A Case Study: Ruby Keeler's Anti-Star Image in 1933 Warner Bros Great Depression Musicals

THESIS

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Omer Akbulut, B.A

Graduate Program in Film Studies

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Master's Examination Committee:

Ryan Jay Friedman, Advisor

Linda Mizejewski

Angus Fletcher

Abstract

Although the trilogy of 1933 Warner Bros Great Depression movie musicals have been examined by many scholars who specialized in dance, music, women and gender studies and film studies from various angles, none of them draw attention to Ruby Keeler's star image in the three films, *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade*. This study examines Keeler's on-screen characters in those three films alongside fan magazine articles, biographical accounts of her life story – especially as they relate her marriage with Al Jolson – by using star theory, in order to put into place Keeler's anti-star status. These considerations are taken up in the broader context of 1930s Hollywood female stardom to find out how her crafted star image connected to a traditional American morality, as well as the contemporary Hollywood labor practices. This research demonstrates that Keeler's star image was constructed around institutions of marriage not only to promote traditional American family values and rehabilitate a male identity perceived as in crisis, but her unique star image signaled a change in 1930s female stardom altogether, commenting on labor unrest in Hollywood.

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Vita

2009.....Malatya High School

2014.....B.A. Radio, Television and Cinema Marmara University, Istanbul.

2014 to present.....YLSY scholarship awarded by Ministry of National Education (Turkey)

2018 to present .....M.A. Film Studies, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Film Studies

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> I enjoy the pictures, but I am sure that if *42nd Street* had not been such a tremendous box office hit, my Hollywood career would have ended as suddenly as it started. I have done three pictures since, and, fortunately, they have been elaborate musicals. I credit their success to the vogue for music and to the all-star casts each had. I, myself, have been just the romantic filler-in. (Maddox 95)

In an article from the September 1934 issue of *Screenland* magazine, "The Star Who is Wise to Herself," Ben Maddox shows how Ruby Keeler was "dumbfounded by her opinion of acting" (95). Although Keeler has played leading roles in *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), and *Footlight Parade* (1933), she gives credit to everything other than herself, describing herself as a "romantic filler" in these three Warner Bros musicals. In 1930s Hollywood, where female stars hold the visions of "delusions of importance prevailed," she goes against the prevailing concept of stardom by downplaying her contribution to movies (51). In his article, Maddox highlights Keeler's uniqueness, claiming that it comes from the "philosophy of knowing thyself, which is exact mental self-evaluation," rather than having "physical possessions." As opposed to other women stars, who "look glamorous, beautiful and brilliant," this fan magazine article gives the audience the sense that neither Keeler's physical (ingenue, charm) nor characteristic qualities (modest, shy, honesty) will be altered (Maddox 51).

To measure the shift in the audience's opinion of Keeler's status as a sophisticated star across the fan magazine discourse of the 1930s, it is essential to look at readers who express their complaints about major stars. In a feature titled, "What the Fan Thinks," from a 1934 issue of

Picture Play Magazine, a reader wonders, "Why do people call Katharine Hepburn different? She is just another imitation of Garbo. Don't we have enough of those on the screen today? What the public wants more actresses like Ruby Keeler…She is fresh, beautiful and can dance. She is a fine actress, too" (58). In another comment from the same column, a reader says, "I am so sick of wide-eyed, baby-face girls who pull their skirts up to their flowered garters. It is a pleasure to see Ruby on the screen. She is both pretty and sweet, but she has plenty of pep. What a tap dancer" (7). Those comments evidence how, for fans, Keeler's unique star image combined ordinary looks, talent, and honesty with offering a tempting promise for readers fed up with manufactured stars who copied each other's style in 1930s Hollywood.

While fan magazines shaped notions of 1930s Hollywood female stardom by introducing, as Alexander Doty puts it, the "modern woman as sexually liberated independent, young woman" in negotiation with the industry practices of the star system, prominent stars of the era, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, whose careers were on the decline, looked for ways to revive their star images (Doty, 127). As they were well-known for "glamorous, sexually open women roles," with Garbo constructed as queer and Dietrich as bisexual via musical numbers in the movies, their star images presented as sex-goddess. (111, 119). As a result of casting Garbo and Dietrich in sexually-active, ambiguous-woman roles, their publicity centered on so-called shady lady parts (115). These actors became potent symbols of women of "easy virtue," playing roles of "fallen" women in most of their 1930s movies. At the beginning of the 1930s, both Garbo and Dietrich made an effort to move their "glamorous foreign images towards American working-class Great Depression environment as often occupied by Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, and Constant Bennett" (113).

Garbo and Dietrich threatened traditional gender roles through film characters who embodied sexually independent (active) women. Stephen Sharot notes that, in both actors' fan magazine discourses, Stanwyck and Crawford, who came from lower-class backgrounds, were revealed as independent, career-oriented, autonomous women in the process of rising to stardom. While Crawford turned herself into a more upper-class, glamorous "lady," through marriage and gentrification, Stanwyck symbolized the "tough, wisecracking, hard-boiled dame" in films, which appealed to the working-class. Her independent star image was bolstered by her labor practices: she refused to work for the studio under her seven-year contract (Sharot *Love* 186-189). In regard to similar discourses on independent female stars in 1930s Hollywood, Emily Susan Carman put forth that Stanwyck, Hopkins, and Lombard were promoted through fan magazines and the popular discourse and developed their personas and the public images as independent, working and modern women (583-615). Likewise, in the mid-1930s, advice columns in fan magazines encouraged American women toward a nontraditional lifestyle that privileged feminine individuality and focused on careers instead of domesticity. Thus, fan magazines encouraged female readers to imitate these stars and to pursue their recommendations to be independent and "modern" themselves. As a result of these given messages on ideal femininity, the married women followed the advice led to rising tensions in regard to gender roles within American society (587-612).

The rising concern for married women's social and economic autonomy was a phenomenon concomitant with the loss of men's traditional status as breadwinners during the Great Depression in 1933. While many families struggled to make a living, familial breakdowns became common, as men left for other parts of the country in hopes of finding jobs. According to

Stephen Sharot, “In the worst Depression years (1932-33), one-third of all married women workers were the sole support of their families…Some men felt a sense of deep humiliation as a consequence of their economic dependence on their wives and daughters” (*Love* 167), but Sharot points that out many “gold digger films” produced between 1930-1933 (the so-called Pre-Code Era) turned the economic anxiety of male populations to moral concerns (207, 211). Along with “gold diggers,” “fallen women” was a general theme of the times. Their depiction involved transgressive sexuality in movies such as *Red-Headed Woman* (MGM, 1932), and *Baby Face* (Warner Bros., 1933) drew attention from the Catholic Legion of Decency, a group that, concerned with morality, pushed for increased censorship (Sharot *Social* 107). The Production Code implemented out by the Studio Relations Committee, later well-known as the Hays Office, was advisory. As such, it was overlooked by Hollywood studios until the end of 1932 (Sharot *Love* 208). Thus, during the Pre-Code Era, the studios freely exploited the sexuality of the female body to capture larger audiences, even at the risk of offending some groups’ sensibilities.

Hollywood female stars of the 1930s continued to contradict the traditional gender roles by fusing feminine and masculine traits in their stardom and injecting glamour and mystery into their star images (Carman 603-609). According to Sharot, all-female stars went through this glamorization process in Hollywood to some degree, forgetting or covering up where they came from (in terms of class) in service of achieving star status (*Social* 179). By creating a new notion of femininity, female stars resisted not only the absolute control of male-dominated Hollywood over female agency through labor practices (i.e., being bound by long-term contracts) but also the pre-existing gender roles structuring American society. Even as Hollywood took precautions and punished female stars for terminating agreements to stabilize their profit-driven movie business,

adopting this new feminine personality, female stars that threatened male identity were compelling enough for an American audience (Doty 115).

Audience condemned the leading female stars of the 1930s, Garbo, Dietrich, Crawford, and Hepburn who, each generated a star image heavily dependent on "celebrity discourse"; performed or exaggerated false senses of glamor, mysteriousness, stylishness, independence, and luxurious lifestyle**.** One fan comment from the column, "What the Fan Thinks," in a 1934 *Picture Play Magazine* shows famous female stars in the eyes of fan magazine readers. "What a pity the Hollywood star can't cultivate some real sophistication. They are all so soaked in Hollywoodism it makes them insufferably dull" (7). While most of the female stars were criticized by fan magazine readers for their perceived fakeness, Ruby Keeler's ordinary-looking, working-class female protagonist in the Great Depression trilogy of Warner Bros won the sympathies of fan magazine readers. This is evident in a 1933 "Audience Talks Back" column from *Photoplay*, in which a fan expresses that "Ruby Keeler is like a buoyant breath of spring air, after the exotic perfume of Hepburn or Crawford. She conforms to no accepted formula for the heroine. Glamorous, sophisticated, beautiful, clever—it is evident usual glib adjectives do not apply. She is natural and individual" (8). Fan magazine readers were awake qualities that make Keeler's star image unique and embrace her authenticity.

