In the summer of 1918, as part of an attempt to refashion her stardom and broaden the range of dramatic roles she might pursue, Photoplay magazine reported on Mabel Normand’s personal library. When visiting the former slapstick comedienne at her New York apartment, journalist Randolph Bartlett reported that he found within her bookcase an ‘array of authors as unusual as it was fascinating. There were Gautier, Strindberg, Turgenieff, Stevenson, Walter Pater, Kipling, Oscar Wilde, Shaw, Ibsen, John Evelyn, J.M. Barrie, Francois Coppé, Bret Harte. Of superficial best sellers there was not a single sample. Nor was there to be found in the room a copy of any of the cheap, current fiction magazines.’ Bartlett goes on to assure the reader that the motion-picture star has actually read these important works and that she is possessed of a genuine interest in literary culture and an enthusiasm for new ideas. With the exception of Evelyn, Normand’s library apparently consisted of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists and playwrights, all of whom would have been recognised, at that time, as aesthetically progressive writers. Without being too radical or experimental, these authors helped define what could be broadly characterised as a modern literary and dramatic sensibility. Normand’s up-to-date artistic tastes are verified in the Photoplay article by the conspicuous absence of any classical works that might cast her in the role of the boring scholar who is out of touch with her times. Indeed, even the manner of her reading, we are informed, shuns the contemplative stance of the highbrow. As Bartlett attests, Normand ‘does not take her reading like a sponge, but like an electric motor’.

While the unstated purpose for this particular piece of publicity was the promotion of Normand’s new position as a glamorous feature-film star for the Goldwyn company, such articles in the fan magazines were also part of Hollywood’s broader attempt to court genteel middle-class patronage and to increase the industry’s prestige by emphasizing the refinement and good taste of its creative talent. Normand’s regular appearance with Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle in a popular series of slapstick farces for Keystone just a couple of years before is referred to by Bartlett as an apprenticeship in a previous era of filmmaking in which the actress’ ‘mind was developing toward something more important’. In this way, as was often the case when the early stars were still considered to be privileged representatives of Hollywood, Normand’s career and private life synecdochically stood in for the film industry’s own history of improvement and increasing cultural refinement. However, not only the film industry benefited from the star’s aesthetic education. By giving the public a glimpse into the film star’s consumption of important modern authors, Photoplay was also offering motion-picture audiences indirect access to these same authors and the cultural capital they represented. The very attention that audiences paid to the career and personality of Mabel Normand was a means to self-improvement.

As Richard deCordova has shown, this type of star publicity emphasised how the private lives of the stars, while never entirely identical to their screen personae, contributed to the overall merit of their motion-pictures work. Moreover, in this and in so many other cases during the period, the identity of...
the star was shown to be in a constant state of transition and growth. The stars were not just beautiful people; they were becoming more beautiful, more cultured, and more interesting each and every day. The refinement of personality enacted within the early star system was achieved through the stars’ ever-changing relationships and alignments with other influential personalities: important writers and thinkers, politicians, other stars of stage and screen, and ‘select’ sectors of the general public. Stars always appeared as parts of larger constellations. Thus, the star system not only demonstrated the transformation of personal identity now made possible because of the development of mass communications, but it also granted film audiences endless opportunities to transform themselves through their own devotion to the lives of motion-picture stars, a devotion that promised, in addition to learning numerous details about the private lives of the stars, an education in modernity itself. The star system offered itself as a particular way of knowing and being in the world, if only one would place oneself under the influence and instruction of the stars.

There was nothing necessarily class-specific about the content of this educational address of the early star system. For instance, the Photoplay article on Mabel Normand’s library does not seek a middle-class audience by emphasizing her knowledge of literature or even by naming particular authors such as Stevenson, Kipling, or Turgenev. Members of different social classes, including significant numbers of the urban and regional working classes, would, of course, have recognised these authors and the cultural values they represented. What guarantees Normand’s embodiment of middle-class values and what places her squarely within the dominant paradigm of middle-class uplift and reform is the article’s promise that no cheap or popular literature existed along side these more serious works of art. A modern literary canon was being established in the article on Normand’s reading habits, and cultural and social hierarchies were being respected in the process. Stardom was beneficial because its educational effects apparently lead to a particular refinement of taste and to the acceptance of bourgeois standards of evaluation.

By 1918, veteran women stars such as Mary Pickford and Mabel Normand were central in the film industry’s ability to represent itself as an organic corporate community involved in the industrial production of refined culture. The ‘colony’ called ‘Hollywood’ had embarked upon a grand social experiment in which the talents of various artisans, performers and executives were finding their perfect realization in a progressively efficient social arrangement where the very divisions between business and art were magically dissolved. All one needed to transform a studio into a home was a woman’s touch. In the December 1916 issue of Motion Picture Magazine for example, Pearl Gaddis described the newly built studio of the Mabel Normand Feature Film Company as ‘having ever so many feminine touches that make it artistic as well as businesslike, comfortable as well as efficient.’3 Normand readily admits that the men of the studio tease her about her ‘woman’s touch’, but she points out how eager they are to go to work in the morning and how reluctant they are leave once the workday is over. The star-producer explains, You see I have a hobby that dovetails beautifully with my work here. It’s studio housekeeping, or, rather, studio homekeeping … Efficiency comes first of course, but I didn’t see why a studio should be a huge, unlovely barn of wood. So I planned for comfort and beauty, as well as efficiency. That explains the rugs downstairs, the adorable balcony, and the attractive dressing rooms.3

