

Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy

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In the early 1930s, several popular Hollywood films depicted the relationship between men and women in a fresh, new way that focused on their enjoyment of each others' company, their shared sense of fun and companionship and the complementary nature of their partnership. Preeminent among such films was Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), the archetype of the screwball comedy genre.¹ The screwball comedy adapted the new ideal love relationship, referred to by a contemporary writer as "love-companionship," to the realm of middle-class experience and to a variety of middle-class characters.² By repeatedly showing the redefined relations between the genders, the screwball comedy made this style of love its central focus, and thereby represented the theme's most in-depth exposition on the Hollywood screen.

Film was only one of several popular media that participated in the thoroughgoing exploration and reconceptualization of the ideal love relationship between men and women. During the 1930s, similar discussions appeared in commercial fiction, popular nonfiction (specifically college texts, marriage manuals and advice literature) and mass market periodicals.³ Most of the popular media considered women to be their primary audience; female taste not only dictated the content of most periodicals, but also shaped the film and best-seller market.⁴ The widespread discourse on love that permeated the popular media signified a contemporary concern (especially among women) about the institution of marriage, which experts and the public alike perceived as being in crisis.⁵ This view rested, in part, on contemporary statistical evidence: during the 1920s the divorce rate had increased to approximately one in seven. Between 1929 and 1932, the marriage rate in the United States declined abruptly, reaching a record low in 1932.⁶ Liberal reformers in the late 1920s and early 1930s

sought to reappraise and redefine the institution of marriage. Their writings verified to the reading public that the older Victorian model of marriage had lost social credibility.⁷ Margaret Sanger, Ernest Groves, Ben Lindsey and others predicated the new marriage on a revised model of male/female relationships, based on love and companionship. These changes came on the heels of a cultural revision of the ideology of femininity that repudiated the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, and superseded it with the "New Woman" of the 1920s.⁸ The widespread discourse on love and marriage in film and popular literature helped to disseminate, naturalize and sanction the newer male/female relationships during a time when Depression conditions caused Americans to focus greater attention on marriage. Marriage became more desirable during the 1930s due to its postponement. By the end of the decade, the marriage rate exceeded any previous year on record. The family became the locus of social interaction, emotional support and entertainment, due to declining financial resources.⁹

In the 1930s, screwball comedy specifically addressed love and marriage. The films' plots characteristically involved a sexual confrontation between an initially antagonistic couple whose ideological differences heightened their animosity. Their courtship entailed the verbal and physical sparring referred to as the battle of the sexes, and their recognition of mutual love and decision to marry (or remarry) ultimately reconciled the sexual and ideological tensions.¹⁰ Class conflict frequently motivated the ideological clashes in the early examples of the genre; one of the romantic pair was often identified as being middle or working class. By interjecting their class perspective into the life and circumstances of the other, upper-class half of the pair, they exacerbated the sexual tension, but eventually humanized the wealthy partner.¹¹ Conflicts in class ideology gave way in many later (post-1937) screwball comedies to other ideological disputes (city/country, home/work, reason/intuition). However, the genre always retained its focus on the comedic situations arising from the dual tensions of sexual and ideological conflict between its romantic leads. By multiplying the couple's fundamental disagreements, screwball comedy intensified the normal concern of romantic comedy (whether a couple will marry) by decreasing the probability that they would overcome their significant and numerous differences.¹²

The style of male/female interaction was a central concern of screwball comedy. Many critics and historians have offered interpretations of which audience interests, needs and desires screwball comedies addressed. Some writers have asserted that the characters' eccentric behavior and "lunacy" provided models for sanity and survival in a crazy and overly conventional world.¹³ Other writers have maintained that screwball comedy constructed a model for reconciling the socioeconomic disparities that threatened national unity.¹⁴