Her stardom won the approval of fan magazine readers, signaling a radical change in the 1930s female stars fan magazine discourse. First and foremost, she has a natural appearance, not coming from wearing makeup—this natural appearance combined with moral values that created a success story along the way to the stardom. Even after gaining star status, she did not consider herself as a star. On the contrary, she denied her position and was not *the most* anything, but she

was well-known for her humility and self-deprecation, highlighting her own limited talent in press interviews. Keeler's star image, which circulated around her marriage in fan magazines and the narratives of three movies, touched on the conflict between domesticity and the career-woman, but it took a position against the mainstream discourse (i.e., the emancipation of women through their careers, as promoted by fan magazines in 1930s Hollywood). Unlike major stars of the 1930s, like Crawford, Lombard, who lost themselves in the glittering world of Hollywood luxury, in fan and filmic discourse (Love and Marriage 189), Keeler exhibits a quality that resists the temptations of stardom. Although she is a person from the working class, who gains wealth and success through hard work, luck, and marriage, she neither forgets where she comes from nor does she compare her star status to others for rivalry. Instead of taking things for granted, she is shown as a self-sufficient person who wields material richness in ways that promote solidarity with her family through charity. This sort of behavior aroused sympathy around her star image and strengthened audience identification with her character. One fan magazine letter from the column of Audience Talks Back shows how the audience approaches Keeler as more than a movie star: " A small boy suddenly asked his mother "Do you think I will ever have a girl like Ruby Keeler, mother?.... Here is a girl I would love for a sister, pal, or sweetheart" (6). Fan magazine readers see her as a member of their family, instead of sexualizing her body. Flood of love shown against Keeler was also evident from the number of letters sent to her and the results of a contemporary survey.

According to a 1933-1934 survey conducted by the *Hollywood Reporter*, Keeler came in third as the star who appeared most frequently on the cover of magazines, after Crawford and West, who shared first place, and Hepburn and Garbo, who tied for second (Slide 127). Although

Keeler climbed the ladder of success and achieved star status in a short time, her unique star image has failed to gain adequate scholarly attention within film studies. In order to illuminate Keeler's anti-star status in the context of 1930s Hollywood female stardom, I examine her stardom as a case study, using her appearance in the three aforementioned Warner Bros.' musicals, as well as through fan magazines, her general biography, and her marriage with Jolson. I claim that Keeler is constructed as an "anti-star" who comes from a lower-class background and possesses an average look and higher moral values. Her innocent appearance associated with the working-class embodied social and cultural values that are both lacking in and some degree in crisis in American society.

First and foremost, her anti-star image was constructed around the image of the Keeler-Jolson couple as happily married, which rehabilitated the contemporary male identity in crisis, by reconfirming man's position as a head of family house in the traditional family. Secondly, her anti-star image was crafted both in the fan magazine and movie eased labor tensions in Hollywood in a way that cultivated a star image that worked within the boundaries of Hollywood labor practices. As a chorus girl rising to star status, she worked hard and dedicated herself to whatever task was given to her, but she also portrayed a star image that demanded less from the studio in terms of roles and salary. She put her trust in management and did not use her star image against the studio to gain a monetary advantage. Warner Bros. saw an opportunity and capitalized on her star image. By doing so, Warner Bros, claiming to follow New Deal policies, elevated society and each individual by promoting social values through descriptions of Keeler's marriage and her personal life. The studio also exploited the New Deal and climate of the Great Depression as an excuse to extend its control over the star's image**.** By downplaying the star's

status and showing an example of Keeler (naïve person) with limited talent, Warner Bros. gave the idea that anybody can be a star with hard work and a little bit of luck**.** The studio used Keeler's star image as a bargaining chip to take economic advantage of other stars.

In the next section, I examine Keeler's marriage with Jolson and explain how fan magazine articles used the happily married couple image as a framework to diminishing Keeler's agency when placing Jolson in a superior position as a head of house through reinforcing family values around various dichotomies. In the third chapter, I will look at promotional materials from Warner Bros.' Great Depression-era musicals, in relation to the New Deal and Keeler's star image. First, I will shine a light on how Warner Bros. used movie posters for *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933,* and *Footlight Parade* as a publicity tool and highlighted Keeler's significant underrepresentation in these campaigns. Second, I will undertake a textual analysis of the studio's Great Depression trilogy and comparative reading of fan magazine articles that relate Keeler's biography, to how her constructed anti-star image served as commentary on labor unrest, masking and minimizing her contribution to the films in which she starred. I will further explain how Warner Bros crafted Keeler's image and organized labor through the example of Keeler. Constructing Keeler's roles in the Great Depression trilogy and the discourse in fan magazine articles about her, Warner Bros created an innocent, ordinary-looking, self-sufficient, obedient, humble anti-star who stuck to the studio's decisions in terms of assigned roles and salary. This representation of Keeler announced an alternative version of stardom and signified a shift in Hollywood's celebrity industry. The studio saw the opportunity and deployed Keeler's anti-star status for maximizing profit and reinforcing the society's values in the time of crisis in line with New Deal policies.

Chapter 2: Keeler's Marriage with Al Jolson and Rehabilitating Male Identity in Crisis

Because Al Jolson, one of the most famous entertainers in both Hollywood movies and Broadway musicals going into the 1930s, had been in the heyday of his career, his marriage to Keeler engendered the curiosity of the masses. When the two newlyweds sailed to Europe for their honeymoon in 1928, their marriage earned a place on newspaper front pages, where it was treated as a scandal, given the difference in the couple's ages and religions. While Keeler was eighteen-years-old and Catholic, Jolson was forty-six and Jewish—the exact age of Keeler's father at the time. Apart from that, Keeler-Jolson's marriage surprised Keeler's family as much as public opinion. Her sister, Margie Keeler Weatherwax, said that "We did not meet Al Jolson until Ruby returned from her honeymoon. They eloped; it was a shock to the family. After we got to know him, we thought he was a wonderful family man" (Trump 48). Due to the rapid development of marriage, rumors circulated through New York newspapers that Jolson had given one million dollars to Keeler as a gift in order to please her Irish-Catholic family (Oberfirst 214). Newspaper headlines and statements from Keeler's sister imply that the wealthy Jolson used his money to pressure Keeler's mother into allowing his marriage to her daughter, the young dancer. These responses can be understood as the first signs of how Jolson's reputation would wield influence over Keller's stardom during the young actress's rise to fame. Although, during their honeymoon, the major newspapers drew attention to the differences between them in terms of age, religion, and tastes, for the sake of publicity, fan magazines still depicted Keeler and Jolson as a happily married couple during the 1930s. In his foundational work of star studies, *Stars*, Richard Dyer states that stars are cultural constructions that represent and serve to interpret socially and culturally shared meanings of society (contradictions) in which they were born into,

or to uncover them and introduce positions contrary to the prevailing ideology (34). As opposed to leading female stars who rejected assigned gender roles and the cultural values constructed around family, Keeler's star image affirmed the traditional family and its values. By using the happy marriage as a framework, fan magazine articles shaped Keeler's star image (agency) throughout the dichotomies, which are; housewife-career woman, independent-dependent, self-sacrificing-self-sufficient, feminine-masculine, and glamorous-plain. Each of these categories was used in fan magazines to impose rigid gender roles and moral values on the star image of Keeler within the limits of the institution of marriage.

In the article titled "It is Always June with the Jolson's," published in *Movie Classic* in 1935, Maude Cheatham refers to the Jolson-Keeler marriage as "one of the seven wonders of Hollywood." She portrays them as a romantic, happily married couple living in perfect harmony. While Al defines Ruby as a quiet, modest, shy, and level-headed girl, Ruby labels Al unselfish, generous, and thoughtful (Cheatham 74). This article stresses that they are an ideal couple with a "strong bond of sympathy and a complete understanding that no outside condition can touch" (31). Even if the famous couple agrees on most subjects, they sometimes argue about trivial issues, as happens to every married couple. The exceptional personal qualities that they attribute to each other differentiate them from any average person and appeal to fans looking for something different in their stars to find attractive. According to Cheatham, the feature that brings them closer to the average couple is that they occasionally fight over trivial matters. (31, 74).

Another article, "Meet the Wife by Al Jolson," finds Jolson himself detailing his private life with Keeler. He calls himself the luckiest person in the world. He states that they are the

happiest couple, the right combination of an "old, gray-haired Jewish boy, and little Irish girl Catholic kid in and out of Hollywood" (90). Jolson emphasizes the image of them as a happily married couple living out a love story filled with the best version of everything. The article, "The Fairy Princess of Film," follows similar patterns, treating the institution of marriage as sacred in the form of Jolson and Keeler's companionship. What these articles hold in common is their coverage of the Jolson-Keeler couple's private life, which includes sacred pillars of marriage: a husband, a home, and children. By portraying their union in this way, fan magazine articles speak directly to women readers of the publication through star discourse (in this example, Keeler's) and instruct female fans to accept and internalize messages loaded with gender stereotypes. I am going to look at the main components of a happily married couple image that shape Keeler's stardom through questions arise: What kind of contradictions do Keeler-Jolson embody in their representation of a happily married couple? And how do those contradictions shape the star image of Keeler in negotiation with the gender roles of the 1930s?