By making domestic labour an enjoyable hobby, the women of Hollywood were transforming the very nature of industrial work and, in the process, making mass culture itself more refined, more respectable. Though, according to the article, the idea of studio boss as homemaker had long been a dream of Mabel Normand’s, she assured those readers of Motion Picture Magazine who might be skeptical of her matronly qualifications to run a reputable household that she had ‘worked so hard and planned so hard to attain just this end’. Gaddis reviews Normand’s career struggles from artist’s model to world-renowned comedienne in order to represent her new executive position as a further step in a process of creative self-improvement. She concludes the piece by noting, ‘The finest work of Mabel Normand’s career is blossoming forth under the stimulus of her own company.’

During the early 1910s, even before the formation of the movie colony in southern California, the film industry had constructed its public face by thoroughly identifying itself with its beautiful stars. It was the seemingly identical interests of the stars and the studios which originally defined the early star system.
Reading Mabel Normand’s library

notes that Weber often made her own experiences the basis of the social reform perspectives of her motion pictures. In one interview, Weber connected many of her films, including *Shoes*, with her earlier background in missionary work among the urban poor. For Stamp, such attributions worked to promote Weber’s own authority as a voice of reform: ‘By occulting her script’s genealogy in Jane Addams’s mission, pointing instead toward its origins in her own lived experience and her own recollections, Weber fashioned a particular vision of the filmmaker as social worker, literally substituting her own gaze in place of Addams’s fieldwork’. Of course, such appropriations are never complete, and Weber’s life experiences certainly gained in value through prop- ping themselves on the citation of Addams’s socio- logical text at the beginning of *Shoes*.

Weber’s relation to the book is relevant to the celebrity of Mabel Normand. What is at stake in both is the place of cinema in the production of knowl- edge, as opposed to its production of pleasure. To the extent that the cinema sought only to duplicate the knowledge of the world produced by sanctioned sources elsewhere, the cinema posed no threats to traditional authorities. What was censorable in the cinema during the late Progressive era was either the production of certain forms of unwholesome pleas- ure or the failure to duplicate accepted wisdom about the state of the world: displaying risqué images or letting a crime remain unpunished, for example. That the cinema could be enlisted toward educational ends or could even participate in debates on social policy was not typically a controversial proposition. Stamp’s work on *Shoes* is quite important because she uses the film to indicate an emerging tension about what motion pictures might add to their visual reiteration of accepted knowledge, an addition that Stamp locates in the newly offered pleasures of an emerging cinematic language that increasingly facili- tates psychological identification with individual characters, particularly through the elaboration of point of view. Despite the fact that Weber empha- sised her commitments to social realism while down- playing her creative role in innovating or even using these new forms of visual pleasure, Stamp argues that *Shoes*, unlike the Addams’s published fieldwork, forced its middle-class audiences to share the hero- ine’s perspective and participate in feelings of em- pathy with her situation. Such emotional identification with the poor was not only uncharacteristic of most middle-class reform discourse, but also fairly at odds

and which would eventually sub tend the repre- sentations of Hollywood as a progressive corporate community in the late 1910s. By the early 1920s it seemed as if the industry was paying a very high price for such intimacy. The early Hollywood scan- dals had a way of ‘sticking’ to everything, haunting those who were named in connection with them, and calling into question the social utility of Hollywood itself. After the scandals, star publicity and industry public relations would never again completely overlap or fit together quite so easily. Norman’s industrial status as a good housekeeper would be shattered when her involvement with many of the early scan- dals led to a public demand for the studios to seek hired help in ‘cleaning house’.

By the 1920s, Mabel Normand’s stardom was complicated by more than her relation to scandal. As a working class woman and movie star, her claim to new forms of cultural authority in the 1910s was rapidly attenuated by the implementation of regulat- ory discourses about motion pictures and other products of mass culture, making those products subject to various forms of verification and institu- tional certification. Film stars would never again have the kind of appeal they had in the early star system because the field of that appeal was largely reduced to popular amusement. A better sense of the enorm- ity of Normand’s public command can be glimpsed in the now unlikely comparison of her cele- brity to that of director Lois Weber, her Hollywood contemporary. In an analysis of Lois Weber’s Shoes (1916), Shelley Stamp describes how the filmmaker was widely promoted and appreciated as a social worker committed to moral reform. Like other film- makers of the Progressive era, Weber often found narrative inspiration in the same social problems that were on the minds of sociologists, journalists, re- formers, religious leaders and politicians of the day. Yet, Weber saw her films as more than topical dra- mas, and Stamp points out that Weber’s publicity often positioned her as a sort of editorialist who used the cinema as a means of social intervention. The first few shots of *Shoes* – a film about a young woman who cannot afford to replace her worn out shoes because of the paltry wages she is paid as a retail clerk – present images of Jane Addams’s 1914 book, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, thereby pos- ting the film’s source in the famed reformer’s study of prostitution. If *Shoes* presented itself as a sort of case study exemplifying in cinematic form the observ- ations and arguments of Jane Addams, Stamp
with the ethnographic project of sociological case studies. Instead of assuming classical narration to be the expression of a bourgeois worldview, Stamp rightly sees that the addition of these identification structures to the causes of reform signaled a potentially ‘more radical role’ for the cinema’s ability to participate in the social production of knowledge.⁷

