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Too Good for the Fan Rags: The Argument for Agency in the Stardom of Katharine Hepburn

Abstract

During her tenure at RKO in the 1930s, Katharine Hepburn ascended to the top echelon of stardom, establishing herself in the public eye as a gifted actress even as she resisted the formal structures of fame and celebrity. Through the examination of personal correspondences, including letters and telegrams from fans, friends, and colleagues, this paper investigates the extent to which Hepburn actively contributed to the maintenance of her image leveraged her stardom as the means to manage her own career. Of equal concern in this inquiry are the implications of the actress's agency for the longevity of her early career; to this end, contemporary fan magazine coverage will be analyzed for its role in constructing Hepburn's public persona. The discrepancies and overlaps in the public and private discourses surrounding her star image serve as crucial evidence of Hepburn's privileged status within the industry, which runs contrary to broadly accepted notions of the studio system.

As early as 1935, RKO memorandums reveal that the star wielded considerable power within the studio and was making decisions regarding production, which was particularly rare for actresses during this phase of the studio era. That same year, Hepburn received a letter that predicted her eventual labeling as "box office poison" and suggested ways to achieve greater influence in Hollywood; subsequent correspondence indicates the nuances of the studio's response to Hepburn's attempts to follow that advice. In terms of industrial agency, these communications offer a dynamic that is particularly crucial to the understanding of the ostensibly "private" star.

Introduction

In a 1935 letter, a young New York City woman named Mary Desiderio offered her compliments to Katharine Hepburn on the recent release of *Alice Adams*. The daughter of Hepburn's gardener, she noted that her family had a "personal interest" in the star and her films, and "always make[s] it a point to see every one of them." Based on her knowledge of each of these roles, Desiderio wrote to declare that Hepburn is a "fine actress... who can fit herself into any character and bring to her audience a complete understanding of every emotion [and] written word, felt and spoken by that character."¹

Desiderio's letter is an example of the discourse that surfaces among the many letters that Hepburn received from fans, friends, and colleagues during

her early career. This correspondence, as historical evidence, indicates how Hepburn's star image was popularly perceived, and it is often particularly revelatory of the level of agency that the actress maintained while under contract at RKO between 1932 and 1938. Histories of the studio system traditionally highlight the industrial nature of Hollywood film production, thus precluding notions of individual agency, particularly among female stars. At the height of the studio era in the 1930s and 1940s, producers and executives groomed actors into particular screen images to maximize the audiences' recognition and ensure their popularity from film to film; as a central function of the industry, the star system left little room for autonomy among talent. In *Negotiating Hollywood*, however, Danae Clark rejects historical narratives that "do not address the possibility of actors' agency and resistance" to the

structures and labor politics of the film industry, arguing instead for a theoretical approach to star studies that emphasizes individual subjectivity. The screen actor is, for Clark, a “historical subject who actively negotiates the economic, political, and ideological discourses of identity” in the cinema.²

Clark’s methodology is fundamental to the consideration of Hepburn’s stardom, because, as several scholars have previously suggested, the actress enjoyed far more power and privilege within the studio system than most of her contemporaries. In *From Reverence to Rape*, feminist film scholar Molly Haskell championed Hepburn as an “institution,” categorizing her as among the “stars powerful, eccentric, or intimidating enough to choose their projects and determine their own images.”³ Further, in *RKO Radio Pictures*, historian Richard Jewell provides a more in-depth assessment of Hepburn’s tenure at the studio, confirming that the actress possessed more leverage than most talent at the time. Andrew Britton’s *Hepburn: Star as Feminist* is perhaps the most prominent example of this scholarship; much of his analysis rests in the notion that the actress’s filmic presence enabled a semiotic “contradiction” to the conservative ideology of the industry.⁴