To read the screwball comedy as an exegesis on a new style of love is not to contradict these other readings. Rather, such an interpretation will situate these films within the historical context of the Depression years, and link screwball comedy with ideas prevalent in other forms of popular media. The lack of contextualization of specific films in their historical milieu has resulted in many film historians and critics making oversimplifications.¹⁵ In 1975, Robert Sklar wrote that critics and historians could arrive at a "considerably more accurate idea" of the messages a work of art communicated if they were placed within the "broader framework of imaginative communication" in the culture to see how they relate to the "recurring themes, images, characters, situations and resolutions that make up the conventions of artists and entertainment workers in many media."¹⁶ This idea has received greater theoretical grounding and articulation in the work of the new social historians and feminist historians, who have shifted their attention away from the public sphere of politics and policy to study the private sphere of daily life. Working from such materials as the mass market writings of sociologists and psychologists, advice literature, popular periodicals, general-interest and women's magazines, commercial fiction and advertisements, a historian can reconstruct a period's recurrent themes, images and rhetoric. Reading films in relation to other mass media firmly grounds them in their contemporary culture, suggesting the meanings they carried for their audiences.¹⁷

Screwball comedies focused on the primary intimate relationship most Americans would engage in during their lives, love and marriage, and provided an ideal model for successfully achieving this union based upon contemporary social thought. Departing from the traditional filmic depiction of love and marriage, screwball comedy built upon three major sources: a redefined image of woman, a redefined view of marriage and a redefined idea of cinematic comedy.¹⁸

The "New Woman," or the flapper, evolved from cinematic and literary sources of the 1920s, presenting a redefined image of the modern woman. This cultural revision of femininity, conducted primarily through the mass media, incorporated some of the features of radical female dissent, but altered them to conform to the needs of the hegemonic culture. The "sexual revolution" of the 1920s commercialized the more politically radical sexual revolution among the working class and the Greenwich Village bohemians in the previous decade. The political and economic critique of the *status quo* implicit in the prewar movements were lost, as the dominant culture used the popular media to sell the sexual revolution and its complementary cult of consumption to the middle class in the 1920s.¹⁹ The flapper challenged earlier codes of feminine behavior through

her consumption of such commodities as short and revealing clothing, silk stockings for everyday wear, cosmetics, cigarettes, perfume, jewelry, sweets, hairstyling and popular public entertainment (such as movies, dancing and amusement parks),²⁰ but broke with the feminist ideas of political and economic equality.²¹

The flapper's consumer-based "revolution" masked her continued and more profound conformity to the dominant ideology of women's subordination, economic dependency and powerlessness, and her acceptance of her primary role as wife and mother. The movies depicted the flapper's new manners and morals as integrally tied into a larger quest for self-fulfillment, a desire satisfied through the new "fun" morality and a consumer life-style.²² The eminent psychologist G. Stanley Hall suggested, in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1922, that the high school flapper imitated her favorite movie actress, and that films had fashioned her tastes and style, if not her very code of honor.²³ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd's influential 1925 study of Muncie, Indiana, indicated the effect of movies on behavior (for example, on the use of clothing for social recognition) as well as on social mores.²⁴ Both contemporary sources indicated that the flapper was, above all, a consumer. The focus on consumption and behavioral freedom in the popular culture of the 1920s sidetracked the larger issue of women's real freedom through economic equality, hopes dashed with the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1926.²⁵ Although the rubric of "the flapper" subsumed many different aspects of modern female behavior, and although the flapper image declined under Depression conditions, the female protagonists of screwball comedy were the repositories for some of her characteristics.²⁶

In three significant areas, the screwball women protagonists perpetuated the attributes of the flapper: her personality and behavior, her participation in the paid labor force, and her more egalitarian relationship with men. Although they lacked the flapper's overt sexuality, the screwball heroines shared her vitality, physical freedom, spontaneity and vivaciousness.²⁷ Margaret Thorp commented in 1939 that the more natural, down-to-earth looks of the "screwball heroines" made them easier to identify with; discussing the change in the concept of "glamour" in Hollywood, she wrote:

The glamorous star today is as natural as possible. She does not pluck her eyebrows and paint in new ones; she develops the natural line. She does not tint her hair to exotic hues. She does not try to be a fairy-tale princess, but an average American girl raised to the nth power. "Vivid" is the adjective she works for hardest.²⁸

In the women's magazines of the 1930s, both advertisements for beauty products and feature articles on makeup and hairstyle frequently used



In the playhouse: Cary Grant, Edward Everett Horton, and Binnie Barnes in *Holiday* (1938).

to remarry, to become a "real woman" with a home and children. Walter combined his sexual charms and energy with a journalistic crusade, creating a shared adventure that rekindled their love and led to their remarriage.

