls his dead wife are not contained in the script. This suggests that Weber may have felt no need to document in writing the complex visual effects that were increasingly common in her films, as they were so integral to her artistic conception from the outset. These visual effects may also have been significantly elaborated

on the set in collaboration with cinematographer Dal Clawson. Second, the written screenplay follows a more linear version of the story, which, on screen, jumps back and forth between action in the city (where Phillips's daughter Dixie is appearing on stage and living with his wardrobe mistress, Mrs. Moore), the country (where Bert and Mrs. Hughes live with Flo), and the island (where Phillips lives as a recluse). Weber apparently reworked her scripts considerably in the editing room, embroidering more intricate narratives with juxtapositions, comparisons, and foreshadowing.

If *False Colours* is emblematic of the pivot Weber made from her Rex shorts to more complex features at Bosworth, continuing her fascination with artistic personalities, heterosexual couplings, gender performance, and innovative camera work, *Sunshine Molly*, her last Bosworth production, signaled a shift in Weber's scripts toward more contemporary social issues and a greater emphasis on realism. Set amidst the roughneck world of California's oil boom, *Sunshine Molly* was shot on location in the La Brea oil fields and includes some spectacular cinematography, beginning with a nearly 360-degree tilting and panning shot around the oil field that ends with a long shot of Sunshine Molly herself standing with her suitcase on the side of the road, having just landed at the oil field. In addition to the sweeping panoramas afforded in this location shooting, Weber's staff created a miniature reproduction of the setting at the Bosworth studio, where they were able to stage the destruction of the oil field in an explosion and subsequent fire—a visual effect one reviewer called “exceptional and most unusual.”¹⁸¹

Against this horizon, *Sunshine Molly* explores the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence in the workplace.¹⁸² After arriving at the oil field in the film's opening scene, Molly (Weber) finds work in a boardinghouse where she prepares and serves meals to men who work on the rigs. The film is focused less, in the end, on men toiling in the oil fields than on the less publicized but equally essential labor of women behind the scenes, feeding and caring for these workers. One of only a few women there, and confined largely to the boardinghouse, Molly nonetheless commands the men's attention. Staging in these early scenes emphasizes her prominence, placing her in the center of the frame serving meals in the dining hall or summoning men inside for a meal, surrounded by men who frame her movements and whose eyes always seem to be on her. We see how the dining hall's architecture allows Molly to become an object of fascination, for it simultaneously puts her on display serving food to the men and hides the women's labor in the kitchen—they emerge only to deliver meals. Capable in all of her tasks, generous with her assistance to others, and always charming, Molly is “one of those adamant types upon which



Figure 12. In her last Bosworth production, *Sunshine Molly* (1915), Weber turned her attention to sexual harassment and sexual violence in the workplace. Author's collection.

the morality of our nation depends," Margaret I. MacDonald concluded in her review for *Moving Picture World*.¹⁸³

Bull (Smalley), "a hard character whose opinion of women in general is not high," according to the film's publicity herald, "attempts to become familiar on short acquaintance," whereupon Molly promptly smashes a plate over his head and refuses all contact.¹⁸⁴ Shunned by the other men after his advance on Molly, Bull nurtures a growing fascination with her, coming to appreciate her dedication to others. Although she remains wary of him, their bond deepens when she asks him to help her care for "Old Pete" (Herbert Standing), an elderly oil worker. Through Molly, Bull learns the transformative value of selflessly helping others. Late in the film we discover, through a flashback, that Molly had arrived at the oil field just after having been released from prison, where she had served time for stabbing a man who raped her. This late revelation explains her violent reaction to Bull's early acts of physical aggression and her exceptional acts of kindness toward others. After Bull is blinded in a work accident, Molly nurses him back to health, and through this they fall in love. Torn by his attraction to her, Bull writes Molly a note saying, "Let someone else wait on me for I

can't keep my hands off you and I'd rather die than lose your friendship again." Sitting down on the bed beside him, Molly then says, "I reckon it don't matter if a man puts his hands on his wife." The two embrace in the final shot.

