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**‘Gilbo-Garbage’ or ‘The Champion Lovemakers of Two Nations’: Uncoupling Greta Garbo and John Gilbert**

Michael Williams

In the summer of 1928, in the golden age of the picture palace, a self-confessed ‘flapper’ wrote to *Picture-Play* magazine in exasperation at ubiquitous coverage of the celebrity coupling of silent stars Greta Garbo and John Gilbert, since they had set screens ablaze in *Flesh and the Devil* (Clarence Brown, 1926).[[1]](#endnote-1) In describing this coverage as ‘Gilbo-Garbage’, nearly a century before the ubiquitous Bennifers and Brangelinas of the contemporary celebrity age discussed by others in this volume, we find a fan apparently coining their own portmanteau term for the star coupling, as on-screen romance shifted to off-screen passion. ‘Gilbo’, an inharmonious phrase coined to mock the vacuous nature of celebrity, while evidencing its power, is evoked as a sign of resistance to the rising public fascination with star culture and particularly the private lives of the stars. In the final years of the silent era, the phenomenon of the star as a remote and somewhat divinised being – of which Garbo is the exemplar – reached such mythic heights that the pedestal was bound to wobble.

As the fan letter above testifies, ever since the release of Brown’s film, few fans across the USA and Europe were unaware of Garbo and Gilbert’s romance, both on and off the screen. Perhaps precisely because the exact nature of their relationship was shrouded in mystery and intrigue and so fuelled speculation then as now, it was a gift to studio publicists and gossip columns alike and their screen coupling would be repeated in a further three films. This ostensibly unlikely combination of Garbo, the ‘Stockholm Venus’,[[2]](#endnote-2) and the dashing American idol,was central to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s publicity campaign for the film, and would consolidate Garbo’s stardom in this her third Hollywood feature. The stars obligingly arrived arm-in-arm at *Flesh and the Devil*’s Hollywood premiere, with the *Los Angeles* *Times* noting their screen roles ‘may or may not account for the appearance of the two arm in arm at the premiere’, alluding to a blurring of on- and off-screen worlds. The paper added that the stars ‘were supposed to have been engaged at one time and who have since, according to report, broken that engagement’.[[3]](#endnote-3) In this way, the press invited fans to participate in a guessing game with the press and, by proxy, the stars and sometimes, as we shall see, arguments with other fans. The contrasts between the couple and the uncertainty about what actually happened between them is as much a part of ‘Gilbo’ as the seemingly genuine affection shared by two high-powered and talented stars. The pairing also deepened the mythology of Garbo as the siren who lures but who must always be alone, and Gilbert as a full-hearted but troubled romantic, whose career was faltering before his untimely death of a suspected heart attack in 1936 (linked to his problems with alcohol). If Garbo (with Stiller’s assistance), as Betsy Erkilla has noted,[[4]](#endnote-4) authored herself in choosing the name ‘Garbo’ over her original Greta Lovisa Gustafsson, then ‘Gilbo’ is a name authored by fans in resistance to studio promotion and press fascination with the couple. Whether they were for or against the stars, it was a term that granted them agency to express their views not only about the couple, but about what a star should be and how they should behave.

While the ‘Gilbo’ timeline is uncertain, the story goes that the couple fell in love during the shooting of *Flesh and the Devil* in the late summer of 1926, with Garbo soon moving into Gilbert’s Los Angeles home. There are different accounts of a marriage being arranged for 8 September that year, with some contemporary reports stating that Garbo jilted Gilbert at the altar at a planned double wedding (with actress Eleanor Boardman and King Vidor), or that she had never actually intended to marry him in the first place. Another attempted marriage was reported in April 1927, along with the story of Gilbert’s short spell in jail after brandishing a revolver following a disagreement with Garbo’s close friend, director Mauritz Stiller.[[5]](#endnote-5) Indeed, Stiller was described as ‘Garbo’s first and greatest love’ in the press with, needless to say, no mention of Stiller’s homosexuality. Coincidentally, or not, *Flesh and the Devil* continued to break records at the box office while this intrigue was running. By 1928, Garbo’s biographers tell us that she had moved out of Gilbert’s home, with Gilbert hastily, and briefly, forming another celebrity couple by marrying actress Ina Claire in May 1929. Garbo stayed loyal to Gilbert, however, respecting the professional support he had given her in the past, and insisting that he co-star with her in their final film together in 1933, *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian). All this time, Garbo’s famously taciturn and media-shy personality contrasted with the garrulous Gilbert, whose later seemingly unguarded outpourings to the press when the relationship did not lead to the marriage he desired, would not have endeared him to Garbo. It perhaps also challenged Gilbert’s ‘great lover’ image, already affected by other troubled couplings, as we shall see.

