



Dorothy Farnum

Also Known As:

Mrs. Maurice Barber

Lived:

June 10, 1897 - January 1970

Worked as:

adapter, film actress, scenario writer, screenwriter

Worked In:

England, France, United States

by Matthew Hipps

As with many women in early cinema, such as [Jeanie Macpherson](#) and [Frances Marion](#), Dorothy Farnum's career in Hollywood began with acting before settling into writing. Known for her intelligence and beauty, she worked well in front of the camera. From articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, we know that she was educated in a convent boarding school (location unknown) where Farnum mastered French history and literature and became fluent in Spanish and German (C27, 33). Although she received several offers to act and even appeared in the films *Over Night* (1915) and *The Cub* (1915), she was reported to have instead preferred writing scenarios for the silent screen. Farnum's scenario writing career began in 1919 when she approached producer Harry Rapf with an original scenario titled *The Broken Melody*. Impressed with her skills, he employed Farnum at a commission of twenty-five dollars a week. Unfortunately, after just two weeks Farnum proved to be too inexperienced and was released from her contract. Rapf promised to employ her once she attained a footing in the industry and refined her trade. Farnum continued to work for a few years, steadily writing adaptations and scenarios. Finally, as reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, Rapf rehired her in May 1926 and gave her work on what would become one of her most renowned films: *Beau Brummel* (1924) starring John Barrymore (C27).

The early twenties were pivotal launching years for Farnum. Her first substantial mention in the press appeared in an article on May 19, 1922, in the *Atlanta Constitution*, which highlighted her work with director Kenneth Webb on the film *Fair Lady* (1922). The editorial noted Webb as saying that Farnum's script was "unquestionably one of the best technical guides ever placed in his hands for production" (18). In 1923 she married Maurice Barber, the general manager of the Cinema Finance Company. At the time of her marriage, Farnum was a member of the Warner

Brothers scenario department. After finishing *Beau Brummel* (1924), star John Barrymore told the *Los Angeles Times* that Farnum had given him his greatest role up to that point in his career (C32). After this praise, columnists began to write regular stories on Farnum and her fame blossomed. When asked about her writing process, she remarked to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1926: “You must think with your heart and feel with your head. When I write my scenes I try hard to progress not from one thought to another, but from one feeling to another. For the majority of people want to have their hearts excited and their minds let alone when they come into the world of low lights and soft music of a motion-picture theater” (C19). Farnum was a strong proponent of keeping her adaptations true to the original author’s intent. She fought against reworking scripts to offer happy endings, according to an article titled “Success Shows ‘Happy Ending’ Not Essential” (A1).

After her success with *Beau Brummel* (1924), Farnum began work on adapting the Sinclair Lewis novel *Babbitt*. Personally acquainted with Lewis, she collaborated with him while preparing the book for the screen, the kind of cooperation the *Los Angeles Times* praised as a new method of writing screenplays (23). In fact, a large majority of her work focused solely on scenario adaptations. Farnum was known to delve into libraries to explore background material several months before she began writing. She would regularly confer with others such as Broadway producers, a variety of other writers, and even close friends when she adapted plays for the screen. Farnum also traveled extensively and many of her trips in the mid-to-late-1920s involved research on specific cultures and customs, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1925 (A1).

Farnum’s inspirations not only included research and collaboration, but music as well. Known as “the writer with the Kodak brain,” she was said to have mentally stored away pictures of her travels and used music to recall them. The *Los Angeles Times* on November 2, 1924, thus described her method: “She always carries a small phonograph with her and when she is ready to write she puts on a particular type of record chosen as carefully as ‘emotion doctors’ on film sets choose their themes to inspire desired emotional effects in the players. Miss Farnum declares that the spell of music sets her thinking, bringing forth the ‘kodaked’ ideas from their mental storage with a clarity not otherwise possible” (C25). As Farnum commented to the *Los Angeles Times* in November, 9, 1924: “Writing a scenario is an orchestration, in a way, because you must proceed from one emotion to another rhythmically. A successful scenario sings its own lilt. You have to feel the course of your theme tremendously and always consult your heart before your head” (C32).