What begins as a story about a feisty young woman who refuses to tolerate being pinched and leered at by roughnecks turns into a more complicated tale, once we learn that Molly has been the victim of a far more serious sexual assault, one for which she, not her assailant, has served jail time. Reviewers were coy about the film's sexual situations, describing how Bull "tries to force his love on Molly" and how Molly had been imprisoned for attacking a man who "tried to get fresh."¹⁸⁵ But the violence of these scenes is clear in the film itself; Molly is a victim of rape who forcibly resists Bull's sexual harassment and attempted assault. Indeed, the flashback structure does more than withhold crucial information about Molly's past; when that information is finally revealed, it is done so through Molly's own point of view. We come to understand her attitude precisely at the moment when we are invited to share her position of victimization. The nonlinear, flashback structure also places Molly's prior experience of sexual assault in closer proximity to Bull's attack, demanding that viewers compare the two episodes. The perpetrator of the rape was the boss's son at the factory where Molly worked, a man who targeted his father's employees under the guise of workplace surveillance. At the oil field, Molly, one of only two young women, is easily singled out for attention. The film is careful to show how her labor in cooking and caring for the men is effaced, and how sexualized she becomes in the performative arena of food service, echoing the situation in the factory where her boss's son eyed women at work in order to identify potential targets for his sexual violence.

Given *Sunshine Molly*'s emphasis on the structural conditions of sexual assault in heterosocial workplaces, and its insistence on the repeated incidence of such attacks, the film's concluding scenes are troubling. Not only do they seem to present Molly's change of heart too abruptly, but Bull's violent sexuality is not entirely erased. Molly's quip about how marriage will allow him to put "his hands on his wife" echoes Bull's earlier vow to keep "my hands off" her following his attempted assault, which in turn echoes the euphemistic language used to describe Molly's rapist, who "wouldn't keep his hands off" her. In fact, just prior to this scene an older man tells Molly, "Bull ain't so bad, I used to pinch pretty girls myself when I was young," casting sexual violence as a boyish prank. The demands of narrative resolution—here achieved through the formation of a heterosexual couple in marriage—seem forced in *Sunshine Molly* and are ultimately unable to settle the pressures revealed between men and women in the workplace.

False Colours and *Sunshine Molly* stand at opposite ends of Weber's tenure at Bosworth, demonstrating the different ways in which she exploited new opportunities and resources available to her in feature filmmaking. If *False Colours* shows how she was able to develop the thematic preoccupations and formal experimentation of her Rex films to their fullest, *Sunshine Molly*, her last Bosworth release, provides an indication of the work she would produce when she returned to Universal later that year to embark on a series of enormously successful films on contemporary social issues. But Weber's most ambitious and notable Bosworth production, by far, was *Hypocrites* (1915), the film that established her artistic reputation and defined her as one of the premiere filmmakers of her generation. Produced and released almost exactly coincident with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Hypocrites*, like its counterpart, asserts a complex argument about cinema's artistic potential. If Griffith sought cinema's legitimacy in a historical epic, a re-imagining of the Civil War to mark its fiftieth anniversary, Weber took a different tack, exploring the theme of religious hypocrisy through historical allegory.

In *Hypocrites* Courtney Foote plays a minister disturbed by the hypocrisies of his ever-so-modern congregation. Falling asleep after church one Sunday, the clergyman dreams he is a medieval monk named Gabriel who leads his parishioners up a steep mountain, then carves a controversial statue of "Naked Truth," which comes to life. "Since my people will not come to you," he says to Truth, "come to my people," taking her back into contemporary settings to visit his modern-day parishioners. There she holds a mirror of truth up to their activities, revealing hypocrisies in their views on childrearing, sexuality, politics, and the like. As one reviewer put it, "Miss Weber does not hesitate to flay hypocrisy in every form."¹⁸⁶ Striking visual effects convey these visits, as Naked Truth appears superimposed over these scenes, matte shots showing what she reveals in her mirror. At the end of the film the clergyman is discovered, dead, still seated at the altar, clutching a newspaper he had seized from one of the members of his choir. It features an item on Adolphe Faugeron's 1914 painting *La Verité*, a vision of truth as a naked woman that had scandalized Paris the previous year, the apparent inspiration for the minister's dream. His parishioners, ever hypocritical and still blind to their own moral failings, are mortified to find him with the nude image.