This chapter will focus on the earlier period of Garbo and Gilbert’s association, from late 1926 leading up to the release of *Flesh and the Devil* until around 1930, when the debates around Gilbo were still raging in the letters pages of *Picture-Play* magazine in particular. I examine how the Garbo-Gilbert romance, ‘real’ or ‘fictional’, impacted on the stars’ reception and had lasting implications for the images of both stars and particularly Garbo, who has become synonymous with Hollywood stardom at its most heightened. This chapter thus reads the promotion and fan reception of ‘Gilbo’, as being as much about the changing nature of stardom as the Garbo-Gilbert relationship itself. I first turn to the film that launched the couple onto the public, *Flesh and the Devil*.

**Venus meets the Doughboy**

*Flesh and the Devil*is an adaptation of the 1894 German novel by Herman Sudermann, and stars Gilbert as Leo, and Lars Hanson as Ulrich; two military men who have shared a close friendship since childhood. Upsetting the symmetry of their relationship is Garbo’s Felicitas, a married woman with whom Leo has an affair. The discovery of this illicit romance results in a duel, in which Felicitas’ husband is killed by Leo, who is then sent into temporary exile at a military outpost in Africa. Ulrich marries Felicitas in Leo’s absence, not knowing of her past with Leo, and tensions develop when Leo returns and proves unequal to the task of resisting Felicitas as she attempts to rekindle their relationship, once more illicit, upon his return.

Felicitas is one of many ‘vamp’ figures to cause Garbo to complain of typecasting, the star having just appeared in *The Temptress*. Garbo’s success as Felicitas would only reinforce that type, with her reported real-life temptation of Gilbert meaning that the vamp persona would inevitably inform the reception of their relationship’; the *Los Angeles Times* would call her ‘the luring Garbo’ while *Flesh and the Devil* was in production.[[6]](#endnote-6) The image of the alluring and yet distant siren is typical of the way Garbo’s Hollywood image had evolved since the early awkward publicity picturescirculated by MGM of Garbo posing at the USC athletics track, and shows how the studio struggled to locate, and then dis-locate, the actress in space and time. She thus becomes the ‘statuesque blonde’ from ‘the Land of the Vikings’, as one *Picture-Play* feature put it in 1925.[[7]](#endnote-7) Continuing the elemental theme, the *Los Angeles Times* described a maelstrom of emotional peril gathering around the star at MGM, adding that few are truly able to understand her. The star, columnist Katherine Lipke opined, gave meaning to the phrase ‘“there were drowned men in her eyes”’, describing her as the ‘eternal siren’ and ‘a woman of fatal fascination’ (a type later becoming the femme fatale), who had directors clamouring to star the actress in their films. Garbo comes across as powerful and potentially destructive, but is credited as innovative and intense in her performance, even as she struggles to resist typecasting. Her new co-star, Gilbert, however, is described as ‘almost beyond the reach of helping hands’, and ‘does not spare himself in talking of her, and is seen constantly in her presence’.[[8]](#endnote-8) In the same year that European émigré, Rudolph Valentino, was being attacked on a sexist and homophobic basis for being an effeminate or a woman-kept man, there is a hint here that while Gilbert may be unambiguously heterosexual, and certainly passionate, he is somehow ‘unmanned’ by Garbo, and becomes driftwood caught up in her wake. Although their relationship is not directly mentioned here, a quote from Garbo – unlike Gilbert, words are evidently forced from her – hints at trouble ahead: ‘“I do not want to get married!” This much she does say, over and over like a well-learned lesson’. The actress then expresses her desire for seclusion away from Hollywood parties and particularly the public gaze, asserting: ‘“I have not energy enough. People take energy from me and I need it for pictures”’. This is revealing, indicating Garbo’s resistance to a model of stardom that demands the sharing of one’s personal life, and her associated rejection of the institutions of Hollywood society and heterosexual romance alike. By the mid-1920s, Garbo’s press already foreshadowed her ‘I want to be alone’ persona, which a future line from *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932) would immortalise.