The screwball comedy also illustrated the value of play as a means of establishing the companionship so essential to contemporary love. A fundamental aspect of the youth culture of the 1920s was its pursuit of fun through activities like dating, dancing, sports and other forms of mass entertainment. The "fun morality" advocated fun as a new obligation, and defined too little fun as something to be feared; one could not have enough fun, and it even became part of work.⁵⁶ *Bringing Up Baby* developed the idea of play as a metaphor for Susan's vitality, spontaneity and sexuality, qualities noticeably absent in David. From the beginning, David misunderstood the nature of play, seeing the golf game with Mr. Peabody as an extension of work, while Susan understood that it was "only a game." Later on, as she and David pursued George to find the missing bone, Susan commented, "Isn't this fun, just like a game." Immediately prior to the final embrace and declaration of mutual love, David admits that the day they spent together was the best he ever had, signifying his conversion to her worldview. *Holiday* went even further in advocating

the benefits of play. Here play itself became the language by which the authentic lovers discovered their affinity. Suggested by its title, the concept of play permeated the film, surfacing in Johnny's exuberant entrance into Nick and Susan's apartment where he wrestled with them, then exited, doing a cartwheel, in the juxtaposition of the formal rooms in the Seton mansion (comfortably occupied by Mr. Seton and Julia) with the playroom (inhabited by Linda), in Johnny and Linda's pursuit of amusement through toys and acrobatics, and in Johnny's understanding that amassing money was not the ultimate goal of life, but the means to an end that he wanted to discover. In McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937), both Jerry Warriner (Cary Grant) and Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne) actively and enthusiastically played with the dog, Mr. Smith, when their marital strife disrupted their ability to play together. The protagonists C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) and Tracy Lord Haven (Katharine Hepburn) in Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) had shared fun and play aboard the sailboat *True Love* (and other activities like swimming and hunting) which provided the common language and experiential base uniting them despite their divorce. In Wellman's *Nothing Sacred* (1937), Wally Cook (Fredric March) and Hazel Flagg (Carole Lombard) played together on a sailboat, while in Capra's *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), the transforming power of play beneficially affected not only the lovers, but everyone else.

The screwball comedy also used role-playing to show how the companionable relationship emerged from separate, often hostile, identities. By playing fictional characters, the screwball characters freed themselves of their original personalities, expectations and value systems. Experimenting with other identities allows them to grow together. In *It Happened One Night*, Peter and Ellie played a married, working-class couple, while Hildy in *His Girl Friday* played Bruce's fiancée, the traditional, middle-class version of nurturing and respectable femininity. In *Nothing Sacred*, Hazel Flagg impersonated a strong and heroic dying woman, while David in *Bringing Up Baby* (whose identity had already been stripped of its professional signifiers when he donned a negligee, then hunting clothes and sandals) impersonated a big-game hunter, Mr. Bone, and a gangster, Jerry the Nipper ("a regular Don Swan").⁵⁷ In *The Philadelphia Story*, the entire Lord family put on an affected and obnoxious upper-class act for the benefit of the *Spy* reporters Mike and Liz. In *The Awful Truth*, both Lucy and Jerry Warriner put on elaborate acts to embarrass the other: Jerry feigned sincerity when waxing eloquently to Dan about his desires to live in Oklahoma, and to Dan's mother about how pure and above suspicion Lucy was. Lucy enacted the role of Lola Warriner, Jerry's "sister," to embarrass him in front of his wealthy new girlfriend and her family.

Several women's magazines from 1934 (the date of *It Happened One*

Night) carried stories dealing with the positive values of companionable love between active, enterprising women and men. In "The American Thing" (*Women's Home Companion*), a thirty-five-year-old single woman saved her family business and her town's economy. She found a lover-companion-husband in the lawyer who was going to foreclose on her house. His mind was changed by the fun of the endeavor to salvage the old way of life.⁵⁸ In "Marriage is Like That" (*McCalls*), the young wife feared she was losing her husband's affections to a widow at the office. After trying a new wave and facial, a new dress and his favorite dinner, to no avail, she regained his love by their companionable interest in their pet dog, who the widow found totally objectionable.⁵⁹ In "I'll Give You a Ring Some Day" (*McCalls*), a female dance teacher (again in her thirties) married a man who at first awakened a feeling of comradeship in her, due to their mutual interests and experiences. He was a temporary teacher whose music class was next door to her dance class.⁶⁰ Gaiety and vibrancy were codes for the desirable quality of fun in romance: a cover description of a serialized novel, *Modern Merry-Go-Round*, read, "A New Novel of Young Moderns in a Modern World . . . He brought gayety [*sic*] to love and, in some inexplicable way, drama."⁶¹