Hypocrites was widely recognized for its demonstration of cinema's potential as a serious art form. Describing the film as "quite remarkable from every angle of the picture art," *Variety* decreed that "no one else has attempted as much or has gone as far." Weber had achieved "a new revelation



Figure 13. The Naked Truth wields her mirror in *Hypocrites* (1915), the film that established Weber's reputation as a leading filmmaker of her time. Frame enlargement.

of the artistic possibilities of the photo-play," one critic declared. *Hypocrites*, another noted, "takes its place among the most exceptional films." Observing that it was "unjust" to consider the film merely a "strong pictorial drama," another writer even insisted, "It is a production to be compared favorably with the most powerful modern productions of the stage." The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed *Hypocrites* "without a doubt one of the biggest and most outspoken, yet artistic productions yet seen on a local screen." When the film was revived the following year for a run at the Strand, the *New York Times* noted how well it held up, suggesting it was "superior to the majority that have followed in the two years since it was made."¹⁸⁷

Even as it received praise for its artistic ambitions, *Hypocrites* also attracted considerable attention for its depiction of female nudity. Inspired by Faugeron's painting, Weber elected to allegorize truth as a naked woman, casting Margaret Edwards to play the part, though electing to clothe the actress in a flesh-toned leotard. Even cloaked in such ideals, conceptualized in this way, Naked Truth elicited considerable sniggering from the press. Incensed by these responses, Weber sent a telegram to the *New York Mail*, writing, "I want to take exception to your statement that 'The Hypocrites' was produced to attract by reason of the nude woman." Instead, she wrote, "I hoped that the picture would act as a moral force. The nude woman is too delicately carried through to act otherwise."¹⁸⁸

Likely because of Weber's decision to incorporate female nudity—or, more properly, the *suggestion* of female nudity—*Hypocrites'* release was considerably delayed. The production was apparently finished and copy-righted by the end of September 1914, so it was likely the first feature Weber completed at Bosworth. Some trade papers reviewed it in early

October, but the general release appears to have been held up by deliberations at the National Board of Censorship and negotiations with the New York district attorney's office. As a result, *Hypocrites* did not have its official premiere until January 1915. After a private showing at Roxy Rothafel's showcase Strand Theater, the film began an indefinite run at New York's Longacre Theater, a grand "legitimate" playhouse on West 48th Street just off Broadway, where it played to capacity crowds in afternoon and evening screenings. A live chorus, enlarged orchestra, and Wurlitzer organ accompanied screenings, with ticket prices ranging from twenty-five cents to one dollar. Reviewed by regular dramatic critics in all of the city's daily newspapers, *Hypocrites* received considerable attention and drew large audiences, especially for the higher-priced seats. One report boasted that the theater took in \$5,000 in box office receipts for a single week's run.¹⁸⁹ After attending the show, *Moving Picture World's* Hanford C. Judson reported an attentive and appreciative audience, predicting the film was destined "to enjoy a long and emphatic popularity."¹⁹⁰ Following a run of several weeks at the Longacre, *Hypocrites* moved to additional theaters in New York City and began playing across the country. Paramount exchanges, which normally required exhibitors to commit to an entire year's worth of programming, sold *Hypocrites* on an individual basis, encouraging bookings at legitimate theaters rather than regular movie houses.¹⁹¹ In many cases *Hypocrites* marked the first occasion that motion pictures were shown in these venues, and such screenings often maintained the aura of the initial Broadway performances with lecturers on stage and orchestral or choral accompaniment. The first film ever shown at Philadelphia's Globe Theater, for instance, *Hypocrites* was accompanied there by a chorus, and scenic tableaux were presented before and after the picture. When it opened at Atlanta's Lyric Theater, marking "the advent of pictures" there, a critic announced, "Plenty of good pictures have been in Atlanta before, but none that can excel this last offering."¹⁹²

Even with the imprimatur of New York's cultural and religious elite, *Hypocrites* enjoyed what one observer called a "stormy voyage" across the country.¹⁹³ Weber's use of female nudity continued to cause alarm, no matter how "highbrow" the context. The National Board of Review would ultimately ban all depictions of female nudity on screen in early 1917, likely as a result of the controversy ignited by *Hypocrites*; but in the meantime Weber's film tested regulatory agencies across the country at a time of patchwork regulation during which the National Board of Censorship often found itself at odds with local police and district attorneys, as well as competing municipal and state censorship agencies. Ohio's Board of Censorship

