HONOR AMONG LOVERS (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Dorothy Arner; Original story and screenplay by Austin Parker, with additional dialogue by Gertrude Purcell; Camera, George Fosley; 75 mins; NY premiere, Paramount Theatre.
With: Claudette Colbert (Julia Traynor); Fredric March (Jerry Stafford); Monroe Osweley (Philip Craig); Charlie Ruggles (Monty Dunn); Ginger Rogers (Doris Blake); Avoine Taylor (Maybelle); Janet Mcleay (Margaret); John Kearney (Inspector); Ralph Morgan (Skeet); Robert Greig (Butler); (Note: Pat O'Brien is frequently listed in casts for this film, but his part appears to have excised before release).

Although such was not necessarily the intent, one could hardly have a greater contrast in prevailing moralities in these two films tonight. "Honor Among Lovers", resolutely presents a code, though quite tastefully not exploiting that aspect, is a basically amoral tale, with a hint of moral code just eleven years later. Its wartime MGM co-feature is thoroughly moral in every respect, and though a period piece, resolutely touting all of the American values so important in wartime.

Claudette Colbert's 11th film, and the 2nd of her four co-starring vehicles with Fredric March, "Honor Among Lovers" is a much glossier production than one usually got from Paramount's East Coast studios at Astoria. The sets are spacious, and most of them are designed in a dashed art-deco style. Since it was directed by Dorothy Arner and does, to a degree, speak out for abolition of dual standards of morality and a certain amount of sexual freedom, it would have been a ready contender for cult status, had it been readily available. But showings have been rare, and thus it has not (fortunately) achieved the inflated reputation of Arner's much later and more accessible "Dance Girl Damsel". Seen and enjoyed on its own merits, it is well above average for its then quite familiar type, glossily mounted, brief, snappy and with good dialogue. There's also a touch of novelty in its plot structure. In films of that period it was not at all unusual for the heroine to fall in love with a sympathetic business tycoon with whom she was just best friends. Poor John Halliday just about cowered the market in this role, although over at MGM Otto Kruger had a pretty good innings too. "Honor Among Lovers" reverses the situation quite a bit, and is quite unpredictable, especially as to its climax. Along the way we have Monroe Osweley being more of a rotter than ever, if such a thing is possible, and Ginger Rogers surprisingly wasted in little more than a "bimbo" role. Those who enjoy Charlie Ruggles' brand of humor will be pleased to hear that we have one of his starring vehicles from this period, "The Girl Habit" (with some excellent location work in and around New York) lined up for the Spring season.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE VANISHING VIRGINIAN (MGM, 1941; rcl: 1942) Directed by Frank Borsage; produced by Edwin Knopf; Camera, Charles Leavon; Screenplay by Jan Fortune from an original story by Rebecca Yancey Williams; Musical Score, David Snell; Musical Direction, Lennie Hayton; 79 mins; NY premiere, Loew's Criterion.
With: Kathleen Grayson (Dorothy Yancey); Wendy Barrie (Priscilla Yancey); Elisha Cook (Roscoe Yancey); Spring Byington (Rose Yancey); Natalie Thompson (Margaret Yancey); Douglass Newland (Jim Shirley); Mark Daniels (Jack Holden); Elizabeth Patterson (Grandma); Juanita Quigley (Caroline Yancey); Scotty Beckett (Joel Yancey); Dickie Jones (Robert Yancey Jr); Leigh Whipper (Uncle Josh); D. Vancaps (Mrs. Yancey); Louise Beavers (Aunt Emmeline); J.M. Kerrigan (John Phelps); Harlan Briggs (Mr. Rogard); Katharine Alexander (Marica Marhall)

With Borsage's long-lost late silent "Lucky Star" about to be unveiled (and given a run at the Film Forum) and the Lincoln Centre Film Society purportedly planning a big Borsage cycle, "The Vanishing Virginian" will serve well to whet our appetites for more of the sentimental side of this sensitive director. It's such a well-made film and such a likeable one that it seems almost unfair to suggest that it might have been a much better film if made as a smaller one ten years earlier. Borsage was at his best in 1932, able to wring pathos and sentiment out of the slightest on-screen nuance, and to create emotional effects with an almost uncanny knack of how to use screen space and how to cut to the smallest possible psychological high points. One of MGM's biggest all-purpose directors, and Frank Morgan too, a superb actor in 1932, and giving a good performance here, just had too many stock MGM comic buffer roles under his belt by now. Even the adaptation of the book seems out to create a lush, likeable visual treat and is far less successful in translating the essence of that book to the screen than, for example, Warner's not dis-similar "One Foot in Heaven" of the same year. Perhaps MGM and the omnipresence of Louis B. just were too much for it. It should have been a classic, and it does have some extremely touching sequences -- the funeral service for example. Yet that is such a fool-proof sequence that, given direction and acting of the Borsage/Morgan skills, it would have been difficult for it not to work. But, to repeat, it seems pointless and even churlish to be critical of a film that is so civilised, so well intentioned, and basically so well done. With the exception of "Avalon" and the two recent French Fagnol biographical films, nobody seems to be making this kind of film any more. Perhaps if Borsage had been able to make it at Republic (where he did "Moonrise" a little later) it would have been a leaner film and a more personal one, like Ford's "The Sun Shines Bright". But why quibble? At a well-received mid-50's screening of his "Seventh Heaven", Borsage thanked the audience because they "could still smell the flowers". You can smell them here too.

--- William K. Everson ---