Not only were romantic love and friendship the basis for a love relationship; contemporary sources also defined the sexes as complements of one another. Due to the complementary nature of their physical and psychological characteristics, men and women were incomplete without each other. When their interests did not fuse, the complementary nature of the genders provoked the clashes described as sexual antagonism.⁶² The battle of the sexes became a convention of the screwball comedy. In *It Happened One Night*, the mutual antagonism between Ellie and Peter stemmed from both sexual attraction and ideological conflict. Their clearly delineated socioeconomic differences compounded the tension arising from their erotic desire. By the end of the film, their shared experiences and interests allowed them to discover their complementary natures.

In *Bringing Up Baby*, perhaps more than any other screwball comedy, the romantic couple represented polar opposites, and their final pairing signified the perfect complementarity of the male/female relationship.⁶³ The conflict in this film, as in *It Happened One Night*, was also sexual and ideological, although here the ideological clash was between the intellect and emotion, reason and feeling, work and fun, confinement and freedom, rigidity and spontaneity. Hawks's *His Girl Friday* was a remake of Milestone's *The Front Page* (1931), which had focused on the companionable relationship of two male journalists and the conflict between them due to one's desire to leave the newspaper business to marry and settle down. The narrative's central opposition was between the spheres of work

and domesticity, between the world of men and the world of women. Hawks's transformation of the male Hilde Johnson into a female compounded the ideological conflict between Johnson and Walter Burns, adding sexual conflict through the device of their recent divorce. The divorced couples in *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Awful Truth* also possess sexual knowledge from their earlier marriage. In the former film, the differences between Tracy and Dexter rested on his knowledge of her sexual coolness, her emotional remoteness and her disdain for human frailty (particularly emotional weakness). Tracy experiences a sexual awakening and an emotional "thaw," leading to their remarriage. In *The Awful Truth*, the couple was already perfectly matched but needed to experience their incompatibility with others (Dan Leeson and Barbara Vance) to realize their complementarity.

Dorothy Parker's short stories from the 1930s also depicted various male/female relationships during courtship and marriage, and revealed the complementary qualities that signified a well-matched pair. For Parker, the linguistic form of the argument became the mode of engagement for the battle of the sexes.⁶⁴ In "The Sexes," she depicted a courtship entirely through a bickering conversation dealing overtly with lack of communication and jealousy. Like the feuding couples of screwball comedy, the argument entailed their intense interaction with and concentration on each other and ended with harmony.⁶⁵ In "Here We Are," a couple departing on their honeymoon progressed from stilted conversation to full-scale bickering (complete with the man's continual, accidental and embarrassed references to sex), as they adjusted to being alone together.⁶⁶

Building upon the contemporary ideology that love required a male/female friendship based on fun, and that play melded the complementary aspects of their natures into a harmonious whole, a contemporary marriage required a union that took more than a license or certificate to forge. Many screwball comedies dismissed older ideas of marriage, to advocate the newer ideas of a love-companionship between two complementary opposites. *It Happened One Night* explored the contrast between a legal marriage and a real one, in the triangular relationship of Ellie, her husband King Wesley, and Peter. Although they both come from wealthy, leisured backgrounds, Ellie and Wesley's marriage was nominal; they had experienced neither a sexual nor companionable union, and their marriage represented the older legalistic definition of the institution. Ellie's legal marriage was as bogus as the series of pretend marriages she and Peter enacted during their journey (for the benefit of a traveling salesman on the bus, various auto court owners and her father's detectives). Her legal marriage was actually more fraudulent, because as Ellie and Peter played married lovers, they built the necessary foundations (familiarity, friendship and nurturance) for an authentic marriage. By the journey's end,

Ellie declared her love for Peter, and at the film's end, they entered into an authentic marriage.