As one of the top writers at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Farnum worked with many leading stars and was famously paired with Greta Garbo for several films after they worked together on *The Temptress* (1926). In 1927, at the height of her profession, the *Washington Post* reported Farnum’s earnings at \$2,500 a week for her services as scenarist (F3). Grace Kingsley’s *Los Angeles Times* article reports that several studios contracted Farnum throughout her career, including Warner Brothers, MGM, United Artists, and Gaumont-British. After numerous lengthy tours in Europe, in 1929 Farnum took a two-year leave from MGM to live in Paris. There she reportedly worked with United Artists on writing, adapting, directing, and supervising films. She

returned to Hollywood in 1932 and signed a contract with Charles R. Rogers, but once again decided to return to Europe a year later to work for Gaumont-British (A9). After her silent era success, Farnum finished her career in London and disappeared from the public eye. She quietly took permanent residence in Europe, having made her home in Grasse in Southern France, we learn from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1950 (B6). Unfortunately, today there is no scholarly work on Dorothy Farnum, and most of the information about her work must be culled from newspaper reports. Further archival exploration, specifically with regard to her work at Warner Brothers, MGM, and Gaumont-British, is needed in order to explore and unlock clues about Dorothy Farnum’s career as one of the most gifted and prolific scenarists in silent era Hollywood.

Bibliography

“Domination Bad for Actor, Says Film Director.” *Los Angeles Times* (2 Nov. 1924): C25.

“Dorothy Farnum to Do ‘Babbitt’ Script.” *Los Angeles Times* (10 Feb. 1924): 23.

“Heart Interest Success Secret of Film Writer.” *Los Angeles Times* (2 May 1926): C19.

Kingsley, Grace. “Foreign Film Advice Given.” *Los Angeles Times* (25 May 1932): A9.

Pearson, Felicia. “Movie Graphs.” *The Washington Post* (15 May 1927): F3.

“Right.” *Los Angeles Times* (9 Nov. 1924): C32.

“Scenarist and Husband Off on Tour of World.” *Los Angeles Times* (7 Feb. 1925): A1.

“Scenarist May Set Departure in Film Script.” *Los Angeles Times* (28 March 1926): 33.

“Success Shows ‘Happy Ending’ Not Essential.” *Los Angeles Times* (21 March 1926): 29.

“Ten Southland Officers Finish Guard Course.” *Los Angeles Times* (9 May 1950): B6.

Whitaker, Alma. “New Contract Awes Her.” *Los Angeles Times* (2 May 1926): C27.

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Dorothy Farnum as Screenwriter

The Great Adventure. Dir.: R. Kenneth Webb, sc.: Dorothy Farnum (Whitman Bennett Pictures US 1921) cas.: Lionel Barrymore, Doris Rankin, si, b&w, 35mm, 6 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#).

The Iron Trail. Dir.: R. William Neill, sc.: Dorothy Farnum (Bennett Pictures Corp. US 1921) cas.: Wyndham Standing, Reginald Denny, si, b&w. Archive: [Gosfilmofond](#).

Jim the Penman. Dir.: R. Kenneth Webb, sc.: Dorothy Farnum (Whitman Bennett Productions US 1921) cas.: Lionel Barrymore, Doris Rankin, si, b&w, 35mm, 6 reels. Archive: [Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research](#), [Library of Congress](#).

Salvation Nell. Dir.: R. Kenneth Webb, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Whitman Bennett Pictures US 1921) cas.: Pauline Starke, Joseph King, si, b&w, 35mm, 5-7 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#).

Wife Against Wife. Dir.: Whitman Bennett, sc.: Dorothy Farnum (Whitman Bennett Prod. US 1921) cas.: Pauline Starke, Percy Marmont, si, b&w, 35mm, 6 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress](#), [Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research](#).

Modern Marriage. Dir.: R. Lawrence Windom, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (F.X.B. Pictures US 1923) cas.: Francis X. Bushman, Beverly Bayne, si, b&w. Archive: [BFI National Archive](#).

Beau Brummel. Dir.: Harry Beaumont, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. US 1924) cas.: John Barrymore, Mary Astor, Willard Louis, si, b&w, 35mm, 10 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive](#), [Filmoteca Española](#), [BFI National Archive](#), [Svenska Filminstitutet](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Beau Brummel [outtakes]. Dir.: Harry Beaumont, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. US 1924) cas.: John Barrymore, Mary Astor, Willard Louis, si, b&w, 16mm. Archive: [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#).