The public availability of Mabel Normand’s reading habits similarly constituted a potentially radical addition to the pleasures offered by the expanding star system. Coverage of the hobbies and recreations of film stars were commonplace by the late 1910s, and the private pursuits of the stars often provided the public with information on how to experience and understand contemporaneity. They were, indeed, idols of consumption, but Normand’s library was neither a reflection nor a simple appropriation of established canons of literary culture. The Photoplay article credits Normand herself with being able to construct that canon, to authorise it through her unique celebrity. The piece concludes by making Normand’s studio work and her leisure all of a piece. ‘But no matter what she does – romping through a picture and lifting it out of the commonplace, or reading Strindberg, Shaw, or Ibsen after a hard day’s work at the studio, Mabel Normand stands all by herself.’⁸ Distinctions between expert and amateur, scholar and dilettante are at least partially elided by the unique personality of the star herself. Here the pleasures of star promotion and reception have become a vehicle for the production and dissemination of literary knowledge. If Weber was adding the cinematic pleasure of identification to the practice of sociological investigation in the mid-1910s, then we might also think of Normand as adding cultural criticism to the pleasures of her star reception. Where Weber assumed the role of social reformer through an act of ‘substituting’ her own life in place of an academic tradition, Normand assumed the role of a belle des lettres by making her library just another unremarkable part of her life. Both women demonstrated the possibility of effective improvements through the fairly effortless task of being themselves.

The Photoplay article on Normand’s library begins with the interviewer asking the star whether she rented her New York apartment furnished or whether its furnishings belong to her. ‘This was the only important thing I asked Mabel Normand’. Establishing the library as Normand’s own personal collection was a crucial requirement for this particular instantiation of contemporary literary value, even if the Photoplay writer also felt obliged to assure readers that the actress had ‘a thorough knowledge of what is contained between the handsome covers’ of her books. Walter Benjamin noted the central importance of book ownership to the conferral of cultural values. Even though scornful of the cult of Hollywood stars as mystifying the revolutionary conditions of the new mass medium, Benjamin’s figure of the book collection applies to Mabel Normand.

For a collector’s attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of the collection will always be its transmissibility [...] the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more academically useful than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.⁹

While the collector disappears through the rapid erosion of the traditional preserves of culture wrought by the increasing rationalization of society and the development of mass communications, Hollywood’s star system provided a new situation for individual ownership and for the emergence of new mass cultural preserves. Transmission was now instantaneous and the heir the public itself. Yet whether we wish to consider Normand’s library an attempt to mystify a contemporary cultural crisis or whether we view her collection as an authentic form of cultural stewardship, it is the film star’s personal attachment to her books that made the books’ authors newly interesting and worthwhile. Normand’s very ownership of these books defined that attachment.¹⁰ The answer to the piquant title of Photoplay article on Normand’s library – ‘Would You Ever Suspect It?’ – turns out to be ‘yes’.

Of course, Normand’s book collection also represented the very apparatus for her self-directed intellectual refinement, while Weber’s lived past is responsible for the correction of present social injustices. The different contexts for the effectiveness of their respective personalities – self-improvement and social uplift – are a result of their differing class positions, as well as the presumed class positions of their respective publics. However, the instrumentality of Normand’s library was downplayed as the explanation for its existence: ‘Miss Normand’s collection
of books has, probably, done little toward making her successful, but they are an index of that intelligence without which their can be no success’. Like Weber’s past experience with missionary work, the actress’s books are just part of her life. Anne Morey has documented the ways in which the cinema and its ancillary institutions emerged in the 1910s as sites for the discourses of self fashioning, discourses that worked through tensions between creativity and standardization, individualization and collective effort, work and play, knowledge and pleasure. In her analyses of juvenile serial fiction and the Palmer Photoplay correspondence courses, Morey reveals the multiple ways that affect, personal experience and consumption were increasingly refigured as the basis of socially useful knowledge and as salable merchandise.\textsuperscript{11} From the point of view of political economy, such enterprises were attempts to create new consumer markets through the sham enfranchisement of members of the public. Yet, as a cultural discourse, the threat posed to established social authority by the commodification of personality, particularly in the form of a non-labouring personality, ultimately resulted in the curtailment of the progressive use of the cinema for social change and self transformation. This curtailment was achieved through institutionalised censorship and through the newspapers’s denunciation of film celebrities as fakes. Weber’s fortunes suffered in the 1920s because of the former, Normand’s because of the latter.\textsuperscript{12}

The star culture promulgated by the fan magazines offered readers access to these new personalities, to the orientations to the world these stars pioneered and, most importantly, to the very mass cultural conditions that make the creation of stars, their circulation and their publics possible. Gaylyn Studlar was one of the first to suggest that the highly reified personalities on display between the covers of fan magazines were presented with a double perspective in which the women readers in particular were simultaneously encouraged to engage with details of the stars’ lives through affective fantasies, and to hold both the stars as well as their fantasies about the stars at some critical distance. Studlar adopts the psychoanalytic concept of masquerade to describe this address as a ‘play of identities’, a relatively new cultural possibility with rising importance for ‘many women in the 1920s who were themselves engaged in an attempt to resituate themselves in relation to