If Garbo was a creature of singular, divinised abstraction, John Gilbert was a man of a more earthly realm. Indeed, despite being one of the silent era’s greatest matinee idols, it was Gilbert’s particular strength that he made good-looks and romantic sensuality a tangible thing. As Jeanine Basinger puts it, for fans ‘Meeting John Gilbert might be a stretch, but it seemed possible’.[[9]](#endnote-9) He is the gregarious Everyman exemplified by his best-known role an American soldier in *The Big Parade*, MGM’s most profitable film of the silent era,[[10]](#endnote-10) released the year before *Flesh and the Devil*. He is affable, gregarious, romantic and American and, unlike Garbo, was seemingly more willing to speak to the press about his own worldly flaws and anxieties, including his troubled marriage to actress Leatrice Joy, which ended in divorce in 1924. Of his star image, Gilbert is quoted as saying in 1927 that he didn’t stand a chance until the screen stopped being dominated by ‘“Greek profiles”’ and began ‘“to reflect some of that earthiness which is akin to real life…[so that] my bottle nose and scraggy neck didn’t matter”’.[[11]](#endnote-11) The contrast between Gilbert and ‘the divine’ Garbo is striking, making him appear an unlucky hero of Greek myth who meets one of the gods passing their time slumming-it on earth. Gilbert’s mannerisms are familiar to the repertoire of screen acting, while Garbo moves with a diffuse and otherworldly gravity. Where the ‘divine’ Garbo is unknowable, Gilbert is familiar.

This dynamic is evident in Brown’s film, as I’ve explored elsewhere.[[12]](#endnote-12) While Leo and Ulrich posses a shared history whose memory can be recaptured and spaces physically revisited, Felicitas seems to just materialize at a railway station from another realm, her past actively obscured at every turn. I’ve written elsewhere about the development of the film, and how successive scripts foregrounded a military atmosphere to appeal to Gilbert’s persona. The link is underlined when the film’s press-book refers to Gilbert as ‘the famous doughboy of “The Big Parade”’. Railway stations are associated with couples parting and meeting in wartime, and later in the film, as Leo travels home from ‘exile’, we witness an extraordinary montage sequence where pictures of Felicitas are superimposed in thought-bubbles that echo imagery of wartime postcards. Awareness of Gilbert and Garbo’s extra-textual romance would have given the film’s love triangle an extra frisson. Where the real-world romance of ‘Gilbo’ was fragmented and contested, the screen affair of Felicitas and Leo lent it tangibility through its imagery, fuelling the popular imagination.

**‘The Champion Lovemakers of Two Nations’**

Inevitably, most stars’ reception involves some slippage between character and performer. In terms of the first screen pairing of Garbo and Gilbert, Felicitas has few redeeming features beyond her glamour and the passionate (and often deceitful) affairshe initiates with Leo. Beyond his passion, Leo’s finest quality, his rarefied ‘bromance’ with Ulrich, is only fully realised with the demise of Felicitas, and it is this relationship that the film ultimately privileges and is what lifts it from routine melodrama. When fans choose to attack stars, the easiest weapon is the very discourse that has been fed to them by studios and critics. Thus Garbo is sometimes identified with the worst aspects of Felicitas, and the vamp more widely (as emphasised by the title of her previous film, *The Temptress*), as an avaricious, foreign ice-queen, who tricks, breaks hearts and then vanishes. While Garbo’s European credentials, and exoticism, were her key features, this was also a target for a wave of xenophobia rippling through American fan-magazines in the mid-late 1920s.

MGM’s pressbook for *Flesh and the Devil* opportunistically heralded its stars as ‘the champion lovemakers of two nations’; a tag-line primed for any columnist seeking to blur the lines of on- and off-screen romance. This was also something of a risk. While star romance may fascinate, and offer another level of extra-textual engagement with fans, it is equally likely to irritate and create an air of exclusivity. Even Edwin Schallert’s glowing review of the film worried about the ‘vulgarity’ of a couple of scenes that might cause audiences to titter due to the way it ‘over emphasises its love making’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Indeed, a fan from London wrote to *Picture-Play* suggesting that watching Garbo and Gilbert’s love scenes was akin to eating too much sticky chocolate cake, and mentions that he has heard that the love scenes had been cut down for London showings: ‘For this I would pass a vote of thanks to whoever is responsible, because the “sexy” scenes were the flaws of the picture. Garbo and Gilbert both went at them with a serious savageness that gave me the impression that they were saying to themselves: “Now, for a treat, we’ll give them five minutes’ love-making. I’m sure they’ll like it. Let’s do our best”’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Regardless of the ratio between genuine artistic motivation and exploitation opportunity (it’s fair to say there’s a bit of both), the love-scenes continue to be read, problematically, as evidence of genuine passion between its stars, rather than its characters. Irrespective of the authenticity of the stars’ ardour, these differing readings are evidence of fans interpreting star images in different ways, and seizing the polysemic possibilities freely offered to them by film publicity, with the fan-magazine acting as their ideal organ for expression. *Picture-Play*’s ‘What the Fans Think’ letters columns between 1928 and 1930, as we’ll see below, saw fans enter the heated ‘Gilbo-Garbage’ debate.

