Idols of Modernity
Movie Stars of the 1920s

EDITED BY
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By 1920, Douglas Fairbanks was one of the most popular stars in Hollywood and, indeed, the world, along with Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin. If the formation of United Artists the year before consolidated his position as a major star and producer, it also prepared the public for an even more powerful merger: the marriage of Fairbanks and Pickford. No one—least of all Fairbanks and Pickford themselves—anticipated the enormous boost this union would give their already lofty stature. They were arguably the first celebrity couple, treated like royalty by the press, by their adoring
douglas fairbanks as the thief of bagdad (1924). courtesy of the academy of motion picture arts and sciences.
fans, and even by actual aristocrats. If we look closely at the publicity covering the marriage, we can see certain themes begin to take shape. These themes are especially familiar, since they also appeared in the films of each star and in their individual star discourse as well. But these motifs—namely, rescue, royalty, and the unity of opposites—seem to be borrowed from Fairbanks's films and publicity in particular. The Fairbanks persona, in other words, shaped the discussion of the marriage in general. While Pickford's persona was clearly a factor in the way journalists wrote about the couple, many of their motifs make use of ideas already established in the publicity and films of Douglas Fairbanks.

Though motivated by love, we cannot discount the strategic advantage Fairbanks enjoyed from this union; it gave him the confidence and security to change his star persona and his product from westerns and modern-era comedies to costumed adventure films. This risky transformation eventually paid huge dividends: his swashbuckling persona delighted audiences, his films were lauded as the pinnacle of silent film art, and his imitators were legion. But this period also represents a significant shift in the Fairbanks persona. If his films from the 1910s emphasized his democratic instinct, the films of the 1920s present fantasies of nobility. Furthermore, the star discourse on Fairbanks in the 1920s emphasizes his role as producer over any other aspect that was underlined in the 1910s, such as author, popular philosopher, patriot, or even film star. Instead, the Fairbanks persona transforms into manager, industry spokesman, artist, and Hollywood aristocrat. As his stock continued to rise in Hollywood, he was hailed as not only a major producer, but also as a civic leader and industry captain. Indeed, it could be argued that his position of leadership in Beverly Hills and as the first president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was due primarily to the enormous success of the Fairbanks star persona. In the late 1920s, with the coming of sound and the weakening of his bond with Pickford, it became increasingly clear that Fairbanks's position as King of Hollywood was securely tied to the silent era.

Rescue and Royalty

Upon their arrival in London in late June 1920, the first stop on their six-week honeymoon tour of Europe, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were mobbed. Whether the crowd was the result of carefully crafted publicity (everyone knew exactly where and when they would arrive) or due to a long, pent-up desire to see them both in the flesh, the display of fan enthusiasm was unprecedented and even frightening. One
correspondent, Algonquin Round Table member Alexander Woollcott, reported that fans “hung from factory windows and mounted running boards and fell under the wheels. To the authorities was left only the task of protecting the visitors from being trampled to death or having their clothes lovingly torn from them. In this they were not entirely successful, but then only thirty policemen were detailed as bodyguards” (Everybody’s Magazine, November 1920, 36–37). At one point, in a moment that would
become exemplary of not only their honeymoon but their marriage, “when Mary was in danger of being enthusiastically but fatally trampled underfoot, her husband rushed to the rescue of his lovely and prosperous bride, lifted her in his justly celebrated arms and started to plow his way to safety” (37). A fan, undeterred by this melodramatic rescue, asked for his autograph. While some Londoners were puzzled or disgusted at this display, no one could question its authenticity, or that the crowds treated Doug and Mary with a uniquely modern mixture of reverence and familiarity. They were indeed monarchs of the screen, but everyone felt they knew them personally. Woollcott reports that the King of England did not call on the couple, but that “he had his car drawn up on the distant outskirts of the crowd, and for twenty minutes watched the seething multitude that had turned out with an interest they would be unlikely to show for anyone else in the world, save his own son and heir” (37). George V might not have been caught up in the awesome funnel cloud of modern celebrity, but he could certainly see it from where he stood.