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig. 1. A Perfect 36 (1918). Reading was just part of Mabel Normand’s image. [Marilyn Slater Collection.]
\end{figure}
changing concepts of female social and sexual identity. This double perspective of fan magazines was achieved partially through the contradictory presentation of stars as both affectively close and distant from the fan, as well as by a growing refusal of the magazines to uphold an easy conflation between the off-screen lives of the stars and their appearances in motion pictures. In other words, publicity functioned in the motion picture magazines by revealing the work of publicity and by suggesting its possibilities for the fan’s pleasure, knowledge and self-transformation. Studlar notes that, as the industry sought to control the damage caused by the various star scandals of the early 1920s, the fan magazines grew increasingly insistent on the distinction between the actual performer and her or his star persona. To push beyond the seemingly intractable problem of female spectatorship as it had been defined through feminist psychoanalytic theory, Studlar seeks to give theories of masquerade a historical grounding in the practices of the fan magazines and their women readers during the silent period. However, the post-scandal insistence on a gap of credulity in star publicity, while perhaps making available to women a means of founding their subjective lives on a critical distance from the star image, was also the means for curtailing an earlier form of star promotion and reception that was not truth-functional. This earlier mass cultural address figured star personality as a series of inscriptions that were not determined by any considerations of veracity and verifiability. A subsequent jazz age valorization of ballyhoo worked to discipline mass audiences by dividing them into those who were fooled or taken in by Hollywood fakery (and thus in need of protection), and those who could achieve the proper fracturing of belief. While in retrospect this earlier condition of star reception might appear to be only a form of naïve fascination, the early star system was making possible a situation in which the effective distinctions between pleasure and knowledge would no longer be fully operational for the public.

The growing preoccupation with the truth or falsity of star promotion at work in multiple regulatory discourses functioned just as much to discipline a mass audience as it did to protect the interests of particular social institutions or capital investments. And this is why Mabel Normand’s library haunts her during the Taylor scandal of 1922. The continued press attention to her literary interests was not simply a means of attacking her as a fake; Normand’s library was one of the important targets of those regulatory discourses that sought a continuation of particular cultural distinctions, as well as the maintenance of the class and gender divisions underwritten by those distinctions.

The central importance of cultural canons in the construction and maintenance of early motion-picture stars can be seen in the scandal that engulfed Normand three-and-a-half years after Photoplay’s discussion of her reading habits. Normand’s involvement in one of the major Hollywood scandals of the early 1920s so compromised her ability to be represented as a discriminating producer and consumer of culture that her career never fully recovered. William Desmond Taylor, a well-known film director for Famous Players-Lasky, was found murdered in his Hollywood bungalow in February 1922, and Normand was an early suspect in the case because she was the last known person to see Taylor alive. She also had a plausible motive for murdering Taylor since she purportedly held a jealous rivalry with actress Mary Miles Minter for the attentions of the debonair director. While the suspicions against her eventually subsided, the harm done to Normand’s career was more than the result of being involved in a notorious murder case. When asked by the police and the press about her visit to Taylor’s residence on the evening before the discovery of his corpse, Normand explained how she had been returning some books that Taylor had loaned her. According to the actress, she and the film director had a mutual interest in modern philosophy, and the press continually mentioned Taylor’s schooling of the young star in the works of Nietzsche and Freud. More significantly, it was also reported that Normand claimed to have stopped on the way to Taylor’s house to buy herself bags of roasted peanuts and a copy of the Police Gazette, a publication whose bathing beauties, boxing news and other ‘vulgar amusements’ were usually thought to pander to the interests of uncultivated, lower-class men. In one of her first statements to the police after the murder, Normand herself purportedly testified that Taylor had teased her about eating roasted peanuts and reading the Police Gazette: ‘He put me in the car and as he saw the peanut shells and the pile of books he laughed and said, “Here you are with Nietzsche under one arm and Freud under the other and the Police Gazette close by. You certainly are going in for heavy reading this winter”.’ The press had a field day appropriating Taylor’s joke and poking fun at the supposed incongruity of post-Enlightenment theory and working-class culture. For
example, a writer in a Detroit paper had this to say about the whole affair:

Magazines devoted to motion picture plays and players do a great deal of harm by the nauseating drivel that they print. The silly prattle that is put into the mouths of screen players who are ‘interviewed’ for these magazines and then pen pictures drawn of them are beyond reason. Rex Ingram, a scholar, is not given any better ‘boost’ than the former salesgirl who has suddenly become a headline. The same superlatives that are used to discuss Ingram are used to describe the brainless cutie whose face is her fortune and whose brain is still in the kindergarten age.

It is a long jump from paperbound novels and chewing gum to Plato and Thoreau, but the facile writer of the screen monthlies blithely makes the leap. It must have been with pain and anguish that the screen fans read how Mabel Normand, pictured as a devotee of Voltaire and Nietzsche, testified that on her way to William Taylor’s house on the fatal night she stopped at a newsstand to buy a bag of peanuts and a copy of the Police Gazette.