banned the film outright, as did several cities, including major markets like Chicago and Minneapolis. In other cities, such as Nashville, censors reviewed, but ultimately passed the film. In San Jose, California, the mayor and police chief tried to prevent screenings by seizing prints of the film, but a jury trial established that the film did not contravene the city's moral code, and showings were later permitted. Complaints were filed with the commissioner of public safety in Tacoma, Washington, in an attempt to prevent screenings in that city, but the film was viewed by the police captain and allowed to be exhibited.¹⁹⁴ After Boston's mayor called the film "indecent and sacrilegious," plans were apparently considered to drape Margaret Edwards's frame in a gown "of sufficiently classical style as to meet the requirements of the fastidious Bostonians," though it is doubtful that any such plans materialized.¹⁹⁵ Bosworth, which had encountered trouble with regulators over Hobart Bosworth's adaptation of the temperance drama *John Barleycorn* the previous summer, protested any attempts to censor *Hypocrites*, taking out trade ads denouncing the Ohio Board of Censorship and calling on exhibitors to unite against "the evils of 'legalized censorship.'"¹⁹⁶

In spite of continuing censorship battles, *Hypocrites* was a marked success in many parts of the country, playing extended runs and return engagements in cities such as Denver, Detroit, Dallas, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, where that city's *Chronicle* newspaper noted, "It has been some time since San Franciscans have displayed so much interest in a photoplay."¹⁹⁷ At Pearce's Tudor Theater on Canal Street in New Orleans the film broke box office records, despite the stiff twenty-five-cent admission price. When *Hypocrites* opened in Los Angeles, crowds gathered at the seven-hundred-seat Quinn's Superba, filling six shows daily for several weeks with sky-high ticket prices of twenty-five, thirty-five, and fifty cents. The struggle with regulators over whether the film could be shown in that city had received front-page coverage in LA's dailies. So popular was the film that Bosworth had to print a second run of posters and publicity materials in the spring of 1915. Paramount records indicate that in the end *Hypocrites* was an astonishing success: made at a cost of \$18,000, the film ultimately netted some \$133,000 from domestic and foreign sales.¹⁹⁸ Even as *Hypocrites* helped establish a market for ambitious feature films with high-art aspirations, it also succeeded in cementing Weber's reputation as a filmmaker. "After seeing *Hypocrites*," *Variety* proclaimed, "you can't forget the name of Lois Weber." As a result of the production, another observer noted, Weber had "attracted more attention to herself as a writer of scenarios than . . . any other author during the past season." Profiles even began to suggest that she "ranked as second among American photoplay directors," bettered

only by Griffith, and that she was “a great photoplay writer” and “a photoplay writer of consequence.”¹⁹⁹

If *Hypocrites* secured Weber’s authorial signature, it is also one of her most sustained meditations on her own enterprise. As Paul D. Young points out, the film “embraces its own constructedness, the better to elevate the filmmaker to the status of an artist.” *Hypocrites*, Young argues, is ultimately less about hypocrisy in modern society than “the possibility of imbuing the feature film with a poetic form of visibility.” Weber’s allusion to Browning’s poem at the outset of the film—her portrait dissolves directly into the quotation “What does the world, told a truth, but lie the more”—promises less an *adaptation* of the poem, Young suggests, than a text of comparable artistic complexity and merit.²⁰⁰ *Hypocrites*, in the vanguard of allegorical “multiple diegesis films” common in the early feature period, as Moya Luckett notes, ultimately mounts an argument about cinema itself—about the possibilities of “a vision unbound by time.”²⁰¹ While the film’s allegorical construction draws attention to Weber’s authorial hand, her use of such an overtly cinematic figure as the mirror of truth also signals the uniquely cinematic aspects of this “vision.” Explicitly comparing her own enterprise to that of *Naked Truth*, Weber told an interviewer, “I merely held up the mirror of truth that humanity might see itself.”²⁰²

Weber’s distinctly feminine authorial “signature” was also embodied in *Sunshine Molly*, as the film opens on an image of a large book inscribed with the title “Sunshine Molly by Lois Weber.” At the bottom edge of the frame a pair of female hands opens the cover to reveal the first page, inscribed “Book One,” then turns to another page, where the story begins: “It was a great day for Oilfield when Sunshine Molly came looking for work.” The hand turns the page again, cueing a cut to the first image of the film, the spectacular overhead panning shot that reveals Molly (Weber herself, of course) standing in the oil field, bag in hand. Intertitles continue this theme throughout the film with the feminine hand turning pages of a book to reveal titles or to cue new scenes. At each reel change book pages are shown indicating “End of Book One” and “Book Two,” as the female hand again turns the pages. Noting the innovative page-turning intertitles, one reviewer took the opportunity to draw attention to Weber’s authorship. *Sunshine Molly* “is attributed to Mr. Smalley,” the reviewer noted, “but since he and his wife, Lois Weber, worked in the film, and knowing her handiwork so well, somehow I say it is the work of ‘The Smalleys’; the review went on to refer only to Weber when praising other elements of the film with great enthusiasm.”²⁰³

