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A year after *T'amerò sempre*, in Max Ophuls's only Italian production, *La signora di tutti* (*Everyone's Lady*, 1934), any kind of personal, familial, or social stability is flagrantly eroded.³⁴ In some ways, this movie foreshadows the narrative style and thematics of his 1955 film, *Lola Montes*. As in Camerini's *T'amerò sempre* the personality of the female lead is fragmented by her past and by the strains over her increasingly desperate attempts to recover or to piece together an identity in a modern society—here through her rise to stardom in the cinema. Ophuls, however, offers little optimism about this recovery, concentrating instead on the torturous self-immolation of the heroine and adopting narrative and photographic strategies that (in an almost Pirandellian fashion) continually foreground the illusions and transience from which her realities emerge. While, as the title suggests, the heroine (Gaby Doriot, played by Isa Miranda) is surrounded by men who desire her, their desires all seem somehow perverse and contributing to her emptiness rather than her fulfillment.

The “Modernist” overtone of *La signora di tutti* neutralizes or subverts the kind of wholeness (of characters, of plot, of meaning) that the film's repeated use of melodramatic convention might lead one to expect. The film opens with a scene involving male producers and promoters discussing the direction of Gaby's career and a current publicity campaign about her. Gaby, however, is discovered by her agent lying near death on the floor of her boudoir, the victim of an attempted suicide. All that the audience understands about Gaby in this first section is the image of her that these other characters perceive or would have the public perceive; in fact, the audience does not actually see Gaby here. After she is rushed to a clinic and placed on an operating table, the camera assumes her supine perspective, as a mask that will administer anesthesia is slowly lowered onto her/the viewer. Titles explain that under the influence of these drugs she begins to revive her past. This narrative framing device helps ground the following story in Gaby's personality, but it is a personality that is not necessarily her own and one that is destabilized by her narcosis. Moreover, the events that she remembers are conveyed through an array of melodramatic situations; but, because of the framing sequence, the melodrama of her past becomes tied to *her* perspective (as a movie personality whose identity has been produced by men). Like *La segretaria privata* and *T'amerò sempre*, *La signora di tutti* explores the emergence of the melodramatic heroine into a modern, technological milieu, but Ophuls's film does so “in reverse” and through a style that discourages a clear understanding of her role either as innocent victim or as tramp (as someone “undone” or “made-up” as a popular screen personality).

Rather than gleaning meaning and wholeness from her past in her moment of crisis, Gaby confronts her instability, marginality, and failure to fit into a family and social unit. Her past is littered with self-destructive characters who mirror her own impending demise on the operating table. When she is seventeen, one of her professors kills himself because of his obsession for her; the trauma and guilt of the event compel her to leave school and to move farther away from her family. She at this point meets Roberto Nanni, a young man from a wealthy family, who also falls in love with her. But when Roberto is forced to leave, his invalid mother invites Gaby to stay at their sumptuous (though rather



Gaby Doriot, imprisoned by her image in *La signora di tutti* (d. Ophuls, 1934)

Gothic) estate. Rather than becoming a sanctuary, the family home becomes yet another stage for destructive passions. Leonardo, Roberto's father, also develops an obsession for the girl, and they become lovers. One evening, while they are in the garden, Alma (the invalid mother) plummets downstairs in her wheelchair to her death. So distraught is Gaby over this calamity that she flees from Leonardo and searches for work. Leonardo, meanwhile, is so distracted by his passions for Gaby that he forgets his business interests and gradually falls deeper into debt, and, soon after Gaby leaves the estate, his financial problems force him into prison. After being released from prison some years later, a poor man, he discovers that Gaby has made a career in the cinema. Bent on finding her, he passes into the lobby of a theater where her latest film, *La signora di tutti*, is premiering. After seeing her, however, he emerges from the cinema only to be struck down and killed by an automobile. Once again, Gaby's fortune is marred by a tragic event that prevents her from escaping her past and that surrounds her with scandal. Roberto, who had divorced himself from his father and Gaby when he learned about their affair, returns. Trying to rescue something unsullied from her past, Gaby seeks to rekindle Roberto's feelings for her, only to find that he has married her sister (Roberto's substitute for her). Finally, then, succumbing to the emotional pressures of her failures and her alienation, she attempts suicide.

At the point where her past converges with her present condition on the operating table, she expires. Once again, Ophuls returns the viewer to her supine position as the mask that administers the anesthesia is removed and she is pronounced dead. When news of her death reaches the printing press that is manufacturing poster of her, the machine slowly rolls to a halt, leaving her image beneath the metal bars of the press as if that image were imprisoned. Outside her recollections, the viewer is again left with only her manufactured personality—an image that is frozen as the motion picture itself concludes.

Certainly many Italian films produced during the 1930s lack such a bleak and problematic view of a woman's place in the family in a modern society. Still, lurking beneath Ophuls's treatment of Gaby's predicament is a sense that her failure to form a socially acceptable bond with a man contributes obliquely to her inability to enjoy her public success or career. And it is the implicit correspondence between work and family that also produces much of the humor in the "private secretary" comedies.