In the consideration of Hepburn’s star image, fan magazines and personal correspondence serve as crucial evidence of Hepburn’s image and studio agency, offering a multitude of unique perspectives on her early career. Popular publications like *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, and *Hollywood* codified Hepburn’s image for public consumption, and each element of her stardom is incorporated so as to support the established framework. At the same time, a discourse takes place within the private correspondence between Hepburn and her colleagues, friends, family, and fans regarding the specific nature of her stardom and its maintenance throughout the early part of her career. Rather than submitting to type, Hepburn established herself as a talented actress across widely varied roles during the early years of her career – a distinction that was acknowledged in the popular press as well in as fan letters like Desiderio’s. The dichotomy between the public and private versions of her stardom in the 1930s can then, in a uniquely prescient way, indicate the motivating factors for the distinctive elements of her picture personality.

PART I: Defining the Unknown Star

“That audiences everywhere were acutely conscious of Katharine Hepburn as a dynamic new screen personality is now a matter of motion picture history. Never has *Photoplay* received more letters praising a first screen performance.”

— *Photoplay*, January 1933⁵

In his examination of RKO’s studio records, Richard Jewell suggests that Hepburn “proved to be a tough-minded, volatile businesswoman” while under contract at the studio in the early 1930s, a tenure that began in the spring of 1932 with the production of *A Bill of Divorcement*.⁶ At the time, as Jewell reveals, the studio’s current stable of acting talent had been “adversely affected by appearances in poor pictures” and production head David O. Selznick was in desperate need of new personalities.⁷ In late 1931, Hepburn’s debut as Antiope in *The Warrior’s Husband*, her first starring role on the Broadway stage, garnered the attention of agents, including those with ties to Hollywood.⁸ The following spring, RKO arranged a screen test for the actress in New York City and expressed interest in casting her in one of the films slated for production that summer. Hepburn submitted to the test and declared her desire for a weekly salary of a thousand dollars, a figure that executives considered “excessive” for talent with so little experience.⁹ As budget records for *A Bill of Divorcement* indicate, however, Hepburn was granted her demands and then some, taking home nearly seven thousand dollars for a month-long production.¹⁰

By most accounts, RKO took a gamble casting Hepburn as the ingénue in this film, but studio correspondence reveals that the eventual success of both the film and the star did not come as a shock to those involved. Merian C. Cooper’s advice to director George Cukor in a memo dated August 17, 1932, indicates that the studio became acutely aware of the newcomer’s potential after just the first preview of the completed film. “The chief thing I would do would be to reshoot some of the very bad photographic closeups [*sip*] of Katharine Hepburn,” Cooper writes, “as I think she is due to be an important star and it is not too good to make

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her appear as badly as she does in some of these shots.”¹¹ The requested retakes were completed by the end of the month, and the film was released in early autumn.

The exceptional critical and audience reception of *A Bill of Divorcement* eventually led *Photoplay* to declare the following in January 1933: “That audiences everywhere were acutely conscious of Katharine Hepburn as a dynamic new screen personality is now a matter of motion picture history. Never has *Photoplay* received more letters praising a first screen performance.” Despite the hype, however, publicity surrounding Hepburn’s screen debut indicates marked uncertainty in how to characterize Hepburn’s image. In November 1932, *Photoplay* raved about the performance after its premiere and took a stab at installing Hepburn within the cadre of her contemporaries: “not since Greta Garbo first flashed before screen audiences in *The Torrent* has anything happened like this Katharine Hepburn. This girl from the New York stage is not only a fine actress – she is a great personality.”¹² The “Garboesque” quality became a running theme of Hepburn’s early publicity, but the comparison remains somewhat arbitrary. As a fan pointed out in a letter to Hepburn after the release of her second film, *Christopher Strong*: “someone [in the press] opines that you are ‘America’s Garbo’ which is very meaningless.”¹³

There is a great deal of evidence to support this opinion, most notably the rather absurd 1933 article, “What is this Thing Called X?”, in which *Photoplay* columnist Hilary Lynn situated both Hepburn and Garbo within the cadre of the world’s most notable female figures, claiming that each actress possessed “some elusive, irresistible charm” that was the source of their fascination. “For about the X-woman,” Lynn writes, “there is always the exciting possibility of richer discoveries. She never reveals anything.”¹⁴ There were no precedents in Hollywood for a tall, thin, blue-blooded redhead from New England, but Hepburn mirrored Garbo with her impressive acting talent and apparent indifference to the media spotlight. As Lynn’s column suggests, both stars’ images were constructed in the press around their steadfast privacy, which in combination with the quality of their screen performances made them seem otherworldly.