Beau Brummel [trailer]. Dir.: Harry Beaumont, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. US 1924) cas.: John Barrymore, Mary Astor, Willard Louis, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#).

The Lover of Camille. Dir.: Harry Beaumont, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Warner Brothers Pictures US 1924) cas.: Monte Blue, Willard Louis, si, b&w, 35mm, 8 reels. Archive: [Filmarchiv Austria](#).

Off the Highway. Dir.: Tom Forman, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Hunt Stromberg Corp. US 1925) cas.: William V. Mong, Marguerite De La Motte, si, b&w, 8 reels. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

Bardelys the Magnificent. Dir.: King Vidor, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures US 1926) cas.: John Gilber, Eleanor Boardman, si, b&w. Archive: [Lobster Films](#).

Bardelys the Magnificent [trailer]. Dir.: King Vidor, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures US 1926) cas.: John Gilber, Eleanor Boardman, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George](#)

[Eastman Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#).

The Temptress. Dir.: Fred Niblo, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Cosmopolitan Pictures US 1926) cas.: Greta Garbo, Antonio Moreno, si, b&w, 35mm 9 reels. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#), [George Eastman Museum](#), [Filmoteca de Valencia](#), [Library of Congress](#).

The Torrent. Dir.: Monta Bell, adp.: Dorothy Farnum (Cosmopolitan Productions US 1926) cas.: Ricardo Cortez, Greta Garbo, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Filmoteca de Valencia](#), [Filmoteca Española](#).

The Unknown Soldier. Dir.: Renaud Hoffman, st.: Dorothy Farnum (Renaud Hoffman Productions US 1926) cas.: Richard E. Schayer, James J. Tynan, si, b&w, 16mm, 8 reels. Archive: [Cinemateca Romana](#).

The Divine Woman. Dir.: Victor Seastrom, sc.: Dorothy Farnum (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp. US 1928) cas.: Greta Garbo, Lars Hanson, Lowell Sherman, si, b&w. Archive: [Gosfilmofond](#), [Svenska Filminstitutet](#), [UCLA Film & Television Archive](#).

2. Dorothy Farnum as Actress

The Cub. Dir.: Maurice Tourneur (William A. Brady Picture Plays, Inc. US 1915) cas.: John Hines, Martha Hedman, Dorothy Farnum, si, b&w, 35mm, 5 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Library and Archives Canada](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Dorothy Farnum as Screenwriter

The Broken Melody, 1919; *Good References*, 1920; *Fair Lady*, 1922; *His Wife's Husband*, 1922; *How Women Love*, 1922; *The Secrets of Paris*, 1922; *The Darling of the Rich*, 1922/1923; *Jacqueline, or Blazing Barriers*, 1923; *Loyal Lives*, 1923; *Sinner or Saint*, 1923; *Babbitt*, 1924; *Being Respectable*, 1924; *Daring Youth*, 1924; *A Lost Lady*, 1924; *Lovers' Lane*, 1924; *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 1924; *Recompense*, 1925; *Rose of the World*, 1925; *Dream of Love*, 1928; *The Pagan*, 1929.

2. Dorothy Farnum as Actress

Over Night, 1915.

Credit Report

A Dorothy Farnum was listed as an actress in 1915. It is unclear if this is the same scenario writing Dorothy Farnum. *The Divine Woman* is considered a lost film, however, one reel exists in the MGM film archive. Only AFI credits Farnum as a writer of the following films, FIAF does not: *The Iron Trail*, *Salvation Nell*, *Modern Marriage*, *The Lover of Camille*, *Off the Highway*, and

Bardelys the Magnificent. Curiously, FIAF credits Farnum under Photography for *The Great Adventure*. This is either a mistake of FIAF's part or an aspect of Farnum's career that should be researched.

Research Update

July 2024: Recent research has uncovered that Dorothy Farnum's previously listed date of birth (June 10, 1896) is inaccurate. According to a 1922 [ship passenger list](#), Farnum's birthday is June 10, 1897.

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