Many fans saw the publicity around Gilbo as a means of entering into dialogue into the nature of stardom itself, and its central fascination with the private life of screen personalities. Biographies have highlighted an unusually hostile article towards Gilbert published by *Vanity Fair* in May 1928 that pulled few punches in its depiction of the star’s apparently bad behaviour towards his family, and his alleged abandonment of his wife, actress Leatrice Joy, and their child to pursue his affairs.[[15]](#endnote-15) However, the fan-magazines had already been full of veiled, and not-so-veiled, references to the affair over the preceding months. One fan letter that initiated a key thread in this debate was sent in by Irene Hart of Cincinnati, who branded Gilbert a ‘woman chaser’ and ‘egotist’, who ‘deserted a lovely wife and child’, declaring that ‘that affair with Greta Garbo finished him for me’. Criticising his ‘nerve’ for trying to appeal for public sympathy, Hart points again to the excess of the Garbo-Gilbert relationship – ‘It seems he has so much love to waste where it is not wanted’ – before concluding, with another xenophobic touch: ‘He was once my idol, now he is just another sap to me. Trying to help Greta Garbo live her roles! All this crazy stuff is going to hurt Gilbert more than he thinks. Give me Leatrice Joy any day, and send all the eve-rolling Gretas back to Sweden.’ To this fan, the affair seems to have grounded her idol into the sordid everyday realm, tainted by Garbo’s representation of ‘all’ the heightened stardom that seems to come from Europe.[[16]](#endnote-16) The letter is perhaps inflecting the wider reception context in the mid-1920s, with American fan-magazine letters pages printing sometimes xenophobic letters about the presence of foreign stars in Hollywood. Garbo was one of the stars most cited, perhaps adding to some fans’ hostility towards her later pairing with the all-American John Gilbert. ‘Down with foreigners’ railed one Detroit moviegoer, pointedly named ‘U.S.A.’: ‘I am in favor of letting “Getta Cargo,” the sensational “find” from Vulgaria, start at the bottom, *with a beginner’s salary*, and *work* her way up and *earn* her stardom, if any, before she gets her *cargo* of good American dollars’.[[17]](#endnote-17) The implication being that Garbo’s crime was not only in failing to be American but in bypassing the *work* that qualifies the actor to become a star, rather than a puffed-up celebrity.

Among other letters sent to *Picture-Play*, one fan in October 1927 declares that of Garbo’s reported behavior in the studio, but particularly ‘her affair’ with Gilbert, ‘I have long since drawn the conclusion that she is not all there’, again returning to the theme of Garbo as a disturbing force.[[18]](#endnote-18) In November, one of two letters on this issue saw a British fan reply to Hart, arguing that ‘Instead of considering a star as either an "idol" or a "sap," let us think of him as a hard-working individual, a human being with feelings like our own’.[[19]](#endnote-19) The Garbo-Gilbert relationship in this way found fans question what a star should be. It is notable that letters in late 1927 were particularly concerned with the aftermath of the death of Rudolph Valentino in August 1926, which brought focus onto the question of what a star should be, how much their legacy should be idealized, and in what ways their nationality and romantic affairs should be remembered. There is a certain shift in the late 1920s in the public attitudes to stars and a questioning of the pedestals onto which they were placed, and Valentino’s death, and the debates around ‘Gilbo’ both fuelled this discussion.

By December 1927, with Garbo-Gilbert’s second feature, *Love*, on release, *Picture-Play* was full of such letters, with fans on either side of the debate responding to earlier correspondents (the average three month publication cycle in this era tends to draw out cycles of discussion). In a letter headed ‘In Defense of Mr. Gilbert’s Private Life’, a Santa Monica fan also takes to task Irene Hart’s view of Gilbert: ‘For some time I have felt that the practice of revealing the private life of a star to the public, through interviews and various other forms of publicity, is all wrong…Mr. Gilbert did not “desert his lovely wife and child,” as Miss Hart contended, and most likely it is the press agents and interviewers who are “playing on the sympathy of the public,” and not Mr. Gilbert’.[[20]](#endnote-20) A female Canadian fan joins in, arguing that no-one could blame Gilbert for admiring a ‘glorious creature’ like Garbo.[[21]](#endnote-21) A male fan, Elmer Walkenhorst, contributes to the same issue, and while accepting the truth of the story, thinks it no concern of the fans so long as stars provide ‘good, wholesome pictures’: ‘Let Jack Gilbert have his own affairs without criticisms from us fans, for if Jack wishes to desert Leatrice, that’s his business, and not ours. If he wants to fall in love with Greta Garbo, that his business, not ours.’ Finally that month, declaring ‘The Battle is Still On!’, ‘A Southern Fan’, declares ‘This is in answer to Irene Hart. You poor thing!’, before turning to Gilbert: ‘Of course, he is not a saint! We grant you that. But when viewing perfect acting, do we need to go into the private affairs of a perfect actor to appreciate art?.. We are holding our breath to see how badly hurt Mr. Gilbert is by "all this crazy stuff"’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Conceding that Gilbert’s ‘finest work was not done with Miss Garbo’, it seems that it is the combination Garbo-Gilbert that provides the constant thread here.