One feature of the image of a happy marriage, according to this coverage: the wife should prioritize marriage and her husband over everything. In contrast to the 1930s figure of the unruly woman, Keeler, in the article "It is Always June With Jolsons," is described as "a Ziegfeld's star dancer, who voluntarily forgot her career to be just 'Mrs. Jolson'" (31). The interview quotes her saying, "Oh no, I will not let a career come between us" (31). From her biography, written by Rusty Frank, we learn that she had worked as a dancer at night club since she was twelve years old (243), but in the article "Halifax to Hollywood," Abbuh Wretlaw mentions that "her marriage to Al Jolson was a marriage with plenty of money" (9). This contradictory information implies that Keeler has received wealth through marriage and, therefore, no longer needs to work,

becoming dependent on her husband, instead. The concept of prioritizing husband over everything led to losing the financial independence of career women and obliged her husband's lifestyle.

In another article, titled "The Fairy Princess" and published in January 1934 *New Movie Magazine*, Hester Robison follows a similar pattern, glorifying the Jolson-Keeler relationship as a fairy tale, calling the couple "prince and princess." Robison praises Keeler, who attaches importance to marriage and her husband outside of fame, money, career. Robison promotes this idea by saying, "She snaps her fingers at things that seem all-important to other people" (Robison 56). Keeler is said to have had the courage to turn away from material things because of her hometown, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and its rugged atmosphere, as well as her training in Catholic convents. Robison goes on to mention Keeler's lower-class family background and Irish identity (Robison 56-57). Her Irish identity becomes associated with hard work and toughness, while her Catholic religious identity links her with charity.

These associations function together to suggest that the wealth obtained as a result of hard work—what's deemed a natural trait of being Irish—opens up an aspirational path to goodness and enjoyable life. These associations also gesture toward her implied generosity, as guided by the principles of her Catholic faith. By referring to Keeler's religious background and ethnicity and her previous class status, the article suggests that class mobilization and material richness are achievable no matter what background someone comes from. According to these texts, Keeler's class mobility and wealth were achieved through marriage. This idea of abandoning career and committing to the family are concepts reemphasized in most of the articles published in the 1930s fan magazines. By considering both biographical accounts and fan magazine articles, I suggest

that Keeler transformed from a financially independent, working-class woman, who made a living during the Great Depression, to a happily married woman who stands for a traditional way of life within domesticity/career women conflict.

As a result of how the era's discourse of domesticity dominated everything, fan magazine writers emphasize on the self-sacrifice of Keeler. Her off-screen image appears to renounce her financial independence. In her interview with Jolson, Cheatham quotes him as saying, "I never let Ruby worry over the business; that is my job. I run the house and pay all expenses, and her money is her own to do with as she pleases" (74). It seems that lack of financial independence of Keeler paves the way for Jolson to take the role of man of the house, which ensures his domination over her. In "How Ruby Keeler Holds Man," published in the October 1934 issue of *Hollywood*, Mary Watkins Reeves proclaims that Keeler leads an exemplary life, and uses her as an example for how American girls might develop a relationship with a man. "Gather around and listen, girls," Revees demands: "Every woman who wants to keep a husband happy can learn something from the love secrets Al reveals" (15). The steps to follow toward becoming an exemplary wife, these "love secrets," formulate a familiar idea: give up your career and get married. In Reeves's words, "Ruby will quit the pictures first. No career, she states, could ever take places of marriage to Al Jolson" (15). The article recommends that American girls be submissive to men, as Keeler is with Jolson. Keeler expresses Al's superior position in the family hierarchy by saying that "Al's got to be consulted first," and Jolson adds that Keeler says yes to everything before Keeler affirms this (14-15). The article points out that Al occupies the breadwinner position within their family, and that because of that, he is in control at home. This information, filtered through the text of the article, conforms with Keeler's biography, which

shows how Ruby felt imprisoned in her marriage to Al Jolson. The article uses her to exemplify the ideal wife, explicitly mentioning that "Ruby has got to be close to a loudspeaker whenever Al broadcasts, for the finest thing radio can offer her is her husband's voice" (15). It can be understood from this fan magazine that the only thing Keeler must do is support Jolson, and enjoy the material richness he supplies. This article suggests that women must be supportive of their husbands and that they should stay at home and enjoy whatever their husband offers them.

Staying at home and supporting her husband led Keeler to limit and sacrifice her Broadway career. The biography of Jolson, written by Robert Oberfirst, emphasizes how Keeler gave herself up to fit her husband's life practices**.** The newlywed couple returned from their honeymoon and first settled down in New York, but were eventually forced to live between two separate cities, New York and Los Angeles, because of their different schedules of rehearsals and publicity work. Although Keeler did all rehearsals for her own new Broadway show, *Whoopee* in 1928, she never made the opening night, instead boarding a train to West Coast upon her husband's request (186). It was not unusual for her to make such last-minute changes and to self-sacrifice in line with her husband's schedule. The author of the 1934 article, "The Fairy Princess of the Films," takes this idea of self-sacrifice a step further, noting that "Always in the back of her mind the thought—Will Al think this is right? Will he want me to cut out this bit of business? Will he approve of this? And If the answers in her mind are negative, she snaps fingers at contracts" (91). The article reveals how the power that Jolson has over the decision-making process of Keeler pushes her to implement self-control over her behavior, even in the face of business opportunity.

As a result of Keeler's performed domesticity and self-sacrifice, the scope of her indoor and outdoor activities becomes determined by Al's will and pleasures. The authors of two articles, "Her Future from A Teacup" and "It's Always June with The Jolsons," give information about those activities—including golfing, football, horse-racing, prize fights—in which Jolson and Keeler engage together. "The Fairy Princess," however, stresses that, although Keeler prefers a tennis match to watch a horse race, she has started to watch it because Jolson is fond of it. She has little interest in golf, but, just as with the horse races, declares her interest in golf after marriage because Al has been interested in the game. In another article, "Her Future from A Teacup," a fortune-teller hints as to why Keeler's leisure activities should be under her husband's control as a part of her dream lifestyle. The fortune-teller says to Keeler, "You keep changing from place to place. Often in marriage, you give up your own plan for someone else. That is as should be" (Kutner 79-80). The self-sacrifice made by leaving her film career locks Keeler into life at home; she has had to delay her gratification and remain flexible in order to fit into Al's life. In the biographical material about Keeler from The *Women of Warner Brothers,* Daniel Bubbeo points out that Jolson was jealous of Keeler because of his possessive nature. Whenever Jolson traveled to the West Coast for a movie, he wanted to know by whom Keeler was accompanied. For that reason, Keeler relied mostly on her family and relatives when it came to socializing with people (Bubbeo 115). This anecdote from the book, reveals to what degree Keeler's marriage with Jolson caged her. Fan magazine articles go further and speculate on Keeler's career and life. In the *Movie Classic* article, "Mrs. Jolson Enters Films," published in 1933, Sonia Lee raises a question about how Keeler's career (at the time of her film debut in *42nd Street*) is affecting the Jolson-Keeler marriage, reminding readers that having "two careers in a

family has been considered as a danger for domestic bliss in Hollywood" (29). Despite making this statement, the article adds, "Jolson does not fear the picture imminent for his wife" (29). The article reveals that Jolson acts as both Keeler's agent and manager. This simply indicates that Jolson played a part as a mentor and affected Keeler's career-related decision-making, at a time when the actress herself was still new to the film industry. As the article continues, Jolson's statements make Keeler's misery obvious. He says that "I am pleased that Ruby has such an opportunity to break into the movie business. She has been terribly lonely in Hollywood and longed for New York" (29). His statements reveal part of Keeler's monotonous and dutiful lifestyle, which she would go on to confirm in a later newspaper interview. In 1991, Ruby stated Trudy Le Brule, editor of the newsletter of The International Al Jolson Society, "Jolson's possessive streak made life difficult for me. She said she was not allowed to go anywhere without him, not even out to dinner with a married couple" (Bubbeo 105). An interview Sonia Lee conducts with Jolson in the article, "Mrs. Jolson Enters Film," gives a sense of the growing concern about how Keeler will be separated from her husband because of his career. Even though Jolson says that "I am not in the least disturbed by the possibility of having another picture star in the family," in the aforementioned article, it is easy to understand this reaction as neither surprising nor the part of reality in parallel to Jolson's biography (29).