Though the publicity surrounding stars was

a necessary component to the studios’ marketing of films, Hepburn maintained a notable distance from the public eye that was calculated and gave her an advantage in her construction of her career. The lack of visibility fueled rumors regarding her personal life, which in turn sustained audiences’ fascination with the star. The inherent fallibility of the fan magazines’ speculation allowed Hepburn to retain control over her image by enabling her to involve herself with the mechanisms of publicity only as she chose. *Picture-Play* columnist Helen Klumph picked up on this tactic in a February 1933 article, “A Lady Lies,” in which the actress, in a purported interview with the author, categorically denies all of the rumors currently circulating about her background, even the ones known to be true.¹⁵ Hepburn contradicts most of Klumph’s details about her background – including her marriage, education, and family – but she offers no alternatives except to reiterate her refusal to discuss these topics. An advertisement for a follow-up column, appearing in the June issue of the same magazine, declares that the star’s comments were “part of a well-thought-out campaign” to stir up public interest surrounding her emergence.¹⁶ This insinuation has a great deal of merit, considering that the infrequency of Hepburn’s engagement with the press meant that any comment she made was guaranteed a great deal of interest. Her denial of basic biographical information in articles like these helped fan the flames of public speculation, keeping her name at the forefront of the conversation. In the absence of active image-making, publicity surrounding the star became self-referent; the lack of information became the story.

Klumph’s column is, then, a perfect example of the popular demand for the contextualization of public images within private lives despite the stars’ resistance. Though Hepburn evades this paradigm by limiting the interview’s scope to her professional life, she is symbolically shamed for her uncooperativeness in the title, “A Lady Lies.” This negative framing, however, does not detract from the overarching theme of merit-based achievement. The middle part of the article offers a brief history of Hepburn’s theatrical career, in which her current success is attributed to her personal ambition. Referencing Frances Robinson Duff, Hepburn’s acting teacher in New York, Klumph noted, “at last

I had managed to mention someone whom she did not disclaim.” In a lengthy quotation, Hepburn attributed much of her success to Duff’s tutelage: “through all my disappointments that might have made me so discouraged that I would have stopped trying, she was so serene and helpful that I managed to wait for my chance.” Klumph suggests that this openness reflected the star’s “desire to shake off the label of ‘ex-society girl’ [...] to be judged solely as an actress,” which can arguably indicate a deliberate privileging of professional experience over personal details in the construction of her image.¹⁷

Hepburn’s distinct talent provided her a privileged status in the public eye that mirrored her rarely discussed, but still somewhat known, private life, and the resulting public persona successfully reconciled her socioeconomic background with the tastes and demands of current audiences. Though she rarely acknowledged her family’s social stature, her image encapsulated a sense of aristocracy that was genuine. As Richard Dyer suggests, authenticity is “greatly prized in stars because [it] guarantees... that the star really is what he or she appears to be.”¹¹ In a fan letter to the star, Edward Buczynski demonstrates this appreciation for her role in *A Bill of Divorcement*: “in seeing you act in this picture I was aware of insufficiency in my experience to account for someone so incredibly, so simply herself.”¹²