After the coverage above, it is not surprising that *Picture-Play*’srival *Photopla*y responded with a weary rhyme for its readers on a February 1928 editorial page:

Off again, on again, Greta and John again,

How they have stirred up the news for a while.

Making the critics first sigh with them, die with them,

Making the cynical smile

Off again — on again — Greta

and John again,

They say it's over now — let

that be true!

Let's hear some other, more

staple love stories.

At least they'll be new![[23]](#endnote-23)

Many readers would have agreed. Indeed, *Photoplay* seemed to making the case more strongly in Gilbert’s favour, and editor James Quirk, having already backed Gilbert by giving him magazine space to present his own story after the *Vanity Fair* attack, picks up the theme of those letters, and used the occasion of continuing rumours around Garbo and Gilbert to pronounce, somewhat disingenuously (it was still promoting stars as idols as much as it ever was, although perhaps with added tongue-in-cheek disclaimers), upon its position in the construction of stars in its November issue:

PHOTOPLAY’s circulation is increasing because this magazine is not trying to create gods and goddesses; it is concerned with the men and women of the screen and their pictures.

Clara Bow and Greta Garbo are not saints in the eyes of the public, nor are they trying to pass themselves off as criterions of manners and morals. They are popular because they are interesting and because their names carry the guarantee of pictures worth seeing.

John Gilbert and Emil Jannings can draw huge audiences in any theater in this country or in Europe. There are no wings sprouting on Gilbert. But he can act.’[[24]](#endnote-24)

The argument that stars should not be divinised, nor held up as ideals, did little to silence the critics, of course, and the Garbo-Gilbert coverage continued through the Spring, with the issue of privacy a key focus. In May 1928, a male fan warning *Picture-Play* readers of the dangers of wanting to know of Garbo and Gilbert’s relationship: ‘as to their private business—well, you all knew that “curiosity killed the cat”’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Another fan extended the lesson: ‘.. I do not attempt to judge the real Greta Garbo by her pictures. I do not take it for granted that Greta Garbo and John Gilbert are having an affair just because they are such perfect lovers on the screen…I do not know them personally and have no right to criticize their characters or praise them for being *noble*. I know only their screen personalities. … for Heaven’s sake, let them be responsible for their own characters—let them at least have one thing into which the public cannot pry.’[[26]](#endnote-26)

It was at this point in the summer of 1928, after a year of gossip and argument, and as the release of *A Woman of Affairs* approached at the end of the year, that a ‘flapper’ from Montana intervenes and apparently coins the term ‘Gilbo’ in dismay at the celebrity couple’s ‘contortionist’ screen lovemaking:

My gosh! I’m writing to throw a particularly large and heavy brickbat at Greta Garbo. The person who said Garbo is “a perfectly inane-looking little idiot” is right.

I’m a flapper, and I don’t mind telling people so; but whoever said flappers like these hectic love scenes, that Garbo always plays, is all wet! We don’t mind petting, but when they start showing that kind of loving, good Lord!…Can you imagine a normal boy and girl doing the contortionist stunts that Garbo and Gilbert do in the name of love? I can’t. Nobody ever sees that except in the movies. That isn’t love; it’s plain bunk! We call it “Gilbo-Garbage” out here, and the name fits it to a “T.”