Along the same lines as "Mrs. Jolson Enters Film," other fan magazine articles voiced similar concerns over the potential for Keeler to turn herself into a financially-independent, glamorous woman in the model of most major stars in 1933. In "How Ruby Keeler Holds Her Man," published in October 1934 issue of *Hollywood,* Mary Reeves claims that Keeler does not have the will to triumph over her husband's success by asking a rhetorical question: "Do you

think regardless of what happens, she will ever let her husband stop believing he's run above her on the ladder of achievement? Not Ruby. Not a clever woman" (14). After posing the question, Reeves points out that, while Keeler's career has advanced from chorus girl to star of Warner Bros' trilogy, Jolson's career had declined, as he was no longer entertaining serious offers from Hollywood after they married. In the article, the author warns that if Ruby's greater success is inevitable, she would be better off quitting entirely. Similarly, in "Give This Little Girl A Hand," published in *Photoplay* and in "Halifax to Hollywood," from *Broadway Authors,* the authors give detailed information on Keeler's career. Although those articles mention that, early on in her career as a tap dancer, Keeler was cast in Hollywood with the help of Al Jolson, the writer of "Give This Little Girl a Hand" points out that "There was a time when Ruby Keeler was spoken of as Jolson's wife. Now wits around Hollywood kid Al by telling him that if he does not watch out, he will become Ruby Keeler's husband" (107). Adela Rogers St. Johns reveals that Jolson's position in Hollywood, and as the main source of money and power in the house as well as his legacy is under attack by his wife's newly shining career.

In light of all of these fan magazine articles and biographical accounts, Al Jolson 's declining career paralleled the contemporary crisis of masculinity in 1933. While the breadwinning role of men in the traditional family structure was challenged by unemployment, it seems no coincidence that Jolson, whose career was already in decline, perceived his wife's success as a threat to his dominant position in their family. Since Jolson had plenty of time and was lacking any notable job offers from Hollywood, he started alienating himself from Keeler, who was, by then, busy building her own career. In the book, *The Jolson the Legend Comes to Life*; Herbert Goldman details that "each day he drove to the studio and brought Ruby home as he

used to do. He had the feeling that she did not belong to him alone, that her beauty and charm were shared by millions of others" (249). Jolson's ego and yearning for his old days in Hollywood led him to exercise a great deal of control over Keeler.

In order to soften Keeler's perceived attack against Jolson in the representative form of masculinity in crisis, fan magazine articles used Jolson's legacy, fame, and connection to minimize Keeler's agency by putting her into a passive role in relation to his active, controlling one. In "Explaining Ruby Keeler," published in *Movie Classic*, the author, Beth Walker, defines Keeler as a childish, innocent girl living under the control of Jolson—both her husband and a father figure—who, in the article, is depicted taking one of Keeler's business calls. Jolson is positioned as Keeler's mentor as she steps into the world of the movie business. While her leisure activities remain mostly determined by Jolson, Keeler's area of interest is limited to material goods, such as coats and jewelry. An anecdote shared by the author reflects on how Keeler's agency entirely diminished: "When she walks along the streets in Hollywood with Al, everybody stops and speaks and shakes hand and says 'Hi Al, Hi Ruby,' but when she walks on Hollywood Boulevard by herself nobody recognizes her" (Walker 64). This article does not give any credit to Keeler, who, at that time, had just debuted in *42nd Street*.

Another article, "It's Ruby's Turn Now," published in *Modern Screen*, has writer Caroline Somers Hoty narrate her attempt to get an appointment from Keeler after Hoty attended the opening night of the star's latest picture in New York. Hoty mentions that the fact that Jolson answered the phone came as a surprise for her, as she remembers when Jolson was the center of media interest. She references the tragedy of show business, saying, "Five years ago, he was the great Al Jolson, and who was this little chorus girl he married? But now it is Ruby Keeler. Al

Jolson is her husband" (16). Mentioning how the situations have reversed in terms of their careers, she announces Keeler's success both in *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, pronouncing her "every girl's dream of instant and unusual success": "but to her, at least, husband Al Jolson is still Big Shot of the family" (17). Although Keeler had gained success and popularity, the article implies she believes this is because of Jolson. The writer highlights Ruby's statement that "People hardly ever remember me. But they all know Al" (86). Even if Hoty accepts that Jolson was not the greatest entertainer of the world, she suggests that Keeler holds this opinion. "It's Ruby's Turn Now" also mentions that Keeler steps behind her husband when a cameraman takes pictures of them together in New York. By doing this, Keeler lets Jolson take the center of the photo, while the article itself details how, contradictorily, she is the center of the press's attention. "Ruby still sees Al as the greatest entertainer, and her picture triumphs are merely secondary to the glory of being Al Jolson's wife," Hoty reports (86). These fan articles about Keeler and her relationship with Jolson show how Keeler's off-screen star image is constructed in contradictory ways for Jolson's benefit. Keeler's portrayal as a person who speaks and acts in the opposite way indicates the complex nature of her star image.

As opposed to the fan magazine articles which place Keeler in an inferior position within her relationship with Jolson, the biography of Jolson showed it was a naïve idea to simplify Keeler's characteristic features and portrayed her as a one-dimensional personality. Goldman's *Jolson: The Legend Comes to Life* points out that "Miss Keeler was by no means a wide-eyed innocent, she was a stubborn, somewhat sassy young woman who had been around and who knew all there was to know about speakeasies, Broadway nightlife, and gangsters" (162). Thus, the writer implies the part of Keeler's star image was construction and had nothing to do with

what was presented in fan magazine articles. Furthermore, the book, *You Ain't Heard Nothin Yet*, purports that Keeler tried to insist Jolson give up on coming back to the movie business and let the newcomers shine on the stage (Oberfirst 257). And yet, what appears in the fan magazine discourse, as detailed above, was entirely different from what was going on in real life.

Although Hollywood painted an off-screen image of Keeler as simple-minded, passive, self-sacrificing, and submissive to male power in fan magazine coverage, the career of two actors was developing in total opposite fashion by Jolson's biographer. As Goldman suggests the film, *Hallelujah, I'm Bum*, released in 1933 while his wife's star was on the rise, became the "biggest nail in Al's professional coffin. Hollywood producers no longer considered him as a star of the first magnitude" (212). While movies starring the once-great entertainer, Al Jolson, fell out of favor, Jolson's wife, formerly little more than a chorus girl, was gaining greater access to Hollywood and meeting with major stars through her husband's connections. Instead of focusing on the nascent success and growing fame of the newcomer Keeler, fan magazine articles defined her star image almost entirely through her marriage to the egocentric and cynical Jolson, who could not keep up with the times and seemed haunted by his past success. By doing this, Keeler's off-screen image was mediated through coverage, which rendered her as a happily married woman, happy with the arrangement which limited her agency, as any traditionally good, and obedient wife would be expected to be. In this way, the image of Keeler as a self-sacrificing, dutiful, dependent, charitable, and humble woman not only demarcated the boundaries of an acceptable female hero in response to the Depression-era crisis of masculinity, but her stardom also reinforced traditional family values that had eroded. Fan magazine discourse in regards to the Jolson-Keeler marriage touched upon crucial contradictions of the times: career-domesticity,

dependent-independent, glamorous-plain, luxury-charity, and so on, and created tension by challenging gender roles of society during the Great Depression. By shaping Keeler's image, especially in regards to her marriage in a manner that favors a patriarchal worldview, fan magazine articles of the early 1930s represented Jolson both as a manly man and authority figure. In doing so, this media coverage masked tension and eased national anxieties that surfaced as a result of widespread male unemployment and women's financial emancipation in the Depression-era.

The preceding has examined the representations of the Keeler-Jolson marriage through fan magazine discourse in comparison to biographical accounts of their married life, which spanned from 1928 to 1939. Keeler's star image was constructed around her cross-class marriage that highlighted the struggle over gender roles in 1930s America. In order to shore up traditional masculinity, which was then in jeopardy, fan magazine articles around 1933 found a hero in Keeler. As opposed to its treatment of unruly major stars of the 1930s, fan magazine discourse shaped around Keeler's stardom asserts ideals of the traditional American family and works to secure the compromised position of man-of-the-house. In this idealized relationship, Al represented the masculine identity in crisis and fought for his privileged position as a provider of money and fame, and as a protector (i.e., husband, father, and agent) of Keeler within the borders of marriage as an institution. This situation leads to two conclusions: First, Keeler's success in Hollywood was overshadowed by her husband's legendary status, in the interest of recovering Jolson's career; and second, the masculine identity, which was losing its perceived dominance and being increasingly threatened by the phenomenon of women entering the workforce, was rehabilitated through a strong message given by fan magazine article

Chapter 3: Keeler's Anti-Star Image in the Warner Bros Trilogy and Labor

To gain a fuller understanding of Keeler's star image in 1933, it is essential to consider her screen characters from *42nd Street, Gold Diggers of 1933,* and *Footlight Parade,* in tandem with the available representations of her life off-screen (i.e., magazine, memoirs, interviews). In this chapter, I develop a textual analysis of these films alongside an examination of the publicity materials distributed through fan magazines in order to find the physical qualities and character features that led to Keeler's anti-star status within the context of 1930s female stardom. I will explain how the constructed anti-star image of Keeler revealed tensions between class and gender roles, and explore how that image modified considerations and expectations of both American societies at large and the more insular world of the Hollywood studio. In this section, I argue that Keeler was constructed as an innocent in terms of her appearance, and as morally good (diminishing her personal success in favor of charitable acts), to shape her as an ordinary-looking heroine who works in harmony with the Hollywood studio system and its overseers. Her anti-heroine image was created across the three Warner Bros musicals. These movies crafted a solid example of the changing concept of star image as prudent, plain, humble, financially satisfied. In this way, the studio not only used Keeler's image as a response to the labor unrest occurring in Hollywood but also elevated her star image to a place of moral soundness, in order to promote a suffering society to reassure audiences of a brighter future in accordance with instructions for the New Deal policies implemented by the Roosevelt administration.