Marriage was also the central motif in *Bringing Up Baby*, and the film had recurrent references to it.⁶⁷ When David and his fiancée, Miss Swallow, discussed their upcoming marriage, she primly informed him they would have no honeymoon and no children, because his work came first. David's forthcoming marriage spurred Susan's virtual abduction of him to Connecticut, and it formed a continual refrain of his lament while there. In contrast to Miss Swallow's image of the brontosaurus-skeleton-as-child, Susan provided David with a live Baby (the leopard).⁶⁸ The audience learned of Susan's intentions to marry David early in the film, and by the end he finally recognized that the fun they had had together revealed the falseness (and sterility) of his previous relationship. The film clearly contrasted the formal, lifeless, work-oriented relationship between David and Miss Swallow with the unconventional, fun-filled adventures of David and Susan. Although David and Miss Swallow have more in common intellectually, the film championed David and Susan's relationship, based on shared experiences of fun and play.

Marriage was also the central motif in the films that featured divorced couples. *His Girl Friday* opened with Hildy's announced intentions to marry her fiancé Bruce (Ralph Bellamy), and ended with her planned remarriage to Walter. In between, contrasts were made between two different types of men (Bruce had good manners, was honest and sincere—qualities notably absent in Walter) and different types of marriage. Bruce offers a home, children and a mother-in-law, contrasted with a first honeymoon with Walter in a collapsed coal mine and a second one following up a story in Albany, which was, after all, on the way to Niagara Falls. As in the earlier examples, the film advocated the nontraditional marriage choices that incorporated fun, adventure and excitement. Just as *It Happened One Night* contrasted Ellie's legal marriage to King Wesley with her authentic relationship with Peter, *His Girl Friday* maintained that, although legally divorced, Hildy and Walter were still a couple. Similarly, the concept of what constituted a "real" marriage was the central concern of *The Awful Truth* and *The Philadelphia Story*, both of which began with couples separating, and ended with their reconciliation. Divorce as a legal institution did not sever the complex affectional ties between Lucy and Jerry Warriner nor between Dexter and Tracy Haven. Their separations appeared fraudulent when juxtaposed with the superficiality of their new relationships, the hopeless mismatches of Lucy and Dan (Ralph Bellamy) and Tracy and George Kittredge (John Howard). Their reconciliations seemed a natural outgrowth of their obvious complementary characteristics.

Dorothy Parker also dealt with the contrast between the traditional

view of marital harmony and the contemporary perception of a "real" partnership in her story "Too Bad." Framed by the conversation of two women discussing the divorce of a mutual friend, Mrs. Weldon, whose marriage had seemed the one happy and congenial one, the story's central section depicted the actual relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Weldon. Although they laughed and talked easily in the company of others, they could not carry on even polite conversation when alone. Mrs. Weldon wondered, "What did married people talk about, anyway, when they were alone together? She had seen married couples . . . at the theater or in trains, talking together as animatedly as if they were just acquaintances. She always watched them, marvelingly, wondering what on earth they found to say."⁶⁹ Although the women discussing the Weldons concluded that they got along so beautifully that they must have been crazy to get a divorce, the disparity between what seemed an ideal marriage and what the marriage actually entailed was apparent.

Screwball comedy redefined film comedy in the 1930s and the conventions of this new genre were the third major source for the modification of the portrayal of gender relations on the Hollywood screen. Not only was there an equal teaming of a male and female star in screwball comedy, but for the first time the romantic leads were also the comic leads.⁷⁰ Screwball comedy combined the sophisticated, fast-paced dialogue of the romantic comedy with the zany action, comic violence and kinetic energy of slapstick comedy. The underlying premise of slapstick comedy was the "miraculous survival of the human in a world in which man is treated as a machine" and which depended upon collision as its dominant force.⁷¹ In contrast to slapstick comedy, which relied upon a central actor (usually male) whose identity developed from film to film, who was misogynistic in vision and was innocent of sex, the screwball comedy divided the central figure into a male and female, was more egalitarian in its vision, and featured sexual antagonism as the motivating force.⁷² The romantic leads often had eccentric qualities, and their unconventional behavior was both a form of social criticism and anarchic individualism. Although screwball comedy and the sophisticated romantic comedy of the early 1930s both demonstrated the limits of conventional morality, they differed in the physicality of the assault on society perpetrated by the romantic leads.⁷³ A contemporary film historian, Lewis Jacobs, who referred to the screwball comedies as "daffy" comedies and the activities of the heroine as "screwball," commented that in these films the "genteel tradition is 'knocked for a loop': the heroes and heroines are neither ladylike nor gentlemanly. They hit each other, throw each other down, mock each other, play with each other"⁷⁴ Another contemporary, Margaret Thorp, wrote that, "Today a star scarcely qualifies for the higher spheres unless

