

## **Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage**

*by David R. Shumway*

As floating signifiers go, romance has gotten around more than usual. The term has long designated several different generic categories of prose fiction, as well as a particular kind of subject matter with which fiction, romance or novel, may deal. There are film genres, such as “romantic comedy,” that derive their identity from their concern with love and courtship. But in film studies, the term has additionally named both a self-conscious component of a Hollywood product, its love-interest, and also a frequent element of the ideological effect known as narrative displacement. Romance is very often the receptacle of displacement, which is fitting for a term that also has come to be almost a synonym for illusion. But to treat romance as merely illusion or false-consciousness will lead one to ignore the particular characteristics of its construction and effect. What most analyses of both literature and film have failed to acknowledge is that romance has itself been treated as an ideology by feminist writers such as Shulamith Firestone and Juliet Mitchell. While this ideology is pervasive in Hollywood films, it is perhaps most central to the screwball comedy.<sup>1</sup>

The most sustained analysis of screwball comedy to date is Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*. Despite the fact that the focus of Cavell's argument is marriage, he neglects the feminist perspective almost entirely and the significant body of feminist film study completely. This is certainly a major reason for his failure to understand the cultural work of the genre. Where Cavell goes wrong—and it is hardly a peripheral place—is his position that the screwball comedies he discusses succeed in enlightening us about marriage itself. My argument is that they do just the opposite: they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal—but not the end—of romance. The major cultural work of these films is not the stimulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of the threat of a growing divorce rate and liberalized divorce laws. What an analysis of screwball comedies will show is that romance functions as a specific ideology that is used by these films to mystify marriage. I hope to show how screwball comedies typically construct the viewer as subject of their romance so that he or she must feel marriage as the thing desired. I will then consider how certain elements in the genre suggest a critique of marriage, and examine how these elements can become dominant in such films as *Adam's Rib* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

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Cavell claims to have noticed a previously unrecognized film genre, the comedy of remarriage, which he believes begins with *It Happened One Night*.<sup>2</sup> His central claim is that the comedy of remarriage shifts “emphasis away from the normal question of comedy, whether a young pair will get married, onto the question whether the pair will get and stay divorced, thus prompting philosophical discussions of the nature of marriage” (85). Without going into the vexed issues of genre theory, Cavell does make a strong case for these films as a group that can profitably be studied together. But how can we account for the development of this new comic genre? Why did *remarriage* suddenly become a more important issue than marriage? Germaine Greer argues persuasively that Shakespearean comedy expresses a new, middle-class myth that linked romantic love and marriage.<sup>3</sup> This myth having become widely accepted, the comedy of remarriage is very likely a response to what was perceived as a crisis of marriage. As Elaine Tyler May puts it, “During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American marriages began to collapse at an unprecedented rate. Between 1867 and 1929, the population of the United States grew 300 percent, the number of marriages increased 400 percent, and the divorce rate rose 2000 percent. By the end of the 1920s, more than one in six marriages terminated in court.”<sup>4</sup> If divorce had been increasing since the nineteenth century, it continued to do so in the twentieth. Between 1910 and 1940, the divorce rate nearly doubled, in spite of a slight decline in the early 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Debate over the causes of the crisis was carried on by moralists and scholars. These explanations ranged from women’s emancipation and liberal divorce laws to the general conditions of urban life. Elaine May suggests that each of these explanations is faulty. The one that she offers in their stead is that rising expectation of personal satisfaction and happiness put an increased burden on marriage that it was unable to bear.<sup>6</sup> May seems unaware, however, that a version of this explanation was also articulated at the time. Several studies related the failure of marriages to expectations engendered by romance.<sup>7</sup> If, as Luhmann notes, this explanation remains speculative, May’s analysis of divorce cases goes some way toward supporting it. And, significantly for our purposes, she suggests that Hollywood itself was in part responsible for these rising expectations. Movies and movie stars, such as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, became identified “with an entirely new type of home.”<sup>8</sup> While the home had traditionally been identified as an institution that demanded sacrifice and communal values, the new home was “self-contained” and “geared to personal happiness.”<sup>9</sup> The project of the comedies of remarriage is to reaffirm this romantic view of marriage in the face of the fact of its failure. Hollywood films take up this cultural work not only out of patriarchal interest and ideology, but for the coincident reason that films that participated in this ideology were popular. A majority of the film audience doubtless found it pleasurable to be reassured about the possibilities of marriage.

It is possible, however, to make too much of the remarriage “genre.” For one thing, only two of Cavell’s seven comedies deal with characters who we actually see interacting as husband and wife for any length of time, and, as I

will argue below, one of these, *Adam's Rib*, is entirely atypical. That leaves *The Awful Truth*, which Cavell calls "the best, or deepest, of the comedies of remarriage" (231), and of which he says "it is the only member of the genre in which the topic of divorce . . . [is] undisplaced," as the only pure example of the type (232-33). In the other comedies, remarriage is presented only metaphorically, or, in the case of *The Philadelphia Story*, as the conclusion to a story that takes place after the couple has been divorced. Secondly, each of the seven films Cavell discusses would have been identified by Hollywood as members of the genre "Screwball Comedy," i.e., as being similar kinds of products. While virtually all screwball comedies are romances that end in marriage, many cannot be called comedies of remarriage. On the other hand, Cavell's comedies share the romance that characterizes other screwball comedies. This suggests that the comedy of remarriage is best considered a special case of Hollywood romance, one that applies that same set of assumptions to a new situation. Thus the comedy of remarriage, like Shakespearean comedy, works to link romantic love and marriage. In this sense, screwball comedy continues to perform cultural work that many of the most important forms of cultural production—novels, operas, poems, etc.—had been performing throughout the period of bourgeois hegemony.