Yet Weber’s authorial inscription is even more nuanced than this comment allows. In *Hypocrites* Weber’s photograph and signed dedication, vis-

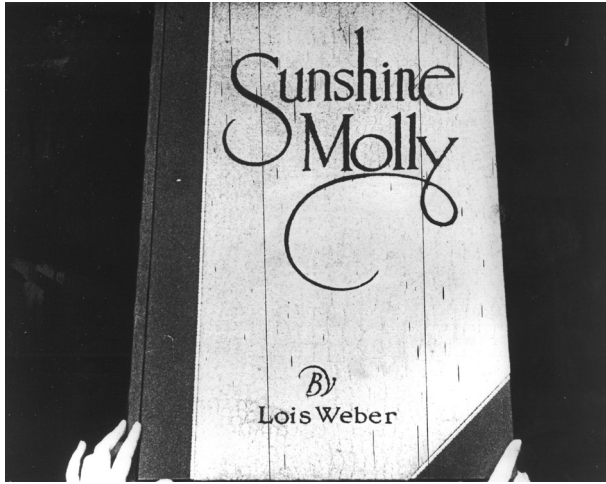


Figure 14. Weber's intricate signification of authorship in *Sunshine Molly* (1915). Frame enlargement.

ible only at the outset of the film, serve to ground a feminine authorial presence otherwise evident in the text only through its allegorical construction and its reflexive use of "life's mirror." In *Sunshine Molly*, Weber's self-inscription, woven throughout the film, is, if anything, more complex, for it is associated with the script/book, hand-written as if by Weber herself; with the unfolding of the visual narrative, cued by the female page-turner; with the spectacular command of optical space that this "hand" facilitates; and with the very embodiment of the spirited heroine, Molly, the kind of woman, as Margaret MacDonald put it, upon which "our nation depends." More still, the film's narrative construction, in which crucial information is withheld from viewers until the final reel, signals a narrator/filmmaker/page-turner with nothing short of omniscient control. Weber's authorship, which she secures through writing the original story, embodying the heroine herself, then "summoning" the images as the film's director, is total and complete.

After finishing production on *Sunshine Molly* in February 1915, Weber and Smalley took a short vacation, then announced they would seek work elsewhere, severing their association with Bosworth, Inc., after only seven months at the company. Hobart Bosworth, who had been suffering "an attack of nervous trouble," took a leave from the company around the same time, though it is unclear how significantly Bosworth's absence affected Weber and Smalley, who tended to work on their own productions independent of those

Bosworth was making. Press reports also suggested the pair were unhappy at Bosworth, yet it is not clear why. Were they dissatisfied directing projects like *Captain Courtesy* and *Betty in Search of a Thrill*—films they neither wrote nor starred in themselves? Did the absence of Hobart Bosworth, who had originally drawn them to the company, change the dynamics there? Anthony Slide even speculates that under Paramount's auspices Adolph Zukor began "interfering in the freedom of control in script preparation that Lois Weber took as her right." If true, this would certainly have rankled the director. Or were finances a cause of the couple's dissatisfaction? Four months after leaving Bosworth, they sued Garbutt, alleging failure to pay royalties.²⁰⁴ Seizing an opportunity to leave, Weber and Smalley met with Carl Laemmle in April 1915 when he was in Los Angeles for a celebration marking the grand opening of Universal City. Laemmle agreed to re-sign the couple and, in doing so, committed to increased production of feature films, a form now thoroughly associated with Weber. During the couple's time at Bosworth, Weber had directed six features, including *Hypocrites*, one of the most ambitious motion pictures ever produced in the United States. More than this, she had fashioned a clear authorial presence in her films, using the celebrity persona Bosworth had erected for her to assert a compelling vision of cinematic authorship. By the time she re-signed with Laemmle, Weber's creative signature had been so indelibly established that one writer declared, "There is no man in the industry who is a greater writer than this woman at Universal City."²⁰⁵