Keen observers would have recognized its contours on the horizon years earlier, of course, with the rise of fan culture in the 1910s, as studios capitalized on the increasing interest in film actors by organizing their productions and publicity around stars (on the early star system, see deCordova). In April 1918, Pickford, Fairbanks, and Chaplin embarked on a nationwide tour for the Liberty Loan bond drive, which was the government’s attempt to stir up money and national fervor for the war (for more on the tours, see Kennedy Over Here 98–106; on Fairbanks and the war effort, see Curtis). The tour’s patriotic publicity combined with the mounting passion for film stars (especially these three) to create a perfect storm of celebrity: the crowds for this tour were enormous (e.g., Chicago Daily Tribune, 5 April 1918, 12). During this tour, fans also got their first extended look at Doug and Mary together, a public pairing that did not sit well with Fairbanks’s wife, Beth Sully. Coincident with the tour, Sully announced to the press that she and her husband had separated, citing an unnamed “actress” as the cause (Chicago Daily Tribune, 12 April 1918, 10). Everybody knew who this “actress” was, of course, even if Fairbanks disingenuously denied the story as “German propaganda.” Owen Moore, Pickford’s husband, knew, too, and released his own thoughts on the topic, accusing Fairbanks of being the “aggressor” and declaring that “the other woman” had been “much victimized” (Los Angeles Times, 14 April 1918, 2:1). This was the beginning of an irreparable breach, even if Pickford and Fairbanks, who had met in New York in November 1915, had been seeing each other regularly since 1916 (Pickford 195–223). Now that the affair was public, there was no
turning back. Sully was granted a divorce in December 1918, which became final in March 1919 (Los Angeles Times, 1 December 1918, 1:5; 6 March 1919, 2:10). That divorce was relatively uncomplicated compared to the Moore-Pickford separation. Out of the blue in March 1920, Pickford was granted a quickie divorce from Moore in Minden, Nevada. Pickford and her mother had been in Minden since February and claimed to have plans to move there permanently. Meanwhile, Moore just happened to be in nearby Virginia City, where he was served with papers (New York Times, 4 March 1920, 9). Immediately after the divorce, reporters were already asking if she would wed Fairbanks, which she vehemently denied, but by the end of the month she had already moved back to Los Angeles and married him (Los Angeles Times, 31 March 1920, 2:1). All of this raised the suspicions of the Nevada attorney general, who claimed that Pickford had acted in bad faith in order to get around the Nevada residency requirement for divorce (Chicago Tribune, 4 April 1920, 3). He vowed to sue to void the divorce; the case moved through the Nevada legal system until Pickford prevailed in June of 1922 (Los Angeles Times, 1 May 1922, 2:1).

Pickford’s divorce could have been disastrous for her and Fairbanks, especially given the celebrity scandals of the early 1920s. They were, in fact, very worried about how their fans would take the news; Pickford was especially anxious that divorce and remarriage, which would lead to her excommunication from the Catholic Church (to which she had converted upon marrying Moore), would cost her Catholic fans (Pickford 204–05; Photoplay, June 1920, 74). But they had three things working in their favor. First, their individual popularity was such that fans were already eagerly anticipating their marriage. The top two box-office stars seemed perfect for each other. A May 1919 feature on Pickford, for example, tells of fan mail asking when she would marry Fairbanks (Boston Daily Globe, 11 May 1919, E3). Second, their established personas—Mary’s innocence and purity, Doug’s honor and gallantry—were already squeaky clean, so it would have taken much worse to tarnish them. Third, they worked quickly to develop sweet-smelling publicity that would overpower any whiff of scandal. Indeed, this publicity borrows its characters and narrative arc from the Pickford and Fairbanks personas. An important example is a June 1920 Photoplay feature on the couple, which appeared in early May, just after the Nevada divorce brouhaha erupted in April. Notably, this article was distributed to a variety of newspapers nationwide, where it was reprinted word for word in whole or in part (for example, Washington Post, 9 May 1920, 49); the piece thereby shaped much of the subsequent coverage of the couple in the national press. The Photoplay article calls their romance “one of the
great love stories of all time” and creates a sympathetic (if not pathetic) portrait of Pickford as a long-suffering woman who deserves a little happiness in her life (Photoplay, June 1920, 70, 73–74, 113). According to the article, hers is “a love that has come after great sorrow” (73)—even if it is vague on the details of the source of that sorrow—and while cynics and gossips may snigger, no one who knows her story would deny her this crumb of joy. It paints the Fairbanks-Pickford marriage as the quintessential happy ending, making her personal story an echo of her films. Particularly interesting is that, even while it tells the story in terms of a Hollywood happy ending, the article equates the cynicism of the press with the “relentless eye of the camera” (70). That is, the camera works as a metaphor for the critical, unforgiving intrusiveness of modern publicity, even while that same machinery creates the criteria by which the success of their romance is measured. By framing their delicate, ephemeral, and “moonlit” romance against “the glare of the mid-day sun of publicity,” the article admonishes the cynical Hollywood gossip (or fan) who does not believe in “romance,” thereby validating not only the marriage, but their films. This piece on Pickford and Fairbanks, like others that followed, demonstrates how much their films and characters set the terms by which writers and journalists approached the couple.