The Great Depression, which caused tension within the traditional gender roles of marriage by challenging the social norms of 1930s American society, also affected the production side of filmmaking. Faced with the effects of this depression, early 1930s Hollywood found itself

in the midst of a financial meltdown. The introduction of sound to cinema doubled production costs and increased exhibition costs. Movie attendance and industry earnings had gone down by forty percent in 1933 (Mintz et al. 17). Upon taking office on March 4, 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the New Deal welfare and relief programs, which included bank closures, budget cuts, and salary cuts to decrease government spending. The movie production business mostly relied on lending and financial stability. Stoked by Roosevelt's bank holiday, after many studios asserted that they had difficulties paying salaries each week, Hollywood moguls decided that they would need a radical methodology similar to Roosevelt's so as to guarantee their survival at the height of the Great Depression (Cohen 82). Jack Warner took the first step by announcing an initial action of fifty-percent cuts for all non-union workers in a letter sent to other studio employees (82). This situation caused dissatisfaction in the Hollywood workforce. As a part of the New Deal, Roosevelt put into effect the National Recovery Administration (NRA) Code of Practice, which regulated employment in the film industry by setting maximum working hours, the minimum wage for everyone and, most importantly, collective bargaining rights for labor (Cohen 163).

By the end of 1933, Hollywood had laid a foundation to start recovering from the financial crisis, gaining the confidence and hope promoted by New Deal policies under the Roosevelt Administration (Mintz et al. 87). As a struggling member of the film industry, Warner Bros. turned its attention to sound and produced Great Depression-era musicals that confronted the economic difficulties of the time, as opposed to other studios' productions, which simply overlooked the economic reality (Mintz et al. 19). According to Harvey G. Cohen, no other production company identified itself with the New Deal and its course of action as much as

Warner Bros. did (165). Warner Bros. showed support for the Roosevelt administration not only through the simple stories of *42nd Street, Gold Diggers of 1933,* and *Footlight Parade*—films meant to inspire the audience by showing how the hardship of the day could be overcome through hard work and collaboration—but also through the of the National Recovery Program's "Blue Eagle" emblem, which the studio displayed for publicity purposes. Although the first of these three films, *42nd Street*, was completed in 1932, Warner Bros. postponed its release until March 1933, when a train to promote the movie arrived in Washington, D. C. for Roosevelt's inauguration ceremony (Cohen 31). By doing this, Warner Bros. followed a strategy of associating itself and its productions with the Roosevelt administration and its New Deal Policy for the sake of increased publicity. This trend continued in fan magazine advertisements for the films. Warner Bros. published a full-page advertisement for *42nd Street Modern Screen*, announcing it as "inaugurating a New Deal In Entertainment," just four days after Roosevelt's inauguration (Cohen 53). As opposed to the simple story of American Pre-Code movie musicals, *42nd Street* portrays the lives of chorus girls—Keeler's character, the morally sound Peggy, stands at its center—struggling to put on a show and making their living during the Great Depression. The film's advertisement in the fan magazine uses blunt sexuality, depicting a woman in a transparent dress that fully exposes her chest.

Figure 1: Movie Poster for *42nd Street* in Modern Screen (Mar 1933). depicting the sexualized body of a chorus girl.

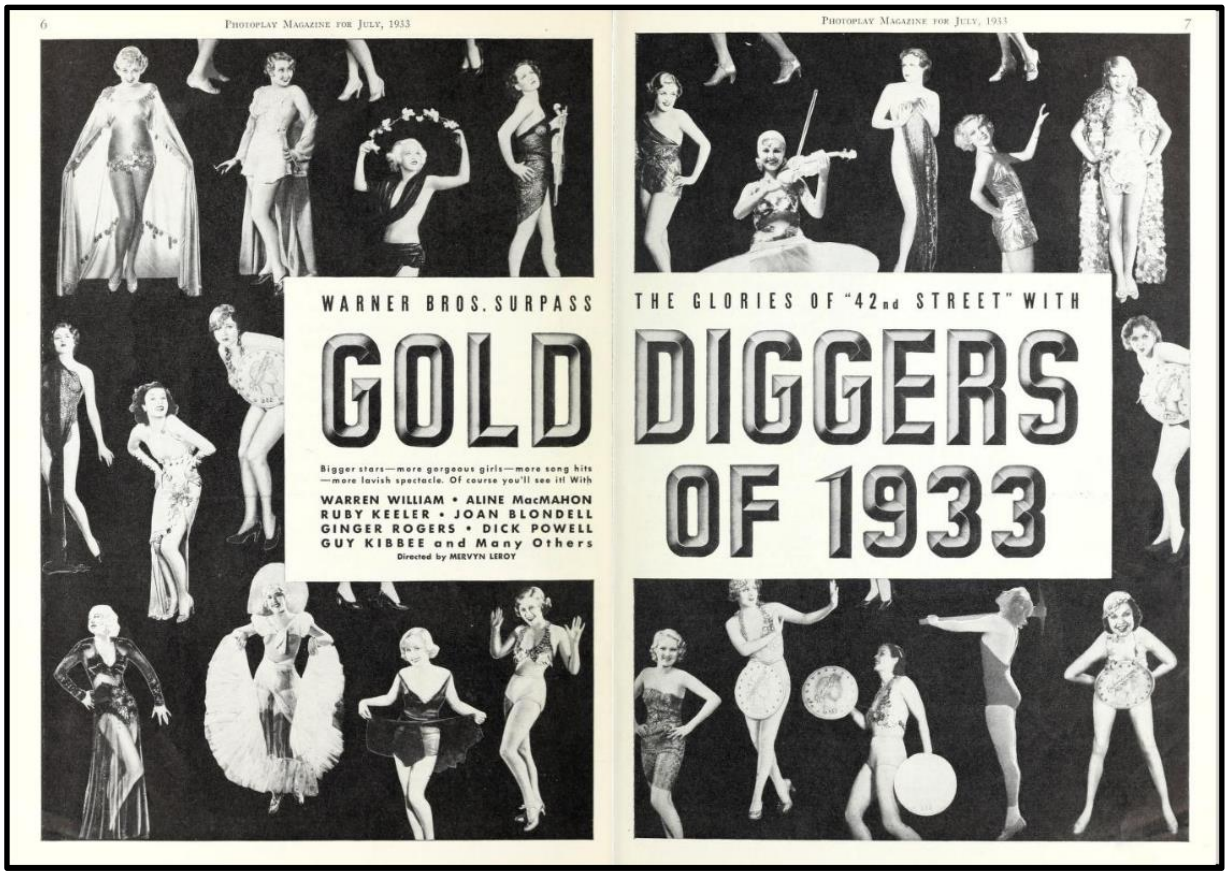

Figure 2: Movie Poster for *Gold Diggers of 1933* in Photoplay (July 1933). Showing chorus girls exposing different parts of their body as a part of the film's promise.

With the lack of strict censorship rules in effect, studio marketing constructed around the Warner Bros. musical trilogy followed the same strategies for *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Footlight Parade,* posters, and advertisements for which used suggestive images of glamorous, sexually-exploited, smiling chorus girls. Published in the July 1933 issue of *Photoplay*, one fan magazine advertisement for *Gold Diggers of 1933* promises the "biggest star, more gorgeous girls, more song hits and more lavish spectacle" (7). As each movie's publicity built on that of the previous one, a poster for *Gold Diggers of 1933* published in *Photoplay* glorifies *42nd Street* as a

part of the advertisement strategy. The poster for the last movie of the trio, *Footlight Parade*, also featured in *Photoplay*, depicts the "Human Waterfall" number, where an arrangement of chorus girls, hand-in-hand, creates a human pyramid. This collective endeavor to create an aesthetic object represents a sense of unity and harmony in the face of hardships.