Employing the now long-familiar gendering of high and low cultures, this editorialist represents the problem of star promotion as Hollywood’s inability or refusal to discriminate culturally important works and authors from mere popular ephemera. While this writer blames the fan magazines for liquidating these traditional distinctions, other newspapers blamed the actress herself for the destructive mixing and merging of different cultural values. Referring to reports of Normand’s weakened state after the Taylor murder, one journalist commented, ‘Between old Mister Nietzsche and the Police Gazette it’s no wonder that Mabel is nervous and confined to her bed’.17

Normand biographer Betty Harper Fussell relates that, after columnist Louella Parsons inquired as to how many of the books in Normand’s library the actress had actually read, Normand jokingly replied, ‘Not a one, but I’ve read the reviews’.18 Such flippancy was part of Normand’s appeal, but by the early 1920s she would have to insist on the genuineness of her literary studies. Fussell’s biography is premised upon the impossibility of ever recovering the truth of Mabel’s life since the actress ‘embodies the mystery of memory, of identity, of truth even to herself’.19 Even so, Fussell often attributes a deeply seated and unfulfilled need for love and respect as the emotional basis for much of Normand’s behavior and life decisions. When writing about the star’s growing interest in books and intellectual culture, Fussell moves quickly from the terrain of the political to the realm of romance. Briefly noting Chaplin’s claim that his intellectualism was “a defense against the world’s contempt for the ignorant”, Fussell ends her chapter on Goldwyn’s refashioning of the star by reducing Normand’s library to a term within her romantic entanglements with her studio bosses. That she cut through Pierre Louys’s Aphrodite and Olive Wadley’s Sand at the same speed was irrelevant. Mabel’s point was that neither Mack [Sennett] nor Sam [Goldwyn] had read anything at all.20 In many ways, Fussell correctly marks out the inappropriateness of the traditional biographical mode to Mabel Normand’s life. A modern personality at odds with the truth of identity, Normand does not so neatly embody the mysteries of memory, truth and identity, as much as she enacts a failure to escape from the imposition of biographical truth. Even while the mystery attributed to Normand by Fussell is a further mystification of the star and of our interest in her, it also describes the continued success of a psychologising imperative that still subtilts our historical
Inquiries. No longer just a publicity set-up for a star witticism, Louella Parsons’s question about the number of books Normand had actually read seems irresistibly to shape our own interest in the star’s library.\textsuperscript{21}

In her work on the late silent-era film star Louise Brooks, Amelie Hastie has documented the types of complications introduced into the cultural field by the intellectual female star.\textsuperscript{22} Brooks, of course, emerged as a celebrity just after Normand’s eclipse from prominence, and, while she never became as popular or well-known as Normand had been, Brooks did enjoy a successful, if short, career as a motion-picture star in Europe. Indeed, as Hastie points out, it was Brooks’s association with European modernism, particularly through her performance of Lulu in \textit{Die Büchse der Pandora} (\textit{Pandora’s Box}, 1929), that later provided the basis for her post-WWII resurrection as a critical voice on modernism, film history and stardom. Hastie argues that Brooks’s own essays on the film cultures of Hollywood and Germany demonstrate how the film star simultaneously produced herself through biographical revelation, even while she denied the possibility of ever producing an authentic account of her true self. Hastie is therefore concerned with Brooks as a witness to and participant in the international modernism of the early twentieth century, but she also examines the differing authority accorded to Brooks’s testimony by those cultural critics, archivists and film theorists who have continually turned to Brooks as a source for thinking through many of their own important projects. While Normand’s authority was rapidly foreclosed after the scandals, and while she never lived long enough to provide a critical retrospective account of her Hollywood life, her difficult status as an intellectual is clarified by Hastie’s work on Brooks.\textsuperscript{23}

As a star, Brooks may have been more successful at becoming a producer of cultural knowledge than Normand because, as Hastie shows, much of Brooks’s authority rested on questions of sexuality and sexual definition. As deCordova’s work suggests, the star system functioned most effectively as a system of knowledge based on the continual interrogation and revelation of identity. Thus, the type of testimonial privilege granted to Brooks, while unusual, did not seriously call into question the epistemological basis of the star system itself. What was more disruptive about Brooks’s performances and her critical writings – and where they intersect with the difficulties of Normand’s stardom – was their subversion of truth functionality, or what Hastie terms Brooks’s ability to perform and negotiate ‘the deceptiveness of truth’.\textsuperscript{24} It was the very rejection of truth functionality that founded Brooks’s ‘reputation for intelligence’, and I would suggest that a similar rejection was behind Normand’s cultural authority as well. Ironically, it was also this rejection that allowed Normand’s intelligence to be called into question. Hastie concludes her essay by quoting Lotte Eisner’s expression of skepticism upon finding Brooks reading a volume of Schopenhauer on the set of \textit{Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen} (\textit{Diary of a Lost Girl}, 1929). Eisner had initially dismissed the occasion as a staged publicity event, but she then claims to have reached a fuller appreciation of the actress’s relation to Schopenhauer as integral to who Brooks was and who she projected herself to be.\textsuperscript{25} As was the case with Normand, Brooks’s relation to intellectual culture was continually deniable only by ignoring its basis in a process of self-fashioning and by insisting upon criteria of veracity and verification. In other words, the story about Brooks reading post-Romantic German philosophy has to be made true or false by yet another witness, in this case Eisner. Interestingly, Hastie shows how much of what was said by others about Brooks originated with the actress herself, sometimes appearing as a form of de-authorisation obfuscating Brooks as the original source of the information. Similarly, we have seen how the first person to publicly comment on the apparent incongruity of Nietzsche and the \textit{Police Gazette} was Normand, as she bore witness to the murdered director’s playful chiding of her tastes and habits. She thereby claimed a comfortable familiarity with the very cultural distinctions that she refused to enact but that her fiercest critics would claim were beyond her grasp and, therefore, an indication of a dangerous pretense.

