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To coincide with the publication of his new biography on serial queen Pearl White, and to extend the conversation around our online HippFest at Home pre-Festival event, [The Serial Queens: Cinema's First Action Heroes](#), we invited William M. Drew to write a short piece about Pearl...

## THE PERILS OF PAULINE: PEARL WHITE AND THE BIRTH OF A GENRE

One of the silent cinema's most remarkable stars, Pearl White still awaits a full rediscovery. The cinema's first great action heroine, Pearl was a tremendously influential actress, a brilliant player who embodied the New Woman to millions of spectators around the world.

While Pearl has not yet received the full recognition from archivists and historians due her, her name has remained familiar to later generations thanks to her first serial, *The Perils of Pauline*, one of only a handful of early films whose very title has become part of the language. Yet many misconceptions about the legendary serial have grown up over the years as a consequence of the drastically cut and reedited version that alone survives.

Preceded by Edison's series, *What Happened to Mary?* (1912) with Mary Fuller, and Selig's *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1913-14), the first continued narrative serial with Kathlyn Williams, *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) enjoyed a success that surpassed the earlier productions, placing the serial at the very apex of cinematic entertainment. Produced by William Randolph Hearst for Pathe's Eclectic Company and co-directed by Louis J. Gasnier, a noted pioneer of French cinema, and actor-turned-director Donald MacKenzie, *The Perils'* principal cinematographer was the renowned Arthur C. Miller whose later credits included *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). The cast was headed by Pearl White in the titular role of a thrill-seeking heiress, Crane Wilbur as her protective fiancé, and Paul Panzer as her scheming guardian seeking to gain control of her fortune by the foulest of means.

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Originally comprising twenty chapters, *The Perils of Pauline* was later slashed to nine chapters for distribution in France and other European countries. With the original episodes having long since disappeared, the French version has been the basis for all the copies of *The Perils* in circulation today. This abridgement often condensed several episodes into one. For example, the first episode blended three chapters from the original—the first installment introducing the characters and the basic narrative situation, the sixth episode featuring Pearl’s famous balloon adventure, and the seventh chapter in which the heroine is rescued from a burning building.

The ruthless cutting and reediting of the serial diluted much of the feminism of the original. In the extant first episode, Pauline states that she wants to embark on a life of adventure for one year before settling down and marrying. In the original opening chapter, however, her thrilling exploits were motivated by a wider literary ambition to use these experiences for stories she would publish. In footage deleted from the extant version, Pearl was seen as three characters—the aspiring writer Pauline, the heroine of a story she has authored, and the apparition of an ancient Egyptian mummy—a fascinating spiritual interrelationship transcending boundaries of time and space.

Besides suppressing any sign of Pauline’s desire to be an author, the cut version also deleted much footage that demonstrated her mastery of the new technology heralding the advent of the modern world. Absent from the nine-chapter version are scenes from the original in which she drove a racing car. The entire elimination of the eighth episode of the 1914 release meant the loss of an exciting climax in which, without any help from the hero, she takes control of a burning airplane and safely lands it.

In spite of the wholesale cutting and the less satisfactory print quality of what in the original 35mm was described by a 1914 reviewer as “fineness in photography,” *The Perils of Pauline* remains a highly entertaining serial replete with exciting, action-packed incidents. While lacking the cinematic sophistication of Griffith and Sennett, *The Perils* was nevertheless in the forefront of films challenging the limitations of stage technique. The serial succeeded in infusing the melodrama with documentary realism by shooting spectacular, thrilling scenes on actual locations, blended at times with footage derived from newsreels. Above all, Pearl’s portrayal of Pauline remains a triumph of silent screen acting, whether manifesting a playful desire to embark on another spine-tingling adventure, registering determination to overcome the obstacles in her

path, or undergoing ordeals that made great physical demands on her during filming. Working with outstanding filmmakers like the Wharton Brothers and George B. Seitz, Pearl would go on to star in serials of far greater accomplishment. But the surviving version of *The Perils of Pauline* continues to transport us to that magic moment when a legend and a genre were born.

## **WILLIAM M. DREW**

*William M. Drew is the author of [The Woman Who Dared: The Life and Times of Pearl White, Queen of the Serials](#). Recently published by the University Press of Kentucky, this first biography of the legendary silent star is the product of two decades of research and writing. Mr. Drew has written extensively on early cinema world-wide, both silent and sound.*