Three themes serve as examples of the way in which the Fairbanks persona, in particular, framed the story of their marriage: rescue, royalty, and the “unity of opposites.” First, as Christina Lane has pointed out, “rescue” was a prominent theme in coverage of the marriage from the beginning (Lane 78). The Photoplay article, for instance, illustrates their shared destiny with this story: “One day there was an accident on the Lasky lot. Miss Pickford was suspended high in the air at a rope's end. It began to spin and twist. There was grave danger that she would be injured. Fairbanks, acting on instinct, climbed to her rescue. He carried her to safety and her arms went about his neck” (Bates 74). Whether this was true or not (likely not) is immaterial. The narrative created around the two is scattered with such stories. Even Pickford remembers the beginning of their romance in terms of a rescue. Recalling their first meeting, she describes a cold November evening when she and Elsie Janis are playfully chasing after Fairbanks and Moore to escape a boring party. Suddenly she finds herself stepping on a log in the middle of a stream: “I knew I couldn’t possibly negotiate it without falling into the icy water. What followed was typical of Douglas. At the precise moment of my sudden panic he decided to turn back. What a relief it was to see his friendly face smiling at me. ‘Do you mind?’ he said. And I frankly replied, ‘No,’ when I saw how he planned to rescue me. ‘Please do’”
And he did indeed. It has not been noted, however, that the rescue theme is pervasive in the Fairbanks publicity from the 1910s onward. According to promotional and publicity materials, he always seems to be at the right place at the right time: “Douglas Fairbanks Finds Dying Man on the Desert,” “Fairbanks Rescues Child; Proves Hero of the Day,” “Fairbanks Gives Blood to Save Employee’s Life” (all from Douglas Fairbanks Scrapbook #5, circa 1917–18, AMPAS), “Fairbanks Routs Wolves, Saves Dog” (Los Angeles Times, 10 January 1920, 2:7), “Fairbanks and His Merry Men Subdue Blaze” (Los Angeles Times, 9 March 1924, B13), and “Doug Fairbanks Rescues 3 Under Overturned Auto” (unsourced, 25 June 1931, Douglas Fairbanks bio clipping file, AMPAS)² are just some of the headlines strewn through the discourse on Doug, who apparently saved more lives than the Red Cross. Fairbanks rescued damsels in his films, too, and in this he was not unique; but the insistence of this motif in his publicity from the beginning to the end of his career is rather unusual. When he married Pickford, the publicity about them appropriated this theme in order to validate and make sense of the union for their film audience.

A second frequent theme is “the unity of opposites.” Commentators never failed to note the difference between Pickford and Fairbanks—one demure, the other brash; one calm, the other boyishly energetic. One interview describes their entrances into the hotel room in a typical, if picturesque, way: “Something happens. At first one doesn’t know just what. Then realization comes. It is Doug.” If Fairbanks is lightning, Pickford is rain: “Suddenly there is a deep quiet, as tho a flower, a cool, white pond-lily, perhaps with a heart of clear gold, falling into a pond, had sent out broad circles of peace. It is Mary” (Motion Picture Magazine, November 1920, 32). This piece lays it on especially thick, but thinking about the Pickford-Fairbanks marriage as an idyllic unity of complementary forces was common. We should also think of this motif in terms of Fairbanks’s films. Sometimes publicity about the couple would be tied to publicity about his films in a painfully obvious way, as when a feature story on the two declares that “Mary and Doug will become a Legend” or “They bring the Age of Chivalry, when men were brave and women fair, into an Age of Commerce,” just after Robin Hood had opened (Motion Picture Classic, February 1923, 47).

But publicity that focuses on the “unity of opposites” theme also recalls similar motifs in the Fairbanks oeuvre starting from his earliest films. This theme, however, has little to do with the romantic subplots of his films; even the most memorable heroines in the Fairbanks films function as little more than pretty faces. Yet these heroines are usually a calm presence in
contrast to Doug’s flamboyant stunts and personality. Ruth Renick’s character in *The Mollycoddle* (1920) is a little more active than usual: she plays a secret agent on the trail of a smuggler. Even so, her activity is limited predominantly to the first half of the film, in which Fairbanks plays a foppish ex-pat American who has grown “soft” from too much time in Europe. In the second half of the film, the Fairbanks character ends up in Arizona and, from this encounter with the land, finds his “true” American blood within; during this transformation, we see little of Renick and when we do, she is a damsel in need of rescue. Accordingly, Fairbanks blossoms into a western hero, saving the girl from the clutches of the evil smuggler. There are two levels, then, in which the “unity of opposites” theme usually works in a Fairbanks film. On the first level, the female lead often functions as blank, calm canvas against which the energetic Fairbanks character can fully display his colors. Interviews with Doug and Mary often rehearse this configuration by contrasting his boyish exuberance against her tranquil, even maternal demeanor. The comparison between Madonna and child or Wendy and Peter Pan, for example, is presented as particularly apt (*Photoplay*, February 1927, 35).