Hepburn’s presence in the fan magazines in the early months of her Hollywood career is marked by a great uncertainty about who, exactly, she was trying to be, which was exacerbated by the misdirection she commonly offered the press. A number of articles in the early 1930s made sweeping attempts at clarification, the most successful of which was a cover story in the May 1933 issue of *Modern Screen*. Earlier efforts were often written with vague contempt and little evidence or in-depth conclusions – Helen Klumph, in the earlier article, was unable to pinpoint a motive for Hepburn’s lies. In “The Real Reason for Hepburn’s Amazing Behavior,” Nina Wilcox Putnam uses firsthand knowledge of the Hepburn family to defend the actress and provide a clearer picture of her personal background. Putnam vouches for Hepburn’s upstanding character and genuineness and establishes a feminist element within the star’s image by discussing her upbringing within the suffragist cause, to which the author

also belonged. Framed as a “modern” woman, Mrs. Hepburn is quoted as saying that she wanted her daughter to always “express her true self,” and it was on this premise that Hepburn and her siblings were raised. Given the contradictory nature of Hepburn’s public image, this quote is somewhat ironic, but as Putnam seems to conclude, this wild rebelliousness and resistance to formal structures *is* the star’s true self; after all, “Katharine Hepburn is not as other women.”²²

The suggestion of a feminist dynamic is not merely the byproduct of the modern reconsideration of Hepburn’s star image; it was also a crucial factor in the contemporary reconciliation of her public and private identities. As these fan magazine articles indicate, the inscrutability of the actress’s persona can be interpreted as a deliberate tactic linked to Hepburn’s desire for autonomy in the establishment of her studio career. This view is supported by her personal correspondence, particularly those examples that indicate her awareness of the political, economic, and, to some extent, ideological significance of her stardom. Sometime after the release of *Morning Glory* in 1933, and around the same time as Wilcox’s article, actor-director John Cromwell penned a letter to Hepburn responding to the film’s representation of female success in comparison with the broader tradition of women in Western art. Though the film is perhaps the most autobiographical of any Hepburn film until *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), Cromwell objected to the narrative subtext that, in his view, supported the rather unenlightened idea that a girl’s best shot at success is “through the love of a good man.”²⁴

Many of Hepburn’s films, and indeed, many films of this period in general, end more or less in this same conclusion; though her character, as Haskell and Britton attest, is generally unique in her independence, the narrative often returns her to the sociocultural norms of the 1930s in the final act. Cromwell’s letter seems to support this perspective, as he writes, “time and time again your acting picks up the dying story and charges it with life as a dynamo charges a battery,” but at the same time, he laments that the stories themselves do not provide the heroine any kind of power or agency: “For the last two hundred years, no Western artist – author, painter, or sculptor – has been able to regard woman other than as an object of sentiment. [...] Now

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the most important problems in regard to woman spring almost entirely from her rebellion against the fact that her power nonetheless chained her to the man [...]"²²

The discrepancy between the independence Hepburn enjoyed within the studio and her treatment on the screen is Cromwell's primary concern, and on one level it would seem to hinder the advancement of a feminist reading of the star. Danae Clark notes, however, the importance of examining "the actor's working relation to the practice of cinema" in the process of historicizing stars as subjects, and indeed the established modes of producing films are the exact limitations that Hepburn defied.²³ Though it is necessary to concede that male executives were always in a position of institutional authority over the star, the short-term success of Hepburn's stardom, occurring at a critical time for the financially insecure RKO, provided the actress with a great deal of leverage within the studio that would affect her career in the long term. Cromwell urged the actress to find a way to translate this agency to her film roles, but as publicity materials and additional correspondence indicate, Hepburn's conscious exertion of her power led to important failures in her career that greatly affected her stardom.

PART II: Hepburn has Arrived

"Katharine Hepburn has discarded some of her eccentricities and is acting more like a human being."

-- *Modern Screen*, April 1933²⁴

The unexpected success of Hepburn's first screen appearance spurred executives to flood the market with her image during the first year of her career, placing the young actress in the top echelon of studio stardom almost instantaneously. Between March 1933 and April 1934, RKO released four more films, each with Hepburn in the starring role. At no other point in her career did she work with such frequency; she completed just nine more projects for the studio in the subsequent four years of her contract. As a marketing tactic, this frenzy of production and distribution was highly successful. The constant media hype surrounding the newest public persona, combined with the critical reception

of these films, led *Picture Play's* editors to declare, in December 1933, that "meteoric Katharine Hepburn celebrates her arrival among the fixed stars."²⁵ Quotes like this one are common within the fan magazines in the months following the release of *Little Women* in November 1933. After four successful films, the apparent maturation of Hepburn's image is an interesting phenomenon that marks the transition to the second phase of her early career.