In response to threatened bans on her films by local censoring bodies and by regional exhibitor organizations after the Taylor murder, Normand claimed to have been the victim of cruel circumstance. The actress saw herself as only guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and this has been a fairly standard biographical explanation of Normand’s moribund career after 1921. However, the way the Taylor murder scandal unfolded in the press left the actress open to charges of holding dangerous intellectual pretensions and of claiming a false cultural authority. What was ultimately at stake for Normand was the perception that her popularity
and her star appeal rested upon what Pierre Bourdieu describes as ‘illegitimate culture’. Bourdieu distinguished illegitimate culture from the authentic knowledge of the cultural aristocracy.

The reader of the popular science monthly Science et Vie who talks about the genetic code or the incest taboo exposes himself to ridicule as soon as he ventures outside his circle of peers, whereas Claude Lévi-Strauss or Jacques Monod can only derive additional prestige from their excursions into the field of music or philosophy. Illegitimate extra-curricular culture, whether it be the accumulated knowledge by the self-taught or the ‘experience’ acquired in and through practice, outside the control of the institution specifically mandated to inculcate it and officially sanction its acquisition, like the art of cooking or herbal medicine, craftsmen’s skill or the stand-in’s irreplaceable knowledge, is only valorised to the strict extent of its technical efficiency, without any social added-value, and is exposed to legal sanctions (like the illegal practice of medicine) whenever it emerges from the domestic universe to compete with authorised competences.26

Normand’s stardom failed precisely when her literary interests emerged ‘from the domestic universe to compete with authorised competences’. The Taylor scandal facilitated this emergence but it was not the cause of the protracted attacks on Normand in the press. The scandal moved Normand’s personality out of the fan magazines and the entertainment pages and onto the front pages of the nation’s most authoritative newspapers, where Normand’s participation in elite culture could no longer be shielded from the guardians of that culture. Even Normand’s most mundane traits, such as her love of roasted peanuts, became damning evidence when mentioned on the front page.27

Since Normand’s long-standing interest in literature and philosophy was intractably inscribed in the details of this sensational murder case and in her relation to the murdered director, that interest exceeded its function as an index of Normand’s fascinating personality and became a factor in understanding what was wrong with Hollywood. While the so-called ‘sins’ of Hollywood might have been on the lips of reformers throughout the country, a deeper question about the authoritative role motion pictures had assumed in mass society was a more vexing problem for bourgeois cultural hegemony. Hollywood had offered itself as an ideal model for a modern and efficient means to self-improvement. The star system presented the public with the opportunity to participate in various types of personal transformations. If the star system was the film industry’s chief means of demonstrating the power of movies to develop compelling and interesting personalities, then it was also one of the key points of attack for those wishing to forestall mass culture’s perceived liquidation of traditional institutions and the social divisions those institutions upheld. In this conservative project, Mabel Normand provided a particularly useful means for unmasking Hollywood’s image of itself as the arbiter of the new and beautiful, not only because she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but because Mabel Normand’s personality – which included her claim to a European tradition of intellectual thought – had been developed through the non-accredited school of the early studio system and because her glamorised identity as an instructor in cultural knowledge had been made too easily available to the public through star publicity and, then, through the press coverage of the scandal.28

While many of the jokes made about Normand’s cultural pretensions sought to expose the star’s long-purported interests in highbrow culture as nothing more than a publicity sham, these jokes also betrayed a deep-seated uneasiness about the possibility that one might, indeed, read Freud and the Police Gazette as similarly interesting expressions of modern times.28 The press effectively contained this threat to traditional intellectual hierarchies by portraying the actress as suffering from a pathological condition in which she was too mentally immature to appreciate significant cultural distinctions (‘[Her] brain is still in the kindergarten age’) or in which she was suffering from some sort of mental disturbance due to her free and indiscriminate consumption of texts (‘[She is] nervous and confined to her bed’). Normand’s deviance was further confirmed by journalists’ assumptions that the news reports of the star’s purchase of the Police Gazette had been received by her public ‘with pain and anguish’. It was no coincidence that at the height of her popular stardom in 1918, Normand had been associated with a canon of mostly English, French and American novelists, playwrights and literary essayists, while at the time of the Taylor-murder scandal her name was...
connected to Nietzsche and Freud, two German intellectuals who were popularly represented as having radically questioned traditional Christian morality and whose books were believed to pose serious dangers to individuals whose minds were unprepared or unable to read them properly.\textsuperscript{29} As an idol of consumption and as suspect in a murder case, Mabel Normand posed many dangers to an impressionable public, but it was her reading habits that were attracting the most ink in February of 1922.