On the second level, the Fairbanks character itself usually displays an inner duality. In such films as *The Lamb* (1915), *Double Trouble* (1915), *Manhattan Madness* (1916), *The Mollycoddle*, or especially *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), the Fairbanks character is divided in two along the East/West axis. *The Lamb* anticipates *The Mollycoddle*: Fairbanks plays an eastern mama’s boy who finds his spine out west and rescues the girl. In *Double Trouble*, he plays a bookish twerp from the East who, after a blow to the head, wakes up as a rowdy mayor of a western boomtown. In *Manhattan Madness*, he plays a son of eastern schools and exclusive clubs who returns to New York after life on the range and consequently finds the city life incredibly boring. This theme of western rejuvenation, of the West as an antidote to degeneration, has a long history in American literature (see Slotkin and White), but the most proximate influence on Fairbanks was his hero, Theodore Roosevelt, who adopted this theme as his own and transformed his political career (on Fairbanks and Roosevelt, see Studlar, *Mad Masquerade*). When he entered the film industry, Fairbanks, too, took on this motif as a way of differentiating himself from his Broadway past and aligning himself with his new Hollywood home. Even when his films from the 1910s were not explicitly western-themed, they incorporated some aspect of this duality, usually in the form of a transformation from dissolute or distracted to focused and determined characters (see Curtis). *The Mollycoddle* is a summary—by way of caricature—of these Fairbanks motifs, but *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) is
their culmination and conclusion. In Zorro, Fairbanks plays Don Diego Vega, the son of a titled landowner in Spanish California, which is ruled by a corrupt governor. Vega returns to California after many years in Spain. By day, he presents himself as a feminized, fey, easily fatigued fop who is concerned with little beyond his slight sleight-of-hand parlor tricks (which nevertheless hint that all is not as it appears). By night, however, he is the dashing masked avenger known as Zorro, who protects the exploited poor from the whip of tyranny. The original inspiration for leagues of superheroes, Zorro combined thrilling swordplay, secret identities, and intrigues with a historical setting. Fairbanks had been interested in costume dramas for some time; A Modern Musketeer (1917) featured a winking historical prologue in which he plays a swashbuckler. But he was wary of putting his successful generic formula of westerns and modern comedies at risk. The rise of United Artists, his marriage to Pickford, and the enormous boost in celebrity that came with both gave him the confidence to try his hand at the costumed adventure film. It paid off: Zorro was his most profitable production yet (Vance 99) and a pivotal film. After The Nut (1921), a minor modern comedy mostly ignored by the contemporary press and historians, Fairbanks never returned to his earlier formula. Zorro also concludes the East/West, weak/strong duality of the former persona and looks forward to his preoccupation with costume films and nobility.

Fairbanks’s longstanding interest in aristocracy is inseparable from publicity about the couple as “Hollywood royalty,” the third theme about the marriage that is framed in terms of the Fairbanks persona. This motif first shows up at the time of their honeymoon in June 1920. Upon their arrival in New York, they were hailed as “Filmland Monarchs” and “given a royal welcome by fans” (Los Angeles Times, 2 June 1920, 1:8). But the metaphor becomes even more common after their return from their European trip; the adoration of crowds overseas seemed to cement their claim to international fame and entitlement. One set of interviewers was especially smitten when meeting Doug and Mary after their European tour, writing that they “begin to realize how it feels to be presented to royalty. Life can never again hold any thrills” (Motion Picture Magazine, November 1920, 31). Subsequent European trips (in 1921, 1922, 1924, and 1926) were instrumental in securing this association between the couple and aristocracy. The trips were not simply vacations; Pickford and Fairbanks also spent time forging business ties with foreign exhibitors, a necessary part of the job, given that United Artists was a distribution company (Los Angeles Times, 6 August 1924, A1). But this workaday aspect of the trips was overshadowed by press that focused on their meetings with royalty and heads of state. During their
1924 trip, one paper reported that “the movie sovereigns will be the guests of Lord Louis Mountbatten, cousin of King George,” and that “they are also ‘commanded’ to appear before the king and queen of the Belgians” before calling on “the court of Sweden” later in the season (Chicago Daily Tribune, 20 April 1924, 5). They were, however, rebuffed by the king of Denmark on this same trip (New York Times, 8 May 1924, 21) and the Spanish king apparently did not appreciate that they attracted bigger crowds than he did, so he asked them to leave (Los Angeles Times, 15 August 1924, 2). But in 1926 they had a long, friendly chat with Benito Mussolini, so it all evened out in the end (New York Times, 11 May 1926, 29).

As a result of these trips, Mr. and Mrs. Fairbanks assumed the appearance of unofficial American ambassadors (see “Our Unofficial Ambassadors,” Motion Picture Magazine, June 1927; “‘Doug’ Fairbanks Called ‘Greatest Ambassador,’” Pittsburg (Kansas) Sun, 14 December 1926). They often hosted dignitaries at their residence in Hollywood, known as Pickfair. They presented their home as a sanctuary against the glare of publicity, even as it was located in the capital of modern celebrity. In one month, for example, they hosted the British foreign secretary and an Italian duke (Los Angeles Times, 30 September 1928, 14). They even offered Pickfair as a summer vacation home for President Calvin Coolidge (Los Angeles Times, 26 January 1927, A1). Lord Mountbatten testified, “It was run very much on English country house lines and in fact they really kept court there. It was like Buckingham Palace in London” (Vance 65). And it was well known in Hollywood that Fairbanks and Pickford rarely went out, but receiving an invitation to Pickfair was a special thing indeed. So by 1927, the royalty theme had become an inescapable element of the publicity surrounding the couple, to the point of cliche: “Doug and Mary are, of course, the King and Queen of Hollywood, providing the necessary air of dignity, sobriety, and aristocracy. Gravely they attend movie openings, cornerstone layings, gravely sit at the head of the table at the long dinners in honor of the cinema great, Douglas making graceful speeches, Mary conducting herself with the self-abnegation of Queen Mary of Britain” (Talmey 33).