A Flapper Who Is Not a Garbo Fan. Kalispell, Montana.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The deployment of a hybrid noun for the couple is a somewhat backhanded compliment to their high profile at this juncture. Writing on the ‘Brangelina’ phenomenon of the early 21st century, a composite term for the coupling of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Linda Ruth Williams observes how there ‘is a stratum of stardom so elevated that it needs only the simplicity of the given name’. This term becomes a brand name and a shorthand reference for their romance.[[28]](#endnote-28) In the case of Brangelina, the portmanteau alludes to figures who are seen to ‘exemplify contemporary hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity’ and their associated ideals of beauty and social aspiration, and the perennial star tensions between the ordinary and deified image.[[29]](#endnote-29) Unlike Brangelina or Bennifer, however, Gilbo uses the family, rather than given name. This signatory aspect emphasises formality and distance, and perhaps artistry; especially for Garbo, who, like Chaplin, or Valentino, really doesn’t need any more names. Yet as I have already suggested, Gilbo is an inelegant term that does little credit to the ‘divine’ Garbo – the ultimate singularity – while Gilbert is reduced to the ‘Gil’, which unfortunately reminds one of the way fish breathe (or, indeed, drink) more than anything. It reduces them to the mundane in affecting a flippant and mocking intimacy, and reminds fans of the kind of fallibility Gilbert had recently become associated with. Brangelina, too, may be redolent of celebrity magazine fodder, but it has a ring to it, and is more playful than reproving. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were somewhat complicit in the production of their image as a savvy power couple, courting some of the highest fees in magazine publishing history for coverage.[[30]](#endnote-30) However, as Vanessa Diaz indicates in this volume, the stars also resisted the Brangelina moniker through Jolie’s threat to withdraw cooperation with *People* magazine if they did not refrain from using it. For Garbo, a star famous for avoiding all acts of publicity wherever possible (perversely becoming more lastingly famous *because* of this reclusiveness), the fan production of the pejorative celebrity term ‘Gilbo’, evidencing the degree to which she had transitioned beyond acting to become a Hollywood celebrity, might have seemed the perfect insult.

The fan from Montana clearly associated ‘Gilbo-Garbage’ with a form of on-screen sexual excess they viewed as abnormal. Indeed, one can see how a protesting-too-much form of heterosexuality here might be seen to add a Queer dimension to the stars’ clearly dysfunctional and increasingly one-sided relationship, with Garbo’s homoeroticism becoming magnified into the 1930s, and most famously in her final film with Gilbert, *Queen Christina*. Indeed, from the outset of the Garbo-Gilbert pairing in *Flesh and the Devil*, it is the relationship of Leo and Ulrich that triumphs[[31]](#endnote-31) – described in the press as ‘peculiarly forceful’[[32]](#endnote-32) – while heterosexuality is curiously decentred. Arguably, Garbo’s presence doesn’t un-queer the waters here, and Garbo was a star building a lesbian appeal,[[33]](#endnote-33) who was likely at least bisexual herself and was evidently not inclined to marry. In any case, as the Montana fan implies, it would be the heterosexual pairing of Gilbo that would cause most squirms. Garbo is picked out by the fan for attack with the repetition of casual sexism, but in the context of ‘What the Fans Think’, this is also a perspective informed by publicity focusing on the couple’s on and off relationship. In due course another fan, W.A Burford, probably male, criticized the ‘girl who originated the term “Gilbo-garbage”’ for being, as some other fans, ‘vindictive in true feminine fashion’ in denouncing Garbo’s appearance and talent. He then embarks on an extraordinary assertion of the star’s myth appeal, arguing that ‘She deserves no ordinary appraisal, yet all I can say is that she is medieval, modern, and futuristic…Garbo’s beauty lived before the golden age’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Significantly, Burford effectively uncouples Gilbo, and neglects to mention Gilbert at all. While he mentions other stars, it is Garbo that he seeks to place back on the pedestal as an idol. Another fan in the July 1929 issue uses the ‘too-forward love-making’ of Gilbo-Garbage (praising the ‘flapper fan’ who coined it) to praise John Barrymore and Camilla Horn’s love scenes by contrast.[[35]](#endnote-35) Even the major columnists started using the term. In the same issue, Norman Lusk’s review of Garbo’s *Wild Orchids* (Sidney Franklin, 1929), which did not co-star Gilbert, remarked that: ‘The complete absence of that commodity a fan rather cruelly termed ‘Gilbo-Garbage” adds to the dignity and credibility of the picture’.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The final reference I have found to ‘Gilbo-Garbage’, to date, came in March 1930, from a British fan praising Garbo’s unique quality, and arguing that she needs better material to escape the trappings of the past: ‘Greta has such unique individuality and fascination that she might well be content merely to exploit them, but she doesn't. I believe she could be one of the very greatest actresses the world has known, if she were given stories worthy of her…Unfortunately, she has become associated with what has been pithily termed "Gilbo-Garbage." John Gilbert is a great actor, but not a great lover’.[[37]](#endnote-37) This and the previous issue contained letters attacking Gilbert’s performance in *His Glorious Night* (Lionel Barrymore, 1929), a feature failing to live up to its title and which suffered from infamously poor sound recording and/or direction. It wasn’t all Gilbert’s fault, but it was a terrible debut in talking pictures. Some fans supported Gilbert, but many voiced the following sentiments: ‘Without Greta Garbo there is no such thing as John Gilbert, after seeing him in "His Glorious Night," and hearing the burst of laughter during his love scenes, when the audience should have been held at the highest pitch of emotion…We would rather have silent pictures with Greta Garbo than all the talkies without her.’[[38]](#endnote-38) Thus successfully uncoupled in discourse, Gilbo was no more, and Gilbert was no longer romantically associated with Garbo. He remarried in 1929 to actress Ina Claire, before another divorce in 1931, and a final, fourth, marriage in 1932 to another actress, Virginia Bruce. When he starred with Garbo again, she was the major star, with her regal character resolutely steering a path to her own destiny. ‘Gilbo-Garbage’ was left far behind in her wake.