Figure 3: Movie Poster for *Footlight Parade* in Photoplay (July 1933). chorus girls creating Human Waterfall

Common across all these advertisements for the Warner Bros. Great Depression, musicals are a representation of the power of unity; both in the forms of many stars and in the way eroticized chorus girls feature. Although Keeler's character, a representation of moral good, is central to the story in each of the three movies, her name receives no more prominence than other stars' names, nor is her picture used in the movies' promotional materials. These choices stem from the New Deal in Entertainment strategy that included diversity, hope, financial relief, and the elevation of social values for American Society. This was even reflected in the casting process of Warner Bros, as explained by director Busby Berkeley: "Some people like blondes, some people like brunettes, some like girls thin, some like them plump. It is obvious to me no one girl can combine ideals" (Trump 72). As part of the New Deal policy, Warner Bros had to give importance to enough varieties in entertainment (casting) to make sure that nobody felt left behind. Cohen notes that "one can sense the Warner marketing team trying to reach as many audiences as possible, the ones who wanted to view some flesh and the more-family-minded demographic" (Cohen 69). As a result of this policy, promotional materials for the Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals exceeded the on-screen sexuality of the films' characters, and this exaggerated sexuality was used to capture a massive audience in order to increase box-office profits (Cohen 104).

Premiering in New York City on March 11, 1933, *42nd Street* was the first of the big three Warner Bros. musicals, the film in which Keeler made her debut. It tells the story of Peggy Sawyer (Keeler), a chorus girl who gets a part in a show at the last minute, instead of Dorothy Brock (Bebe Daniels), who breaks her ankle. When the movie became a box office smash, the fan magazine *Photoplay* announced Keeler's successful transition from chorus girl to star, both in the

movie and in real life ("Brief" 12). Until that time, fan magazines had not given much space to Keeler in their advertisements for Warner Bros. Great Depression Movie Musicals. Now, Keeler was presented to the public as an "instant" and "unusual success" (Hoty 17). As *42nd Street* quickly went on to break the box office record with 2,281,000, Warner Bros. rushed to produce and release *Gold Diggers of 1933* in just five weeks. This film proved to be another great success for both Warner Bros. and Keeler, the film's lead. Her name was now used in the *Photoplay* column, "The Shadow Stage," which reviewed the new picture as "another Ruby Keeler show" (54). The column invokes *42nd Street's* success to further promote the new film, adding, "If you thought *42nd Street* was good, you have a date with any theater showing this one" ("Shadow" 54). *Gold Diggers* went on to beat *42nd Street* at the box office with 3,231,000 (Glancy 60). Warner Bros. released the last film in their Great Depression series, *Footlight Parade,* on September 30, 1933. It was not as successful as the first two movies of Warner Bros.' Great Depression Musicals trilogy, but the three still shared a common theme.

What is outstanding in the three movies upon close examination is their implicit portrayals of a wide range of political and economic problems and concerns caused by the Great Depression (Mintz, et al 77). By capitalizing on the era's New Deal programs, Warner Bros crafted Keeler as an anti-star who possessed special character traits (honesty, a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, humility) and physical qualities ("plain" looks, innocence, naïveté, sweetness) in the three movies. By making Keeler's character working class with high morals and limited talent, Warner Bros could provide hope for the struggling audiences of the Great Depression, while also masking contemporary issues around labor so that her star image projected cooperation with Hollywood's practices.

According to Richard Dyer, "A star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as a promotion, publicity and films and criticism and commentaries" (60). In the case of Keeler, her initial underrepresentation in promotional materials for the Great Depression musicals is obvious, until her success with her film debut in *42nd Street.* Therefore, Keeler's image construction starts with the narrative of *42nd Street* and then expands in *Gold Diggers of 1933*. In the two films, the main characters, Peggy Sawyer and Polly Parker, can be evaluated regarding their appearance and class. In *42nd Street,* when Peggy enters an audition hall, she is introduced to a tremendously competitive environment populated by chorus girls who have experience in show business. For a while, Peggy seems surprised at what she encounters in the hall. Her role as ingenue can be understood from the way she looks around with curious eyes. Shortly after she enters, she is fooled by one of the chorus girls, who guides her to the men's bathroom, instead of bringing her to the stage director to audition for a part. She is then sent to the dressing-room of one of the show's young leads, Billy Lawyer (Dick Powell). She enters the room suddenly, to find Billy wearing only his underwear, the sight of which makes Peggy close her eyes in embarrassment. From the dialogue between two characters, it can be understood that sweet-natured girl Peggy attempts to join show business for the first time.

By showing Peggy's course of action in this situation as well as her interaction with other characters, the movie signals Peggy's inexperience, using the scene to characterize her as naïve. This image of an ordinary, shameful, and inexperienced woman continues in *Gold Diggers of 1933,* which tells the story of three chorus girls who struggle to put on a show on Broadway and survive in New York during the Great Depression. In the film, the Polly flirts with songwriter Brad Roberts (Dick Powell). Polly is portrayed as a sweet, innocent, and romantic person that

believes in true love as opposed to other chorus girls Carol (Joan Blondell) and Trixie (Aline Macmahon) who are comfortable with stealing milk, and gold-digging Brad's brother as well as the lawyer of their Boston Brahmin family. In the narrative of the movie, Carol, Trixie, and Polly are all desperately looking for jobs. They invite producer Barnes home after hearing rumors about his plan for putting on a new show. Later, they figure out Barney has everything he needs except money to cover the expenses of the show. When Polly's romantic interest, Brad, who lives next door to the chorus girls' house, is heard playing the piano, he offers $15,000 to finance the show. No one believes how Brad got the money, except Polly. Even after Trixie raises doubts about Brad's ability to finance the show after reading about a bank robbery in the newspaper, Polly keeps believing Brad without hesitation. This unflagging trust speaks to the naïve nature of her character.

Along with Keeler's ingenue roles in the *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933,* her natural appearance in fan magazines stands out. The author of the article "Give This Little Girl A Hand" mentions what, specifically, about Keeler's appearance makes her an authentic and unique person: "There was something real about her, so different from most of the little girls around the great white way. Her hair was real, and her smile was real, and her charm was real" (106). Keeler's qualities which the article stresses distinguish the quality of her stardom from other 1930s female stars who took on false or exaggerated characteristics: "Movie magazines' depictions of stars' rise to fame and fortune after suffering became formalized and predictable as to lose whatever authenticity or uniqueness each star possessed. The star's mother was always helpful and encouraging" (Sochen 78). Losing those qualities that marked her as authentic and relatable to working-class audiences (e.g., humility, charity, frugality) in the process of rising to

stardom was not the case for Keeler, who, in this article, claim to have stayed the same after her rise to fame. Fan magazine articles continue to promote authenticity discourse, distinguishing Keeler's characters from other characters in the movies, rooted in the family background of Keeler and its nurturing environment. In the article, St. Johns goes further by accentuating her family background as "an Irish girl under her mother's training" and describing her nightclub background "working and dancing in Texas" as two major sources of Keeler's particular personality. In the book, *Jolson: The Legend Comes to Life*, Keeler's early biography is stated as such: "she starts dancing in the clubs-an innocent amid a world of sophisticated, corrupt politicians, show people and gangsters" (Golman 157). Although this point is contradictory to fan magazines, St. Johns claims even if Keeler went through the experience of working in a nightclub, as a member of a typical Irish family, the article claims "she was friendly, natural, little kid, adaptable as are all Irish girls, full of fun and both innocent and ignorant about many phases of life" (106). By doing so, St. Johns uses Keeler's ethnicity and class identity to promote the image of Keeler as an innocent showgirl, who is moral and has a strong sense of responsibility. Ultimately, the fan magazine discourse around Keeler served the purpose of constructing a perfect star image—both physically and morally—that was pure, without any kind of amoral behavior and representation. This process of creating moralizing characters with innocent looks continued in the story plots of movies.

In the narratives of both movies *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933,* which this article, Keeler's characters, who are called Peggy and Polly, respectively, are represented as chorus girls with high morals who come from working-class backgrounds. As the stories develop, their class origins are revealed, and their moralities are tested. In *42nd Street*, Peggy takes Pat (Dorothy's

secret love interest) into her room to look after his bruises after he is punched by a racketeer and left lying on the sidewalk in front of her apartment. The building's Irish-American landlord subsequently evicts Peggy because of this instance of her entertaining a male guest. From the dialogue between two characters (Peggy says she has no money) and the appearance of the room, we learn about Peggy's financial situation and social class. When these two arrive at Pat's apartment, Peggy, who rehearses all day, falls asleep on the couch. As Pat carries her toward his bedroom, she wakes up suddenly and protests, suspecting that he wants to take advantage of her. After he puts her on his bed, she assumes a seated position. As soon as Pat leaves the room, reassuring Peggy that she should sleep well now, Peggy looks around and locks the door with a key. This gesture implies that Peggy is a chaste woman who has refrained from ever staying alone with a man.