Normand’s immediate response to this state of affairs was to deny the newspapers’ charges of inauthenticity and cultural pretension by telling her fans that her long-standing love of books was entirely genuine. In a series of articles for Movie Weekly appearing less than three weeks after the Taylor

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{In her film roles, Normand’s characters often overcame cultural barriers through the strength of personality. The actress in the title role of Mickey (1918). [Marilyn Slater Collection.]}\end{figure}
murder, Normand advised young women on how to prepare for careers as screen actresses in Hollywood. Given that these lengthy pieces appeared immediately following the Taylor murder when Normand is widely reported to be suffering from exhaustion and influenza, these articles were likely ghost written by a publicist. Throughout the ten weekly articles, Normand makes casual references to poets, short-story writers and well-known playwrights such as Chekhov. In the fourth installment on ‘Developing Personality’, she emphatically tells her readers that she ‘abhor[s] artificiality. A poseur to me is impossible. I could never pretend to be something that I am not because I so detest pretense in others’. Normand urges her readers to ‘read, read, read’ so that they might ‘develop something within’ themselves, and she proposes that rather than simply identifying with characters in novels, readers should strive to understand a character, its motives and mental processes. In the next installment Normand urges would-be starlets to keep a diary of their ideas and their observations of human nature. She also reminds them once again to read as much as possible. ‘I read a great deal, and I like to remember what I read. In fact, I have a special contempt for people who can’t remember what they read. It shows a lack of appreciation or concentration. And you need both to be an artist or an educated human being’. Along with advice to young women about budgeting their money and making ends meet while looking for work, these narratives of cultural self-improvement suggested a narrative of class mobility and disguise that did little to alleviate Normand’s public-relations difficulties. In the face of attacks on her stardom as a sham, Normand continued to offer herself as a model for emulation, apparently without comprehending the nature of the threat she posed to cultural order. Her love of literature and philosophy was not simply an alibi that explained why she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time; the crime for which she stood accused in the newspapers was precisely her claim to a cultural capital at odds with her class standing and her gender.

The types of film roles that Normand pursued after the scandal continued her penchant for characters from socially marginal backgrounds who suddenly find themselves cast among the swells of high-society. The disruption of class and gender boundaries had been an important part of Normand’s appeal since her Keystone days. Entirely comfortable in her new upper-class surroundings, the typical Normand character, because of her spontaneous enthusiasm for adventure and because of her love of life’s many pleasures, inadvertently pokes fun at the decorum of the wealthy and the rigidity of their manners. While these film stories had previously served Normand’s stardom by showing her possessed of a irrepressible and dynamic personality, the social transgressions of these characters now supported an investigation into the star’s possible criminality. Three weeks after the Taylor murder, a writer in the Cincinnati Tribune jokingly asked, ‘Why did Mabel have a copy of The Police Gazette with her when she called on the slain director? Did this indicate that she had been to a barber shop immediately before? And if so, could she have taken a copy of The Police Gazette without slaying the barber?’

Here the ideological link between Normand’s inappropriate cultural appropriations and criminal violence is finally forged, and the important lesson for Mabel’s fans and for those young would-be Hollywood starlets is not to believe everything you read about the movies.

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Notes

4. Ibid., 84.
6. Ibid., 146.
7. Ibid., 164–165.
10. Anyone interested in this book collection can consult the list of 129 titles that were part of the probate records of Normand’s estate at the time of her death in 1930. Like most personal libraries, Normand’s was eclectic. According to the estate records, several contemporary writers were represented in Normand’s book collection by multiple works: Aldous Huxley (six titles), Margaret Pedlar (six titles), Oscar Wilde (four titles), and Robert Hitchens (four titles). The library also contained several volumes of philosophy (such as Plato’s Republic, Spinoza’s On the Improvement of the Understanding, and Henri Bergson’s On Laughter), erotic literature (such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs, Arthur Schnitzler’s Hands Around, Frank Wedekind’s Tragedies of Sex, and T.R. Smith’s 1927 collection of Poetica Erotica), autobiographies of stage performers (such as Sarah Bernhardt’s Memoirs of My Life, Lillie Langtry’s The Days I Knew, Constantine Stanislavsky’s My Life in Art, and Marie Dressler’s The Life Story of an Ugly Duckling), collections of poetry (such as The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, individual volumes of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Rudyard Kipling, John A. Joyce’s Peculiar Poems, and Frank Foxcroft’s 1918 collection of War Verse), books on aesthetics and cultural criticism (such as Arthur Quiller-Couch’s On the Art of Reading, Kenneth MacGowan and Robert E. Jones’s Continental Stage Craft, and Gilbert Seldes’s The Seven Lively Arts), as well as clothbound screenplays of films in which Normand had starred (such as J.G. Hawk’s Mickey [scenario by Anita Loos] and Linton Wells’s Suzanna). For the complete list of titles, see William Thomas Sherman, comp., Mabel Normand: A Source Book to Her Life and Films, rev. edn. (Seattle: William Thomas Sherman, 2000), 258–259.