Perhaps this equation with royalty was inevitable, given their place at the top of the Hollywood hierarchy. But it can’t be entirely coincidental that its use corresponds with significant changes in the Fairbanks persona in the 1920s. Certainly, he flirted with the royal fantasy even in his films of the 1910s. Reaching for the Moon (1917), for example, features Fairbanks as a regular fellow obsessed with hints of his quasi-royal heritage; much of the film is a dream sequence in which he finds himself defending that heritage in a crumbling European monarchy. Likewise, His Majesty the American
(1919) finds Doug playing a restless roustabout who discovers that he is heir to a Balkan throne; he rushes over to set the degenerating monarchy straight using old-fashioned American know-how. But these fantasies were exceptions to his distinctly down-to-earth, democratic persona of the teens. Even in *His Majesty*, the Fairbanks character works hard to maintain ties to the common man by entertaining the chambermaids or sharing a smoke with the hansom cab driver, for example. With *Zorro*, however, a different pattern emerges: the heroes (for example, Zorro, Robin Hood, Don Q, the Black Pirate) start out as aristocrats and use their positions and/or skills to aid the people. In other words, between the 1910s and 1920s there is a shift in the Fairbanks persona that corresponds to, shapes, and amplifies his status as “Hollywood royalty” in the publicity of the day. From a “regular fellow” in his films of the 1910s, Fairbanks is vaulted into nobility by the celebrity machinery of Hollywood. From this high pedestal, it was hard even for him to jump down—and with a sanctuary like Pickfair, he really didn’t need to. So his marriage to Pickford generates a royalty trope that taps into his personal interests and finds its way into his films, which in turn continue to feed the metaphor, which eventually guides the way he conducts business.

Fairbanks the Producer

From 1921 to 1926, corresponding to the production of *The Three Musketeers* and the release of *The Black Pirate*, the publicity about Fairbanks focused much more on his role as producer than any other feature of his persona, save his status as Hollywood “royalty.” In some ways, this emphasis follows a pattern familiar to his devotees. In the previous six years, he had been portrayed variously as cowboy, popular philosopher, athlete, super-patriot, author, and of course film star—producer/businessman was just one more facet of his persona. In fact, the discussion of Fairbanks as businessman first begins during his Broadway days as a recurring feature of a (mostly fanciful) biography that tells of a brief stint on Wall Street. That story was apparently a necessary, masculine element. As Richard Schickel states, “It was man’s work—business—in the age when business was said to be the business of America” (Schickel, *Picture* 75). The motif comes up again when Fairbanks creates his own production company in 1917, and then again with the formation of United Artists in 1919. But even at these moments, his role as producer never overshadowed other aspects of his image; it functioned more as a side light bringing other roles into relief. As his productions became more expansive and his status at the top of the
Hollywood food chain more secure, his role as producer outshone all other features of his star persona. One Hollywood wit even admitted, “Doug, the star, would have been out long ago had it not been for his friend, Doug, the producer” (Los Angeles Times, 29 April 1925, C7). During these years, Fairbanks’s “producer function” had three sides: manager, industry spokesman, and artist.

Douglas Fairbanks as The Black Pirate (1926). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
If Fairbanks dipped his toe in the uncertain waters of the costume film with *Zorro*, pulling back quickly with *The Nut*, he flung himself head first into the genre with *The Three Musketeers* (1921). His initial caution stemmed from his unwillingness to fiddle with his successful formula. But costume films had been making headway in the industry without him; Germany’s Ernst Lubitsch, for example, had scored box office hits with imports *Madame DuBarry* (aka *Passion*, 1919) and *Anna Boleyn* (aka *Deception*, 1920). So the waters were not completely untested by the time he decided to film the Dumas novel. Adding to his enthusiasm was his long-standing fascination with the character of D’Artagnan, to whom he would return with his last silent film, *The Iron Mask* (1929). For some, such as critic Robert Sherwood, no other actor could have played D’Artagnan with as much panache: “When Alexandre Dumas sat down at his desk, smoothed his hair back, chewed the end of his quill pen, and said to himself, ‘Well, I guess I might as well write a book called *The Three Musketeers,*’ he doubtless had but one object in view: to provide a suitable story for Douglas Fairbanks to act in the movies” (*Life*, 22 September 1921, 78). The rest of the critics and country agreed—with a fast-paced story and some of the most amazing swordplay ever seen on the screen, it was a big box-office success. But it was also a big production, costing just under $750,000 (Vance 122). Much of the publicity for the film focused on the scale of its production: “The Louvre, with its vaulted ceilings and impressive arches, was reproduced in a set nearly 200 feet long. . . . With the King and Queen looking on from the throne, 200 gorgeously costumed couples occupy the floor. . . . ‘All told,’ said Robert Fairbanks, production manager and brother of the famous Doug, ‘we built 37 interiors and 40 exteriors, every one of them costing at least three times as much as any other set ever constructed on the Fairbanks lot’” (*Boston Daily Globe*, 11 September 1921, 60). Part of this emphasis has a nationalistic (if not testosterone-filled) ring to it: *Musketeers* “is the superior of any of the German pictures that have been brought to this country” (*Life*, 22 September 1921, 78), and it “has proved beyond a doubt that the foreign producers can still learn a lot from America” (*Boston Daily Globe*, 12 September 1921, 9). But this stress on the size of the production also points to the direction Fairbanks was taking the industry. Big spectacles would soon be the order of the day and “it appears to have greatly pleased [Fairbanks] to set hundreds of craftsmen to work on projects that would, ultimately, employ similar numbers of players” (Schickel, *Picture 75*).