While the characters of Peggy and Polly are portrayed as naïve in the movies, fan magazine articles contemporary to the films objectify Keeler and focus on parts of her body. According to John Ellis, "star images are paradoxical. They are composed of elements which do not cohere, of contradictory tendencies" (90). The article titled "Explaining Ruby Keeler" balances out this idea (sexy-innocent dichotomy) by portraying her off-screen personality as holding contradictions to movies. She is, somehow, innocent and sexy at the same time. On the one hand, the article describes Keeler as a "modest, real thing in life with a little, soft, mousey voice of hers" (17). On the other hand, the writer draws attention to her legs by saying, "Oh boy, she has grand-looking legs. You have got to go to her pictures to find that out" (64). By doing this, the writer presents the contradictory qualities in Keeler's star image and encourages fan magazine readers to manage both features in a way that allows the two competing ideas to

synthesize. Thus represented, Keeler's star image exposes its contradictory features, while her stardom reconciles them in a way deemed acceptable for fan magazine readers of the 1930s.

Another feature of Keeler's characters that stands out in the movies: they each belong to the working-class and have a strong moral code. In *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the showgirls' financial situation is revealed through a camera closeup on a note their landlord throws under the door asking for the rent while they sleep. As the scene continues, the camera captures the alarm clock on the nightstand showing that it's almost noon. Trixie, Polly, and Carol reminisce about the good old days when they had jobs and reasons to get up early. Polly says, "Come on! I hate starving in bed." It is obvious from this scene that the movie is indicating their suffering as members of the working class, just as the rest of American society is experiencing the severe effects of the Great Depression. In the face of this hardship and hunger, Polly sticks to her morals, refusing to play both sides against Brad's brother over the course of the film. Brad's brother and his family's lawyer learn of the relationship between Polly and Brad and go to the chorus girls' apartment. Perceiving showgirls to be "little parasites, gold diggers," Brad's brother intends to offer money to Polly to back out of the marriage, but the men are intercepted by Polly's roommates, Trixie and Carol, the latter of whom they mistake for Polly. Using this twist to their advantage, the women seduce the men and pretend to be real gold diggers by making them buy luxury clothes and accessories. Trixie and Carol play a trick on Brad's brother so that he is supposed to sleep with Carol, whom he still believes to be Polly. They think of blackmailing him to get more money, but Polly, by now aware of the situation, is against the idea.

In a scene featuring Lawrence and Polly, Lawrence admits that she is not like other girls: she is childish, innocent, and a "nice little girl." Polly tells the truth to Lawrence—that she is the

real Polly. Her character, who bears this moral obligation, goes against other chorus girls' desire to continue exploiting Lawrence. This shows her honest nature. Keeler's honesty, the quality first conveyed in the films through their characterization of Peggy and Polly, becomes reinforced through the fan magazine article, "From Halifax to Hollywood," in which the piece's author gives a summary of Keeler's career and highlights Keeler's statement that, "I had not any confidence in myself while we were making *42nd Street*. I was afraid even to see the picture afterward" (45). This statement shows that in her contemporary fan media portrayals, Keeler exhibits no confidence and thinks it would be a one-off achievement. The author, however, trumps Keeler's self-effacement, saying, "the girl who was born in Halifax has landed permanently in Hollywood" (45). By articulating Keeler's rising to stardom from small city, the writer not only affirms an alliance between the common values of the average, working-class person but also gives credence to the idea that the average, virtuous person can make her way to the top despite the harsh economic reality of the times.

Serving to construct Keeler's initial screen persona, the characters of Peggy and Polly link the star's appearance, class, and values. First and foremost, her on-screen characters are innocent-looking, naïve, ordinary young women who come from the lower class and are associated with values such as honesty, a strong work ethic, and luck. In the plot of both *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the protagonists put effort into keeping up with the hectic tempo of rehearsals. At one point in the first film, Peggy even faints, exhausted by the long hours of hard, physical labor (i.e., dancing). The character of Polly in *Gold Diggers of 1933* puts in a similarly extreme amount of effort to prepare for the show. At the end of each narrative, the two characters' efforts pay off: they are rewarded with the principal roles in their respective shows, and both find love.

The values embodied by Keeler's on-screen star image in these films extend to fan magazine cover. Dyer points out that "star images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to 'manage' or 'resolve'" (34). Keeler's characters in *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* are imagined as gold diggers in these movies, but she remains, somehow, a morally good one. As a result of their hard work and a little bit of luck, Keeler's characters achieve great success. According to Mark Roth, "the myth of individual initiative, hard work, luck, and ultimate success does seem to be supported by the plot of movies." (2). These concepts, which are at the heart of the movies' narratives, help Keeler's characters succeed within their film worlds. Strengthened by fan magazines that recount Keeler's private life, these ideas serve as a moral compass for fans and the audience.

Both "Halifax Honey" and "The Fairy Princess of the Films," articles published in *Picture Play* and *New Movie Magazine*, respectively, present Keeler's life story from her early childhood through her marriage with Jolson. The authors of each emphasize Keeler's class mobility, as achieved through hard work and luck, with the ultimate rewards of fame, wealth, and marriage. In "Halifax Honey," Margaret Reid first describes Keeler's childhood by saying, "Ruby, whose childhood was spent, not in nurseries and gardens, but in the shifting colored light of clubs" (27). Here, the article aims to show its audience Keeler's extraordinary childhood circumstances as part of her success. Reid adds that "In the middle of the night, when other girls of her age were sleeping, Ruby was dancing on a polished, smoke-hung floor under a blazing spotlight" (27). These details are in accordance with what is known from her biography: Keeler began working in night clubs at the tender age of fourteen.

Hester Robison, the author of "Fairy Princess of Films," takes Keeler's childhood story a step forward by narrating this anecdote. When the young Keeler performed in the Showgirl, she suffered from pain but insisted on keeping her part by begging Florenz Ziegfeld. This little story seems to suggest to readers that one must work hard whenever an opportunity is given, no matter the circumstances or setbacks. After gaining considerable wealth through her hard work and luck, Keeler spends her money wisely in comparison to average showgirls working at any nightclub, as the article goes on to detail. Robison writes, "she snapped her fingers at silk dresses, the fur coats, and limousines that other girls bought with their money. She spent her salary on her folks. When there was little leftover, she spent it on voice lesson" (90). In this way, her star quality forms around her image as a person who rises from the lower class to gain wealth, yet sets a good example to fans by using her material richness to reinforce the importance of family and investing in herself to improve her ability as a performer. Keeler's declaration of the triumph of the ordinary person comes with its own set of values and flips the notion of stardom upside-down.

Another aspect of her anti-stardom is her rejection of her own star status and tendency to discredit her own contribution to the movies in which she features. When fan magazine articles feature Keeler's success in movies, they call her a "little queen, dancing feet" (Maddox 50). In an interview that appears in the article, "The Star Who is Wise to Herself," Keeler denies her importance within her filmic work, saying: "I never dreamed I could ever be a picture star. I have been lucky, wonderfully so." (95). This rejection of her star status is praised by the fan magazine, which claims that such humility is a quality unique to her and that how "she opens her innermost thoughts is positively breathtaking" (95).

Downplaying her own talent helps to perpetuate the idea that anybody can become a star. Keeler is quoted as saying, "I imagine that there are many girls on the Warner lot who could have done as well as I have done in pictures—if they had had the same opportunity. I believe that being married to Al, I was thrown into social contact with producers" (Maddox 95). With this idea, she refers to her being a star as serendipity, just a matter of arriving at the right time and place. By defining stardom as a concept of being somewhere at the right time and the right place, Keeler minimizes all the hard work and training that she went through to achieve success and fame in Hollywood. According to Cohen, "Anyone with the right spirit and attitude can become a star, aided by a little luck. As the character Dorothy in *42nd Street* observes, 'most anyone can have success with a proper break'" (50). Simplifying her process whereby she achieves star status not only keeps hope alive for fans, who may dream of the upward mobility that Keeler has manifested, but also contains a message about labor practices in regards to Hollywood stardom.