While not constituting the trend-setting impact of *People* magazine’s Brangelina spread 77 years later, as discussed by Vanessa Diaz in this collection, the fact that ‘Gilbo’ was coined into existence in 1927 indicates a pressure-point in the development of screen celebrity; a moment when off-screen gossip threatened to supersede screen performance, though neither could be divorced from the other.

**Mythic Zenith**

Thus one thing that the partnership with Gilbert did do for Garbo was consolidate her persona as one who remains apart from the world, and who bears witness to it with almost sculptural aloofness rather than through the impassioned embraces associated with Gilbo. This is a sense conveyed by an interview with Gilbert in between the two reported marriage ‘attempts’, charitably titled, ‘Up Speaks A Gallant Loser’, where he is quoted as explaining his fascination with Garbo with the words: ‘She is like a statue. There is something eternal about her.’ He then relates that Garbo baffled him, but that she was ‘..dangerous, too. When she comes into a room, every man stops to look at her. And every woman…She is capable of doing a lot of damage—unconsciously, of course. Upsetting thrones, breaking up friendships, wrecking homes—that sort of thing’.[[39]](#endnote-39) These words, printed beneath an atypical image of Garbo who appears to be saying ‘oops!’, seem to describe the melodramatic plot of *Flesh and the Devil* as much as the appeal of Garbo herself, and were indeed printed as that film was on release, their romance seemingly almost over before it has begun. The final line of the piece says much about the value of the stars’ relationship: ‘Surely Greta Garbo is the luckiest actress in pictures to find, in her rejected suitor, her most ardent press agent’. A very similar spread in *Picture-Play* followed in the summer, titled ‘Is the Gilbert-Garbo Match Really off?’ and opening with another association with Garbo and the ancient world – ‘She is a thousand years old’ – their respective captions beneath ever-further separated portraits note her, ‘calm’, and his sadness. Their personae are quite separate and distinct, however, their relationship labelled as ‘merely very good pals’; he is described as ‘a fighter’, ‘impassioned’, boyish, gallant, but also vain and fitful, and linked here to ‘Latin temperament’; she is ‘The Scandinavian, confined within its hereditary reserve of the frozen North, moves fatalistically, stoically, heavily’. The more she thought of love as a ‘everyday, concrete thing’, it opines, the further away she removed herself from it.[[40]](#endnote-40) There were hints in the press that year that Gilbert had lost some of his prestige since the release of *The Big Parade*, and that the pairing with Garbo had served to boost his image through association with her.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Edgar Morin rightly described the celebrity coupling of Garbo and Gilbert as ‘the mythic zenith of the star system’.[[42]](#endnote-42) It was a meeting of screen romance with apparent real-world passion, and of the ordinary with the extraordinary star binary described by Richard Dyer; the more present and known Gilbert, with the distant and ever-elusive Garbo. When the film first opened at the Capitol Theatre in New York, the press were incredulous that it hadn’t been granted a bigger opening or had not been more widely advertised. The reason why it managed to gain an audience was eagerly pointed to by the *Los Angeles Times*: ‘I lay it entirely to the potent appeal of Greta Garbo’s name and to some extent the combination of Garbo and Gilbert….[the film] has captivated the highbrow critic who professes to see in it all he wants of rhythm, nuance, tempo and color, and all the way down the line to the tabloid critic who plays up the love scenes for all they are worth, which is a great deal.’[[43]](#endnote-43)

*Flesh and the Devil* would make Garbo MGM’s most lucrative female star of the silent era, particularly so for her three films with John Gilbert, but her solo films did particularly well in foreign markets, perhaps indicating the commercial basis to their pairing for MGM’s strategy.[[44]](#endnote-44) Garbo likely would have developed a similar image without Gilbert, but the flickering light of their binary star is irresistible, and this juxtaposition of ‘Venus’ and the ‘Doughboy’ no-doubt help crystallise the intangible nature of her appeal. The Gilbo affair also functioned, for a brief while, as a microcosm for the mechanisms of stardom. It was fuelled by the tensions between public and private, European artistry and American populism, elusive, sometimes mythologised attraction, plus plenty of sexual intrigue. Gilbo – without the ‘garbage’ – was a marriage worthy of broadsheet *and* tabloid; a commercially expedient, if not entirely civil, partnership.