Historians often note that the upward trajectory of Hepburn's career began to falter as early as 1934, with the poor critical reception of *Spitfire* in spite of its popularity among audiences. From the studio's perspective, this downturn is the fault of the star alone, because she refused the advice of the executives whose experience could ensure the continuation of her initial success. To some extent, this view is valid; Hepburn's desire to determine the direction of her own career led to many decisions that, in hindsight, were clearly misguided.²⁶ In early 1935, RKO began work on its adaptation of Booth Tarkington's *Alice Adams*, intended as a vehicle to reestablish Hepburn's popularity after the modest performance of her 1934 offerings to the box office. On March 27, Hepburn received a letter from production supervisor Pandro Berman: "As a final checkover I have taken a list of all the directors in the industry and from that list selected those who could under any circumstances successfully direct a class picture. [...] I wish you would give me a concrete expression of your opinion so that I will avoid doing something which will make you unhappy."²

The letter offers a choice between two top-tier directors, George Stevens and William Wyler, and includes a comprehensive list of other names that were considered unsuitable for undisclosed reasons. Jewell's account of an exchange between Berman and studio boss B.B. Kahane suggests that this letter is simply a ploy to give the actress the impression of some control over important decisions, and the letter itself seems to support this by strongly favoring Stevens over his colleague.²⁸ Regardless of its potentially disingenuous intentions, however, the example indicates that Hepburn had enough clout within the studio to necessitate such a ruse. On April 5, to further this point, Berman wired Hepburn to inquire about a rumor that she was

negotiating with Joseph Mankiewicz, then known mainly as a screenwriter, “for script of *Alice Adams*.”² There is no clear context for this telegram, but taken at face value, it suggests that Hepburn had at least some privilege of script approval, and that she was more than an ignorant bystander to the production process.

Though Hepburn’s powerful position within the studio was established more concretely through the mid-1930s, her absence from the public eye increasingly hindered her career longevity. *Alice Adams* was met with tremendous critical and audience acclaim and reinvigorated public interest in the star, but as her name returned to the headlines with renewed enthusiasm, so too did questions about her background and her image in general. As Muriel Babcock notes in a September 1935 article for *Hollywood*, “Katharine runs so fast and hard to escape headlines that she gets bushels of them over trivialities.”³⁰ If Hepburn’s initial stardom was perpetuated by speculation based on the absence of information, her publicity in subsequent years took on a revisionist slant, attempting to fill the gaps that still existed in her star image. Nina Wilcox Putnam’s earlier account of Hepburn’s upbringing offers a minor illustration of this point; Babcock’s article here extends it further, reprinting excerpts from old articles in order to comment on them directly. Hepburn’s marriage to Ludlow Ogden Smith, insinuated in Helen Klumph’s *Picture-Play* article in 1933, is confirmed by Babcock, as is their 1934 divorce. On this point, it is interesting to note that the actress’s private correspondence is also unclear; Hepburn’s telegrams to Smith, dated from late 1932, are always signed anonymously, suggesting that the star went to great lengths to maintain privacy for herself and her family.