This pattern holds for his next few films, but especially for the following picture, *Robin Hood* (1922). *Robin Hood* was huge: “Thirty thousand calls
issued through casting department to players. Eighteen hundred players used in biggest scene. Three hundred horses used in a single scene. Total scenes shot, eleven hundred and eight” (Moving Picture World, 9 September 1922, 114). And so forth. It broke records at both ends, in the size of the production and in the size of the box office gross (Los Angeles Times, 10 February 1923, 2:16). It started a new trend toward big-budget spectacles in Hollywood, which included The Ten Commandments (1923), The Covered Wagon (1923), and others. But it was an especially significant film given the state of the industry at the time. Buffeted by the celebrity scandals of 1921–22 (involving Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, William Desmond Taylor, Mabel Normand, and Wallace Reid) and increasing pressure from reform groups for outside censorship, the industry was on the defensive and in an economic slump (see Koszarski, Evening’s Entertainment 198–210). For many inside and out of Hollywood, Fairbanks represented an unimpeachable brand of entertainment. “But the new picture is not all expensive setting. It has a clean-cut, human story” that, for Fairbanks, has none of the “sordid realism” he deplores in the pictures of the day (Los Angeles Times, 19 March 1922, 3:33). Robin Hood came to the rescue in another way. With thousands out of work during the slump in Hollywood, the scale of the production also provided a much-needed economic stimulus in the classic tradition of paying workers so that they can consume the products they help make: “The surprising total of 25,000 persons received pay for serving as supernumeraries” in the film. “This large number of people were given employment in the capacity of ‘extras.’ . . . Most of them have spent a portion of their money on several visits to Grauman’s Hollywood Egyptian Theater, where Robin Hood is starting its fifteenth week” (Los Angeles Times, 21 January 1923, 3:32). And in every story, Fairbanks is portrayed as a figure who manages all aspects of the production, from the initial research to the set design and the final cut.

Robin Hood, then, was undoubtedly good for Hollywood, just what it needed at just the right time. It was a “statement” film that testified to the industry’s potential at a moment when that potential was in doubt. Starting with this film, Fairbanks begins to make more direct remarks to the press and public about the state of the industry. He had always had by-lines, ever since his days on Broadway. In interviews and articles (ghost) written by him, he had offered an opinion on all sorts of topics, but usually within a domain that supported his established star persona. In the late 1910s, for example, he wrote about the importance of fitness and clean living for good health and wartime preparedness (Los Angeles Times, 1 October 1918, 14). He also wrote two inspirational books, Laugh and Live
(1917) and *Making Life Worthwhile* (1918), which outlined his formula for optimism and success. His interviews, too, would often lay out his keys to success in the film industry, or his immediate plans for the next film. He became more involved in the public presentation of business after the formation of United Artists, when he acted as the de facto spokesman for the company. Always good for a quote—and apparently less shy than his partners—Fairbanks was often the point man for any company announcement, such as the formation of Allied Corporation, a subsidiary distributor (*Los Angeles Times*, 21 April 1922, 2:11). But with *Robin Hood*, he offers bolder and broader proclamations about the state of the industry. He speaks against legislating censorship (*Moving Picture World*, 25 March 1922, 355); against industry overproduction (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, September 1922, 117); even against Will Hays's plans for the studios (*Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1923, 2:1). But he also has a vision for the industry, which he articulates in a series of articles for *Ladies Home Journal* in 1922 and 1924. With such titles as “As Douglas Fairbanks Sees the Film Play of Tomorrow” (October 1922); “Why Big Pictures” (March 1924); “Films for the Fifty Million” (April 1924); and “A Huge Responsibility” (May 1924), he justifies his production plans and suggests his ideas about the artistic potential of the medium. Nothing he says is groundbreaking, but they were not questions that would have been asked of him even five years earlier. If he had already become social royalty with his marriage to Pickford, with *Robin Hood* he emerges as one of the town’s leading producers, the King of Hollywood, with all the responsibilities it entails. When he says, “I made up my mind that the best way to further the cause of pictures was by making good pictures,” he explicitly places himself as the gallant protector—even rescuer—of an embattled industry (*Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 1922, 2:9).