1. A Flapper Who Is Not a Garbo Fan. Kalispell, Montana, ‘What is “Gilbo-Garbage?’, *Picture-Play*, August 1928, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Myrtle West, ‘That Stockholm Venus’, *Photoplay*, May 1926, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Garbo and Jack Attend’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 February 1927, A8. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gilbert also changed his surname from Pringle. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Barry Paris, *Garbo: A Biography* (London and Basingstoke: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1995), pp.125; 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Claimants to Celebrity’, *Los Angeles Times*,12 September 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘From the Land of the Vikings’, *Picture-Play*, December 1925, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 2000), p.372. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. H. Mark Glancy, ‘MGM Film Grosses, 1924-1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol.12, no.2, 1992, 127-144, p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. March 1927: ‘Manhattan Medley’, Aileen St. John-Brenon, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Michael Williams, Ch.5 ‘The Undying Past: *Flesh and the Devil*’, in *Film Stardom, Myth and Classicism: The Rise of Hollywood’s Gods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.145-173. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Edwin Schallert, ‘Jannings on First Venture’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 1927, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. G. Pentways, London, ‘What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play*, May 1928,119. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Barry Paris, pp.172-73; Eve Golden, p.164, Golden calls the article ‘one of the most jaw-dropping attack pieces ever written about a Hollywood celebrity, before or since’. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Irene Hart, Cincinnati, ‘She’s through With John Gilbert’, Ohio, *Picture-Play*,June 1927, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. ‘U.S.A’, ‘Down With Foreigners!’, *Picture-Play*, September 1926, 8 [original emphasis]. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dorothy Kendall, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ‘What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play*, October 1928,10. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. ‘Dorothy Grace Shore, London, What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play*, November 1927, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Virginia Hope Jeffery, Santa Monica, ‘In Defense of Mr. Gilbert’s Private Life’, ‘What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play,* December 1927, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Hazel Weatherston. Hamilton. Ontario, ‘What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play,* December 1927, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. ‘The Battle is Still On!’ ‘A Southern Fan’, ‘What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play,* December 1927, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. ‘Greta Garbo and John Gilbert’ in ‘Our News Reel in Rhyme’Paris, 125. (from Fountain, 132), I’ve added text, *Photoplay* February 1928, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. James L. Quirk, ‘Close-Ups and Long-Shots, *Photoplay*,November 1928, 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Clayton Lott, Lawrence, Kansas, ‘Why Criticize?’, What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play*, May 1928, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Harriette Eikel, ‘An Open Letter to Fans’, What the Fans Think’, *Picture-Play*, April 1928, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. A Flapper Who Is Not a Garbo Fan. Kalispell, Montana, ‘What is “Gilbo-Garbage?’, *Picture-Play*, August 1928, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Linda Ruth Williams, ‘Brangelina: Celebrity, Credibility, and the Composite Überstar’, in Murray Pomerance ed., *Shining in Shadows: Movie Stars of the 2000s* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp.200-219 (p.200). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Linda Ruth Williams, pp.207-08. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Linda Ruth Williams, p.202. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Michael Williams, op.cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Edwin Schallert, ‘Story Triumph at the Forum, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1927, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Andrea Weiss, ‘A Queer Feeling When I Look at You: Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship In the 1930s’ in Gledhill ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, London: Routledge 1991, pp.283-298. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. W.A. Burford, Waukomis, Oklahoma, ‘Rudeness Out of Place, But—’, ‘What the Fan’s Think’, *Picture-Play*, April 1929, 11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Florence F. Dostal, Mercer Island, Washington, ‘A Rose for Camilla’, ‘What the Fan’s Think’, *Picture-Play*, July 1929, 11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Norbert Lusk, ‘The Screen in Review’ ‘The Eternal Triangle’ (review of *Wild Orchids*), *Picture-Play*, July 1929, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Marguerite Edgelow, Gerrard's Cross, England, ‘Upholding Fellow Fans’, ‘What the Fan’s Think’, *Picture-Play*, March 1930, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. ‘The Accused Please Rise’, ‘What the Fan’s Think’, *Picture-Play*, February 1930, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Agnes Smith, 'Up Speaks a Gallant Loser', *Photoplay*, February 1927, 32-33, 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. ‘Is the Gilbert-Garbo Match Really off?’, *Picture-Play*, March 1927,24-25, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Edwin Schallert, ‘Story Triumph at the Forum, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1927, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, BFI, 1997; Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005) [originally published 1957]p.52. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Norbert Lusk, ‘Long Lines at Garbo Picture’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 January 1927, C25. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Glancy, p.132. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)