Private correspondence around this time indicates a growing concern among Hepburn’s friends and colleagues that the star’s disinterest in defining her public image would affect the long-term potential of her Hollywood career. In May 1935, just before *Alice Adams* entered production, *Fortune* editor Russell Davenport wrote a seven-page letter to longtime friend Hepburn that, barring the suggestion of clairvoyance, can only be described as a critical analysis of her stardom. It is both a review of her most recent film – “the trouble with *Break of Hearts* can be reduced to four elements:

1) incompetent direction; 2) careless production; 3) abominable script; and 4) an entire misconception of you as an artist. The order of their importance is 4, 3, 2, 1” – and a warning about the viability of her career in the long term. In this conversation, Davenport reflects the frustrations of the print media (to which he incidentally belongs) in raising the question, “as an artist, who and what are you?” Despite the ambiguity of Hepburn’s image, most popular discourse regarding the star agrees on her merits as an actress, first and foremost. Davenport, however, is highly perceptive in his characterization of the star’s Hollywood status in relation to her chosen films, and astutely points out that “great actresses” must be discerning in their selection of roles in order to maintain their stature. “Box-office or no box-office, you are at present riding for a fall,” he writes, highlighting the counterposition of the interests of the studio and that of the talent.³¹ Stars, after all, serve mainly to ensure the success of studio films through the popularity of their public personae, but that which benefits the studio in the short term does not always do the same for the star in the long term.

In the context of Hepburn’s later career, this letter shows remarkable foresight. Following Davenport’s assured advice, after the release of *Alice Adams* in the summer of 1935, Hepburn began to star in more highbrow films. Audiences, however, were unimpressed, and as predicted, the star’s box office draw entered steep decline. The actress’s relationship with RKO also rapidly deteriorated, as evidenced by several telegrams sent by Berman in 1936. The earliest, dated January 23, references a seemingly minor dispute between Hepburn and John Ford over the costumes for her soon-to-be produced film, *Mary of Scotland* (1936), in which the studio sides firmly with the director and advises the star’s full cooperation.³² In a subsequent correspondence, dated June 4, Berman defends himself at length against the concerns raised by the star in a “talk” with Leo Spitz, Berman’s boss, and states that he wishes to “review certain facts” in writing: “[I] am only trying to indicate to you and myself [that] I have never been wrong when I have been personally convicted insofar as your productions are concerned, either from [the] box-office angle or from [the] angle of pleasing the most people with you. These last two things go hand-in-

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hand anyhow as box-office pictures please the most people.³

In this quote, Berman clearly distances himself from blame over the films that were less successful in the box office, essentially using Hepburn's perceived influence in the studio as a strategy against her. This, I would argue, contradicts Berman's earlier statements to Kahane regarding Hepburn; clearly the star was not always "handled" with the same efficacy as in the *Alice Adams* example. Though some of Hepburn's films of the later part of the decade, including *Stage Door* (1937), *Holiday* (1938), and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), are among the most critically acclaimed in recent years, their failure in the box-office was the nail in the coffin for Hepburn's tenure at RKO. In 1938, Hepburn was among a few major stars to be labeled "box office poison" in a publicity campaign backed by theater owners who resolved to boycott the films in which they appeared. Her studio contract was terminated by mutual agreement shortly thereafter.³⁴

In the latter years of Hepburn's tenure at RKO, private correspondence both influenced and reflected the level of agency that the actress maintained at the studio, and the conflicts that arose between her and studio bosses were exacerbated by her lack of a clearly defined public persona. Though in the early days of her Hollywood success Hepburn's aversion to fan magazine publicity created a mysterious quality that appealed to audiences, the actress's attempt to establish a career entirely on her own merit proved, to some extent, the validity of industry mechanisms. Even as Pandro Berman and other powerful players acquiesced to the star's demands, letters from industry outsiders like Russell Davenport indicate an awareness of the unfeasibility of the kind of career Hepburn created for herself. Given the inherent failure of a star without an audience, the unceremonious ending of this first phase of her Hollywood stardom could not have been particularly surprising.

Epilogue: From Hollywood to Broadway and Back Again

"Katharine Hepburn, who long since won the title of 'rebel' from an irritated Hollywood, is back, and the darling of the lot."