His ambitions were not only industrial but also artistic. Not satisfied with making the biggest movies, he also wanted to make the best and most beautiful movies. This aspiration is most evident in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and *The Black Pirate* (1926). Yet in his public proclamations, Fairbanks is ambivalent about the status of his films as art:

Those of us who have tried and learned what is known today as film-making do not believe that we are turning out great and permanent works of art. . . . What everyone who is seriously interested in the business is trying to do is to get at the possibilities of the screen. There is something bigger and better going to come out of the films than anyone has yet found. We are all digging away for that, and meantime we are affording entertainment to millions of persons the world over.

Nevertheless, there is no denying the self-consciously artistic aims of these two films, especially *Thief*. Even if Fairbanks himself humbly demurred, the publicity and critical reception of the films trumpeted their aesthetic qualities. Reviews for both were ecstatic, but the spectacle of *Thief* forced many critics to reach for their thesaurus, as in this advance publicity piece:

> Naught that adds iridescence and kindling beauty to scene and costume will be embodied in the exotic pageant. Naught that has yet gone to make you gasp with astonishment, or laugh with delight at some bizarre eccentricity of pictorial motion, some photographic trick, but will be used to heighten the extravagant fascination of this new Scheherazade tale.

*Picture-Play*, September 1923, 44

Reviews for *Pirate* were similarly positive, especially about its use of still-experimental two-strip Technicolor. No less a commentator than poet and early film theorist Vachel Lindsay compared the colors and compositions of *Pirate* to the paintings of Frank Brangwyn, Howard Pyle, and Winslow Homer (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, August 1926, 12, 114). Indeed, if *Pirate* was an homage to painting, *Thief* borrowed liberally from modern dance, as Gaylyn Studlar has argued. With its “treatment of scenic décor as a ‘dance space’ and by the Léon Bakst–influenced style of its production design . . . the film appears as a self-consciously artful meditation of trends found in the Ballets Russes’s scenic and costume design, setting, and figure movement” (Studlar, “Douglas Fairbanks” 109).

This combination of scale and artistic ambition naturally drew comparisons to D. W. Griffith, as when one reporter notes that the sets for *Robin Hood* represent the largest since *Intolerance* (1916) (*Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 1922, 2:9). Lindsay took that comparison one step further: “I say that in *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate*, Douglas is fighting like a gentleman and scholar for Griffith’s place. The history of the movies is now David Wark Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks, and whoever rises hereafter to dispute their title” (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, August 1926, 12). Today that claim might seem spurious to all but the most devoted fans, but at the time Lindsay was merely confirming Fairbanks’s established place in the cinema hierarchy. After a string of industry-changing successes, his stature was on a par with Griffith’s after *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance*. And Lindsay based his praise not on claims for Fairbanks’s artistic genius, but for his leadership. Chaplin and Valentino have their particular genius, Lindsay argues, “but when you reflect upon the massive statesmanship required to conceive and to put across two such films of the sea and land, of mobs and of cities, as *The Thief of Bagdad* and *The Black Pirate*, Douglas Fairbanks is the statesman and great man” (114). In the late 1920s, this
position of leadership would be at once confirmed through his presidency of the newly formed Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and lost with the coming of sound.

★★★★★ An Aging King

In mid-1927, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) chose Fairbanks as their first president. Given his stature in the industry, it appeared to be a natural choice. After all, he was also very involved in the formation and development of Beverly Hills and in the effort to bring the 1932 Olympics to Los Angeles.\(^5\) He was an active civic and industry leader. But the idea of the Academy was born in the living room of Louis B. Mayer, the MGM studio mogul, and some contended that it was merely a “producers’ union” from the very start, so the choice of president was a delicate matter that might have easily gone another way.\(^6\)

Years later, in fact, director Fred Niblo, one of the original founders, remembered that it did go another way at first: “At our first big ‘get-together’ it was suggested Irving Thalberg [MGM producer and Mayer protégé] be made president. But Irving believed . . . that an actor should head the organization and Douglas Fairbanks was elected the first president” (Fred Niblo to Hedda Hopper, 14 November 1941, Hedda Hopper Collection, AMPAS). Thalberg was right, as he was about so many things: trouble with the actors’ union was brewing on the horizon, as anyone could see, and it would be best, if the Academy were to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the guilds, to choose not a representative from management, but from the actors. As a producer himself, Fairbanks would also be friendly to those concerns. Furthermore, he was a prominent and well-liked personality, giving the new organization a strong public face.

Looking closely at his tenure as president, however, it is clear that his role in the Academy was minimal. Others, such as Frank Woods, William C. DeMille, Fred Beetson, Mayer, and even Mary Pickford were more instrumental in shaping the direction of the organization. For example, an Academy bulletin announces DeMille’s presidency in 1929: “In accepting the office of President, the active duties of which he has been performing for the past year as Vice President, Mr. DeMille briefly outlined the very considerable achievements of the Academy” (Academy Bulletin No. 26, 30 October 1929, AMPAS; my emphasis). We must conclude that it was precisely Fairbanks’s public face, his persona, that the fledgling Academy required: someone perceived as honest and honorable, inherently democratic yet graced with noblesse oblige, as well as someone with managerial skill and a deep investment in the future of the industry. Fairbanks may have personally held all these qualities, but they were definitely elements of his established star image, which was more important to the Academy at its formation.