14. I agree with deCordova that the early star system elaborated a process of perpetual revelation about the identity of the stars, but I am suggesting that it was not principally a truth-functional elaboration. While we can read the promotion of the early stars as the revelation so many ‘secrets’ about them, we can also read that same promotion as promising a continual flow of information about personalities that were under development within a modern media apparatus. Similarly, those semiotic and discursive processes of the star system identified by deCordova were never completely hidden or unremarked in early star discourse. I am offering this discussion of Mabel Normand’s library in support the idea that the ‘will to knowledge’ was only gradually imposed upon the star system as a means of surveillance.


19. Ibid., 239.

20. Ibid., 110–111.

21. Once, after giving a presentation on Normand’s library, I was approached by a well-known scholar who has published important and influential work on post-structuralist film theory, historiography and film history. The scholar’s first imploring question to me was, ‘Do you think Mabel Normand actually read Nietzsche and Freud?’


23. Less than two years after the Taylor murder, Normand was again involved in a highly publicised scandal when her chauffeur shot and seriously wounded wealthy socialite Courtland Dines, while Normand and Edna Purviance were guests at Dines’s Los Angeles apartment.


25. Ibid., 18.


27. In 1919, Mabel Normand had a peanut-roaster installed in her dressing room. Motion Picture Magazine 17:6 (July 1919): 86.

28. This of course has to do with the policing of authority through institutional certification and positioning. As film scholars we might easily read an essay by Freud and an article from the Police Gazette without ever having our discernment put into question, excepting, of course, those of us who teach in English depart-
ments where one still occasionally finds colleagues who look upon such mixing as intellectually unbecoming, if not unwholesome. No one has ever asked me if I actually read Freud. My guess is that no one ever asked Normand if she actually read the Police Gazette.

29. These authors differed from the earlier authors of the Normand library in that they constitute what Michel Foucault has termed ‘founders of discursivity’, writers who not only innovate or extend a discursive practice but ones who create the possibility of divergences or departures from the very discourses their authorships found. In other words, unlike traditional science and art, the works of Freud and Nietzsche make disruption and deviation a constitutive quality of the discursive field. See ‘What Is an Author?’, trans. Josué V. Harari in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101–120. I discuss how both Nietzsche and Freud were mentioned as corrupting influences on Leopold and Loeb during their trial for murder in 1924 in Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in the 1920s, forthcoming from University of California Press. The autumn before the Taylor murder scandal, Herbert Howe reported coming across copies of Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra and Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams amongst several other books lying on a reading table in Normand’s private rooms at the Sennett studio. See his article from Pantomime (12 October 1921) entitled, ‘The Diaries of Mabel Normand’, reprinted in Sherman, Source Book, 129.

30. While most fan magazines such as Photoplay and Motion Picture Classic were prepared weeks, if not months, before their appearance on the newsstand, Movie Weekly evidenced a much more timely relation to developments in the nation’s newspaper during the 1920s, even as it followed the practice of other fan publications in refraining from directly mentioning most current Hollywood scandals. For example, the 23 September 1921 issue of Movie Weekly reported on Normand’s return from a European trip, a return also reported in the nation’s newspapers on 13 September. The report accompanies Normand’s ‘own’ account of her recent overseas experiences, and while much of the content of this piece may have been prepared in advance of her arrival, the writing was obviously revised to seem as responsive as possible to current headlines. It seems clear that the advice Normand dispensed to young would-be screen actresses earlier that year in the pages of Movie Weekly was shaped to similar ends. More than most fan publications, Movie Weekly promoted itself as a sort of Hollywood tabloid. See, for example, Truman B. Handy’s commissioned five-part weekly series on William Desmond Taylor’s life that began in the 18 March 1921 issue.

31. Of course it was not entirely unusual for a star to have an advice column ghostwritten for her or him by someone entrusted to sympathetically represent that star’s perspective. For example, see Cari Beauchamp’s discussion how Pickford employed Francis Marion to write Pickford’s advice column, Daily Talks, during the mid-1910s. Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). William Sherman suggests that the delegated authorship of Normand’s advice articles in early 1922 had a precedent in her statements to the Los Angeles Times in 1916. At that time, she claimed to be receiving so many letters from young women seeking career advice that she turned the task of responding to these inquiries over to her secretary who ‘knows just what my opinions are and just how I would personally answer almost any question’. Sherman, Source Book, 265. Whatever the nature of the authorship of these later advice articles, they represent a distinct shift to a defensive position in which the terrain upon which Normand could construct herself as an intellectual had shifted to a question of proof, requiring her to insist upon the depth, sincerity and hard work of her scholarly pursuits. Normand was no longer a cultural authority; she had now become a struggling student.


Abstract: Reading Mabel Normand’s library, by Mark Lynn Anderson

An investigation of popular accounts of Mabel Normand’s library considers the convergence of the intellectual and the star. Normand’s persona as a working-class woman and movie star enabled her claim to new forms of cultural authority in the 1910s, in turn rapidly attenuated by the implementation of regulatory discourses about motion pictures and other products of mass culture, making those products subject to various forms of verification and institutional certification.