-- *Hollywood*, December 1940³⁵

Just as Hepburn's reticence to discuss her personal life in the media effectively established her mainly as a serious actress, the story of her resurgence in Hollywood is largely a tribute to her own merits and perseverance within the structures of the industry. In the broader history of Hepburn's Hollywood career, the unsavory finale of her relationship with RKO was but a hiccup. In late 1938, she returned East to her family in Connecticut as an escape from the publicity surrounding her downfall, but this break from the spotlight was short-lived. Hepburn returned to the Broadway stage in the spring of 1939 to star as Tracy Lord in *The Philadelphia Story*, a play written specifically for her by playwright Philip Barry. The show's huge commercial success and vast critical acclaim are in some respects a revenge story; among the many congratulatory notes Hepburn received are several from Hollywood executives and other major figures in the film world, including Ned Depinet of RKO and Nate Spingold at Columbia.

As the play's success became known in mid-1939, Hepburn purchased the film rights and began to orchestrate its screen adaptation. Circumstances surrounding these efforts are vague – some say Howard Hughes and his fortune played a major role – but it is generally agreed that Hepburn herself negotiated for its production at MGM.³⁶ The stage version's correspondence file suggests that this move to ride back to Hollywood on the coattails of her success was planned well in advance; a note from George Cukor (signed "Boss") refers to a "promise" the star had made, and indeed, his direction of the adaptation was a non-negotiable term of the sale of the rights to the studio.³⁷ A letter signed only as "Neil," sent a few days after the release of the film in December 1940, recalls the MGM executives' initial hesitancy to facilitate the star's return to the screen, but confirms that Hepburn's efforts during production prove that she is "again a great actress in pictures."³ Perhaps 20th Century-Fox's Tom Lennon put it best: "once again, I am laughing with you at the slobs who laughed at you."³⁹

If, as Russell Davenport warned, the ultimate failure of Hepburn's image while at RKO was due to the lack of certainty about what her personality actually was, *The Philadelphia Story's* success is unsurprising; among all of Hepburn's roles over the years, Tracy Lord is the most closely aligned with her "real self," and thus helped to establish her

public image in clearer terms. With the Depression Era fading away from the forefront of American consciousness, Hepburn was evidently free to incorporate more of her background – her blue-blooded, educated, feminist ways and all – in her screen persona. The dissolution of Hepburn's RKO contract became, in subsequent years, something of a blessing; the temporary break from the industry and the public eye enabled the star to reconfigure her persona into one with greater long-term appeal and less direct conflict with studio practices.

Though screen talent was not often granted the same level of agency that Hepburn achieved, this act of negotiation between the kind of stardom that she wanted and the version that was marketable is an important model for the broader consideration of labor politics in studio-era Hollywood. A similar pattern is central to Adrienne McLean's study of Rita Hayworth; building off of Clark's concept of

the "actor as worker," she argues that the actress "found it extraordinarily difficult to negotiate the competing demands of family, domesticity, and professional labor."⁴⁰ Existing historical scholarship tends to rule out notions of agency among female stars, but personal correspondence and fan magazine coverage, when available, are uniquely positioned to illuminate instances of active involvement in the construction of public personae. Though publicity surrounding Hepburn's last years as an RKO star declared her one of the "most hated people in Hollywood," her performance in MGM's *The Philadelphia Story* reminded audiences that, as *Hollywood* magazine put it in 1934, "what is more important than all else [is that] she is a great actress."⁴¹ Between her comments to the press and the correspondence of her private life, it seems that this is exactly the image that Hepburn hoped to achieve.

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28. Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures*, 105-106.
29. Pandro Berman, "Letter to Katharine Hepburn – April 5, 1935," Katharine Hepburn Collection, Folder 1.f-14, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.
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31. Russell Davenport, "Letter to Katharine Hepburn – May 16, 1935," Katharine Hepburn Collection, Folder 1.f-18, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.
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39. Tom Lennon, "Letter to Katharine Hepburn – January 3, 1941," Katharine Hepburn Collection, Folder 9.f-136 (emphasis his), Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.
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41. Marcella Burke, "Hepburn Dares to be Different," *Hollywood*, February 1934, 22.