she has been slugged by her leading man, rolled on the floor, kicked downstairs, cracked over the head with a frying pan, dumped into a pond, or butted by a goat."⁷⁵ The screwball antics also functioned as a substitute for expressions of overt sexuality. As such, they showed the influence of the prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Production Code, as well as the ideology of the companionate marriage.⁷⁶ Allusions to sexuality replaced the overt, explicit physical sexuality depicted in earlier films, and double entendre, allusion, humor, symbol and metaphor abounded in screwball comedy. Many screwball comedies, in fact, ended without the lovers even kissing on screen.⁷⁷ The most famous sexual image in *It Happened One Night* was the blanket (referred to as the "Walls of Jericho" during the course of the film) hung between Ellie and Peter's beds in the auto courts, and which fell, to the sound of a toy trumpet, after Ellie and Peter married. During their first night together, Peter undressed in front of Ellie (performing a virtual striptease as he removed everything except his trousers), while giving her a lecture on how men remove their clothes. Ellie, undressing on her side of the blanket, inadvertently made the blanket move suggestively and then hung her undergarments on it. A traveling salesman named Shapely ("Shapely's the name and that's how I like them"), a lifted skirt as a hitchhiking ploy, and a hungry Ellie daintily munching on a carrot were other sexual referents.⁷⁸ Sexual innuendo ran rampant throughout *Bringing Up Baby*, from David's reference to the intercostal clavicle as his bone ("My bone. It's rare, it's precious!") to his explanation for dressing in Susan's negligee ("I've gone gay all of a sudden!"). Hildy and Walter, in *His Girl Friday*, already had a rich sexual-companionable relationship. Walter's attraction to Hildy was clear through his many antics to regain her affection both during and after their divorce. During the actual proceedings he had hired an airplane to skywrite, "Hildy, don't be hasty, remember my dimple . . . Walter." She told him that stunt delayed their divorce for twenty minutes while the judge went out to watch, and he responded, "Well I still have the dimple, and in the same place," implying it was not the one in his chin.

Aside from obvious sexual innuendo, screwball antics drew attention to both the sexual and companionable aspects of the developing romantic relationship, as the films seemed to have imposed a taboo on the clichés of romance.⁷⁹ The extreme physicality allowed the characters to touch intimately,⁸⁰ but humorously, offering alternative outlets for repressed sexual energy.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the screwball antics paired the would-be lovers to show their physical harmony and compatibility, as in the parallel movements of David and Susan (tearing each others' evening clothes, falling down a hillside, submerging in a stream, and swaying on either side of the brontosaurus skeleton).⁸¹ The harmony of Hildy and Walter's movements showed that these two characters were perfectly complemen-



"I never saw this woman before in my life:" Cary Grant, Gene Lockhart, Alma Kruger, and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* (1940).

tary. They carried on a rapid, bickering dialogue as they circled his desk in one scene, and traversed the pressroom in a later one. They were so familiar with each others' actions that Walter insulted her while simultaneously ducking to avoid the purse he knew she would throw at him and chiding her for loosing her aim. These antics intensified the fun and excitement the characters experienced together, and these feelings further heightened sexual awareness. The screwball antics reinforced the characters' growing friendship because, like the rapid dialogue that accompanied these actions, they focused the couple's attention on each other, and created familiarity. In *Nothing Sacred*, Wally and Hazel kissed behind some crates on the pier after he saved her from "suicide," but their most intimate physical moment came when they engaged in a fistfight to help her simulate the symptoms of pneumonia, after which they sat in parallel positions, each with a swollen jaw. In *Holiday*, the screwball antics, particularly the acrobatic tricks, performed by Johnny and Linda became the signifiers of their feelings for each other. Although such physical comedy characterized all the films in this genre, none has the sheer energy of *Bringing Up Baby*. The romantic couple's pranks and prafalls

dominated this film from the moment David and Susan met. The characters continually fell down, ran around, tore clothes, dug holes in the ground, smashed and stole cars, threw stones, chased animals all over the countryside, and sang "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby."