Danae Clark puts forth that the few movies produced in 1933 were straightforward in commenting on national affairs to implicitly reflect the studio's united policy. The three Great Depression movie musicals were not entirely following NRA policies, as actors were used by Warner Bros. to comment upon labor practices within the studio system. (91-92). Since Keeler's constructed star image is no exception to this policy, Warner Bros. intensified its message regarding labor unrest through its movie musical trilogy. In her book, *Negotiating Hollywood,* Clark defines *42nd Street*'s Peggy Sawyer as a character with an average talent who is thankful to her director to have been given an opportunity. She is an actress who is ready to accept and do whatever management says in terms of salary and performance (97). The studio actively fortified and encouraged this image of Keeler through the fan magazine discourse. In the article

"Explaining Ruby Keeler," Beth Walker compares Keeler's first Broadway musical experience with that of *42nd Street*. She says " She was awfully embarrassed when she starred in *Show Girl*. When she'd look out at an audience and see a couple with their heads together, laughing. She points out that *42nd* was not so bad since it was not in front of a big audience, and she said what they told" (64). This article not only accentuates her lack of confidence in front of the camera, but it also recognizes Keeler only as a person following instructions given by the stage director. Keeler goes further to say, "I believe I am a good tap-dancer, but I can't sing, and I can't act, and I told him (Ziegfeld) so" (64). Morin notes that "stars are always the most something-or-other in the world—the most beautiful, the most expensive, the sexiest" (11-27). But in this case, Keeler is presented as a star who denies her star status, accepting her limited talent in the article when she expresses, "I want to make a success, but I know I will never be a great emotional actress" (64). Fan magazines surprisingly unfold what is constructed in the star image of Keeler by making her weaknesses apparent. According to Walker, her voice was small, made louder with the help of a microphone. This comment on Keeler's talent is supported by Cohen, who notes, "the actors with less talent like Ruby could flourish in Berkeley's musicals since the imaginative choreography is the star of the show" (37). By setting an example of Keeler, fan magazine coverage shows how Warner Bros could reduce a star's status.

Keeler underestimates her star status, providing an example of a star who comes down to earth in fan magazines, especially in comparison to other leading stars of the 1930s. In "Ruby Tapped the Trial March," an article published in *Screenland*, Ruth Rankin sets up an interview with Keeler, who explains how she survived in Hollywood and draws comparisons to the careers of other major dancing stars of the time. When Rankin asks her about other tap-dancers in

Hollywood, Keeler says it would be unfair to mention her name and Eleanor Powell's in the same sentence. She exclaims, "Oh dear, I do hope they are not trying to start a rivalry between us!… Eleanor Powell is so far superior to me as a dancer….and I have great admiration for Ginger Rogers" (24). She is not only aware of her capacity and being honest about it, but she also prevents unfavorable comparisons to other stars. Rankin questions Keeler about her dance style, wondering whether or not she believes she is changing her style. The star responds, "I did not develop anything new. The idea was that the camera could not hold on any one person for a longer time…They would cut to me doing a few steps" (25). Keeler refers to how the geometrical formations of the dance numbers and the techniques of camera captures in *42nd Street* minimized the burden on her by hiding her flaws while dancing. Cohen makes plain how chorus girls' arrangement functions in the Great Depression movie musicals under the management of Busby Berkeley in his book, *Who is in the Money?*: "Often in Berkeley's film sequences, dancers don't dance. Instead, they establish a formation, and the camera dances around them, or a mechanical device moves them (48). Cohen further comments on Keeler's acting in the same book, saying, "She also tended to do the same steps repeatedly in Great Depression Musicals" (49-50). It is evident that Warner Bros. created a backstage environment supported by camera techniques that push Keeler's performance into the background. By minimizing Keeler's role and turning the subject position of her in the movie into something replicable through camerawork, the article evokes the shift, which can be seen in the notion of stardom as orchestrated by Warner Bros. that lead to the studio's ultimate control over Keeler's star image. As opposed to female stars, Joan Crawford, Jean Arthur, and Marlene Dietrich, who tried to instruct producers and writers how to produce and write, Keeler was presented as a submissive star, indicating, "You know I would

honestly rather let other people figure out what I am to do, and just do it" (25). Keeler clearly states that as an actress, she neither asks for specific roles from the studio nor raises any objection against studio casting.

This aspect of her star quality is celebrated in the article "Ruby Tapped the Trial March," in which the author, Rankin, calls her "A satisfied actress in Hollywood [...] the rarest thing in this town. An actress who does not want to tell producers what she should play, or how" (25). Being satisfied with what they have is a desired feature of a star that is not limited to casting but also includes demanding less money from studio executives, as is stressed in other fan magazine texts. In "Meet the Wife," Al Jolson describes some of Keeler's qualities, indicating what makes her unique. He says "She is sweet, plain and simple. Lots of the time just a great kid" (28). These qualities that define Keeler's lifestyle as modest, and show how, at the time of her greatest fame, she avoided displaying wealth despite being wealthy . Jolson also refers to dialogue between him and Keeler, stating that "She is a funny kid about money. All money seems to mean to her is just the means to do something more for others – her family mainly" (90). She responds, "Al, do not ask them for too much, but ask them for enough" (90). Statement of Keeler shows the unique personality Keeler possesses—how she is a frugal person who regards money as a tool to help others. Fan magazine articles further evidence how Warner Bros. created an anti-star who does not demonstrate the will to negotiate terms with studios, but instead willingly adheres to whatever is asserted as standard practice.

Messages regarding views on labor can be traced in all three of the Warner Bros. Depression-era movie musicals. In each, a chorus girl rises from a working-class background, works hard, demonstrates that she is ready for her chance to come at any time, puts her trust

willingly in management, and ultimately finds love, success, and money at the end of each story. Keeler's personifying character Bea in *Footlight Parade* follows a different path from Peggy and Polly. On her path to success, Bea represents a different type: an intelligent girl with glasses who works as a secretary and offers quick solutions to problems as related to film prologue production in the movie. The audience witnesses the transformation of Bea, a secondary character, from office girl to tap dancer on stage.

Like Peggy and Polly, Bea goes through a long process of growth and development and demonstrates essential qualities of hard work, dedication, integrity, and professionalism. As a result of her efforts, she manages to switch smoothly from desk job to principal player, dancing on the Broadway stage. This move signals to both the audience facing a societal crisis and major stars revolting against the casting practices used by Hollywood. The message registers as follows: if any individual puts their trust in their superior and adopts a strong work ethic, doing whatever tasks are assigned to them, job mobility is achievable. By using Keeler's star image, fan magazines served the agenda of Warner Bros which demonstrated the ideal way of achieving stardom in Hollywood.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the star image of Keeler in the context of 1930s major female stars, taking into account her roles in three Warner Bros. musical movies, as well as fan magazines' biographical accounts in relation to her marriage with Jolson. I have determined that Keeler's physical (innocent-looking, fresh, plain) and character-based qualities (hard-working, humble, honest) construct her anti-star image as a chorus girl who comes from the working-class, in contradistinction to major female stars and the prevailing concepts of 1930s female stardom (i.e., being financially independent, stylish, mysterious and sexually ambiguous). In as much as they describe other stars, those qualities posed a threat both to the position of men in the traditional family and to studios' labor policies—their economic system based on the continuation of a star's image from movie to movie under a long term contract.

Since family values and their breadwinner role was perceived as endangered by some men in American society, Keeler's star image, built around discourses of marital bliss, straddled the contradictory concepts of housewife/career woman, financial dependency/independence, self-sacrifice/self-sufficiency. This image of Keeler was constructed in-part by and disseminated through 1930s fan magazines. In this star image, Keeler conformed to the domestic ideal, prioritizing her husband's success. By accepting the traditional division of gender roles, Keeler's star image embraces the idea that a proper woman should give up on her career that serves to reassure the concept of a married woman's place at home. As opposed to major female stars like Dietrich and Garbo, who challenged the boundaries of patriarchy and gender through combining feminine and masculine sexuality, Keeler represented feminine ideals both in appearances (her romantic look, a combination of sexuality and innocence) and in character (virtue) to not only

win the hearts of fan magazine readers, but she also indicated a change in American audience tastes from an overtly-sexual image of women to one that seemed fresh and natural: the ingenue.

Keeler's roles in the three movies, alongside her statements on labor in fan magazines, set an example for stardom as it was desired by the management class of Hollywood, especially in regards to the industry's labor policies. On-screen characters and off-screen images in fan magazines define her as a hard-working, morally-elevated girl, who began with limited talent, but is always willing to work toward a common goal in collaboration with other characters in the movies. Keeler, a star whose roots were relatable to the average person with high morals (as encoded in her overall look), gave control over her star image to the studio by leaving career-related decisions to them. By using Keeler's star image, Warner Bros. not only maximized movies' box office profits but also uphold the social values of 1930s America as laid out by the New Deal policy.

After featuring in three Warner Bros Musicals movies, Keeler had reached the peak of her career. She continued taking roles in lesser films, "but Al was in no shape to understand this. He saw her now as a great celebrity, with himself the lesser in importance" (Oberfirst 256). Jolson, who could not keep up with the times and was haunted by his past success, became increasingly controlling of Keeler. His possessiveness and jealousy would eventually lead to their divorce – their divorce was finalized on December 26, 1939, in Los Angeles. Although Keeler kept featuring in movies (including one with Jolson), until 1941, none of them was as successful as Warner Bros Musicals of 1933. As soon as Keeler retired from the movie business, she married John Lowe and had a child in 1943. After twenty-eight years, Keeler came back to the stage as a tap dancer at the age of 60 with the movie, *No No Nanette*, which premiered on Jan 19, 1971. By

making this movie, she brought the nostalgia for the old days to the stage. She then announced her retirement in 1973.

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