We can also speculate that the widening schism between Fairbanks and Pickford might have played a role in his waning interest in the Academy and in his work in general. Her mother’s illness and death between 1926 and 1928, along with the death of his brother John in 1926, affected them both profoundly and put a heavy strain on their relationship (Vance 227). As a result, Pickford began to drink heavily, further alienating teetotaling Fairbanks (Vance 281). In 1927, they found consolation in the arms of others—Pickford with her co-star Buddy Rogers on the set of My Best Girl (1927) and Fairbanks with Lupe Velez during the filming of The Gaucho (1927) (Vance 239). They stayed together through this, but the cracks in the relationship were beginning to show. His attention to his work
decreased and his interest in travel grew, as they took trips around the world in 1928 and 1929.

*Gaucho* opened in November 1927, one month after *The Jazz Singer*, to mixed reviews. Though it did well at the box office, the critical response to the film was distracted by the potential of sound cinema. In public, Fairbanks was cautiously open-minded about the new technology: “While fully appreciative of the novelty and the advances made by talking pictures during the past few months, Fairbanks feels it still has serious limitations, particularly in his type of production” (*Washington Post*, 29 July 1928, A2). His son put it more bluntly: “My father’s enthusiasm for his work had, by then, begun to diminish. He was interested in the advent of ‘talking pictures,’ and clearly admired other people’s sound films, but he felt very strongly that his medium, like Chaplin’s, was the silent film—story-telling through the medium of pictures. . . . Sound, for his purposes, was too literal, too realistic and restricting” (Douglas Fairbanks Bio Pamphlet #1, AMPAS). Nevertheless, he incorporated sound accompaniment into his last silent film, a sequel to *The Three Musketeers* called *The Iron Mask* (1929), which opened to good reviews and good box office; but it was only marginally profitable and became the swan song of the costumed adventure film (for the time being) as well. As Jeffrey Vance writes, “Having virtually defined the swashbuckler as a cinematic genre, Fairbanks was also the one to usher out its initial cycle” (266).

The final sign of his impending irrelevance was Fairbanks’s collaboration with Pickford in *Taming of the Shrew* (1929), a talkie adaptation of the Shakespeare play. It seemed like a good idea: fans had been clamoring for them to appear together in a film for years, Fairbanks was comfortable with the Bard, and it was a chance to repair their relationship by renewing their interest in their work. Sadly, it didn’t turn out that way. His normal exuberance soured to petulance under the restrictions of early sound film production. Pickford, meanwhile, tried to maintain her work ethic. Art director Laurence Irving witnessed the inevitable collision: “At times, it seemed as though a mischievous sprite incited Douglas to ruin scenes for the hell of it, in mockery of the medium in which he realized Mary had a professional edge on him” (Vance 276). The tensions on the set further unraveled their marriage. Even though the film opened to good reviews, it was not treated well by history; it was, for example, notorious for the credit, “By William Shakespeare. Additional Dialogue by Sam Taylor,” which they hastily fixed (Vance 277). Pickford’s confidence suffered from the experience and Fairbanks took to traveling, first alone and then with Lady Sylvia Ashley. Pickford and Fairbanks divorced in 1936, but *Taming* did them in long before.
Fairbanks made a couple of minor films in the 1930s, but his heart was not in it—it finally gave out completely in 1939. Perhaps it was clear to him, as it was to almost everyone else, that his reign as King of Hollywood lasted only as long as the last decade of the silent film and his happy collaboration with Mary Pickford.

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NOTES

1. I do not want to give the impression that the Fairbanks persona was the only or even dominant factor in framing this publicity—Pickford’s persona certainly played a role as well. But since this is an essay on Fairbanks, the focus is on him.

2. The Scrapbooks are located in the Douglas Fairbanks Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills. The clipping file is in the Biographical clipping files in the same institution.

3. We mustn’t forget the importance of Doug’s publicist, Bennie Zeidman, in orchestrating the receptions that the couple received. He accompanied them on their European honeymoon and made sure that crowds knew where to find them and that the press was there to witness it.

4. In fact, in 1922 Fairbanks and Pickford hired Lubitsch to be their director, testifying to Fairbanks’s admiration of these films and his plans for the genre. Lubitsch ended up making only Rosita (1923) with Pickford. See “Lubitsch to Direct Doug,” Los Angeles Times, 29 November 1922, 2:1.

5. On Fairbanks as “First Citizen” of Beverly Hills, see Scrapbook #1, Douglas Fairbanks Collection, AMPAS, or “Will Rogers Chosen Mayor,” New York Times, 13 December 1926, 29. For his work for the Olympic Committee, see the same scrapbook or “‘Doug’ Boosts Olympics,” Los Angeles Times, 1 April 1928, A7.