The rapid-paced, constant dialogue of the screwball comedy also functioned as both sexual and companionable interaction, and provided an aural counterpoint to the physical action. The mode of verbal exchange was bickering; the argument, verbal wrangling, was the characteristic sound of screwball comedy, as if this high-spirited, intellectual repartee was a new symbolic language of love.⁸² Talking together was being together, and their use of language forged the bond between them.⁸³ What was important to the lovers was not merely what they said or did, but the fact of saying or doing it together.⁸⁴ The screwball banter clearly differed from the nagging argument of a "traditional" marriage by its speed and its context of fun and adventure rather than domesticity. In *It Happened One Night*, Ellie and Peter staged a marital argument to elude discovery by her father's detectives. The tone, content and context of their quarrel convinces the detectives that they were a working-class married couple. From the moment of their first encounter in *Bringing Up Baby*, David and Susan engaged in fast, bickering conversation which not only contrasted with David's usual mode of communication with Miss Swallow, but became a gauge of his basic incompatibility with her when she could no longer understand the meaning of his discourse. The dialogue between Johnny and Linda in *Holiday* was faster and more playful than between Johnny and his fiancée, Julia. Julia's inability to engage in playful discourse with Johnny (or with his friends Nick and Susan) signified the deep ideological gap between them that could not be bridged. Hildy and Walter also engaged in rapid, bantering dialogue from the beginning of *His Girl Friday*, another sign that they, rather than Hildy and Bruce, belonged together. The image of the ideal male/female relationship that emerged from these and other screwball comedies is one that emphasized multiple levels of interaction and satisfaction: the couple was sexually attracted to each other, had fun together, shared adventures, and developed a singular mode of discourse—all of which resulted in the completion of each person by the complementary characteristics of the other.

Contemporary analysts of real-life gender relationships in the 1930s depicted a picture closer to Dorothy Parker's Weldons than to Walter Burns and Hildy Johnson or Dexter and Tracy Haven. In *Middletown in Transition*, the Lynds described the world of the two genders in 1935 as complementary and reciprocal, but as something akin to separate subcultures.⁸⁵ Although there was more change and choice open to women to enlarge their social roles, married women clearly saw themselves in a

secondary role; high school girls, on the other hand, seemed to be showing more independence by their desire to work after leaving school, rather than immediately marrying and having families.⁸⁶ Adolescent behavior had changed the most since the earlier study in 1925, and the Lynds attributed some of the changes to the movies, the newer and more potent agent of cultural dissemination.⁸⁷

The lessons taught by the movies were vivid reinforcements of those learned from other channels of the popular culture and meant different things to different viewers. While the younger, less tradition-bound audience had the values of their developing youth culture validated and substantiated, the older audience saw their values and beliefs, particularly those supporting the Victorian ideology of love and marriage, challenged. While movies, especially screwball comedies, provided an escape and a fantasy for contemporary viewers, it was an escape to a world that did not seem so remote and unattainable. Although that world may have been inhabited by heiresses with wealth and leisure (*It Happened One Night*, *My Man Godfrey*, *Holiday*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Bringing Up Baby*) or working women suddenly transported into a realm of excitement, prominence and wealth (*Easy Living*, *Nothing Sacred*), the women in the movies had the same objective as the middle- and working-class female inhabitants of Muncie, Indiana: to find an emotionally satisfying, sexually exciting, physically compatible, fun-filled love-companionship was the goal of the female characters featured in the screwball comedy, as well as of the women who went to movies, read *The Saturday Evening Post* and women's magazines, consumed popular literature, and followed the advice of Dorothy Dix and other writers of advice literature. Through its discourse on the ideal relationship, the screwball comedy created a heightened awareness of the new expectations for love and marriage. While not a blueprint for actual gender relationships, the screwball comedy was part of the new liberal ideology that redefined gender relations and focused on the sexual and companionable components of intimacy.⁸⁸ Along with the other popular media, these films helped to sanction and naturalize these beliefs so that they attained social dominance during the 1930s.



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