While Cavell does not discuss screwball comedy, he does define the comedy of remarriage as a subgenre of the romance, and he finds a particular connection between these films and Shakespearean romances such as "The Tempest" and "The Winter's Tale" (19). Cavell does not define "romance," but he accepts the view that romance deals in the fantastic, that it is less realistic than the comedy of manners. He says of *The Lady Eve*, "that Preston Sturges is trying to tell us that tales of romance are inherently feats of cony catching, of conning, making gulls or suckers of their audience" (48). Thus Cavell is not unaware of how romance is being used in these films. As he argues at the end of his chapter on *His Girl Friday*:

It is a premiss [*sic*] of farce that marriage kills romance. It is a project of the genre of remarriage to refuse to draw a conclusion from this premiss [*sic*] but rather to turn the tables on farce, to turn marriage itself into romance, into adventure, which for Walter and Hildy means to preserve within it something of the illicit, to find as it were a moral equivalent of the immoral (186).

Cavell seems thus to contradict himself: comedies of remarriage tell us that romance is illusion and depict marriage romantically, but they can still tell us the truth about marriage. His claim that the comedy of remarriage prompts "philosophical discussions on the nature of marriage" (85) is undermined by his own remarks about romance, but we are also led to wonder why, if these films are intended to prompt "philosophical discussions on the nature of marriage," they must, with two exceptions, deal with characters who are *not* married to each other.

What Cavell does not consider in *Pursuits of Happiness* is that romance is more than simple illusion and more than a genre: it is a complex and tenacious

ideology. As an ideology, romance obviously bears some connection to illusion, but there is, I believe, a more important connection to the genre. While this connection exists at several levels, the most fundamental is a narratological structure that Donald Maddox discovered in the *Lais* of Marie de France. This structure is triadic, including a pair of subjects and an excluded third subject that Maddox illustrates as a triangle with each member of the pair at an angle on top and the third term at the bottom. Narrative succession occurs because the excluded subject always seeks to be included in the pair. When he or she is included, this will necessarily displace someone else.<sup>10</sup> In a moment I will analyze this structure as it appears in *It Happened One Night*, but here I want to point out its connections to other levels of the analysis of these films. The most obvious is the figural love triangle that exists in each of the comedies of remarriage, and that de Rougemont has argued is an integral part of the ideology of Romantic love.<sup>11</sup> Thus in most romances, the narrative structure is actually represented by a triangular set of relationships between lovers, but the narrative structure is not identical with the love triangle, since other relationships, for example, father/daughter or king/court, may constitute the included pair. At a third level of activity, we should note with Maddox the parallels between triadic narrative structure and Jacques Lacan's triangular illustration, in the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" of an intersubjective complex successively occupied by different characters.<sup>12</sup> Maddox thus describes his narrative analysis as intersubjective, rather than functional or actantial. But the notion of subject positioning has also been used by film theorists to describe the interpellation of the viewing subject by film.<sup>13</sup> The viewer or reader of a romance is typically sutured into the position of exclusion; like the odd-person-out in the narrative triangle, the viewer experiences a lack, and the resulting desire motivates and structures his or her attention. In romance such suturing may shift with each new revolution on the triangle.

The coincidence of narrative and figural desire is what makes romance so powerfully attractive in a narrative, and this doubtless in part explains why heterosexual romance figures as the leading line of action in the majority of Hollywood films.<sup>14</sup> While it would be possible to have a story about heterosexual romance that was not ideologically romantic, we know that few Hollywood products fit this possibility. There are a number of different accounts of romantic ideology as expressed in different cultures and artifacts.<sup>15</sup> The version that seems most common in Hollywood film holds "the bliss of genitality" to be the *end* of desire.<sup>16</sup> When the right man or woman is found and returns one's love, the subject will be satisfied, will lack no more. But romance does not focus its energy on describing this bliss. Rather romance seeks by almost any means it can to heighten desire. For this reason there must be obstacles to the couple's union. Furthermore, other desired objects become associated with the couple such that we are enticed into not only sexual but other material kinds of desire. One reason that screwball comedies almost always involve the rich is that their world is a metaphor for the reward that romance promises of love.

The specific illusion that the screwball comedy constructs is that one can have both complete desire and complete satisfaction, and that the name for this state of affairs is marriage. But the other side of the romantic economy is that satisfaction is the death of desire. Romantic tragedies such as *Tristan and Isolde* allegorize this in the literal deaths of the lovers. According to Juliet Mitchell, romance seeks an idealized object, and when that object is attained, love ceases to be romantic.<sup>17</sup> Marriage must be the death of romance between the members of the couple, who, if they are to continue to participate in romance, must find other partners. Hence, for the project of the screwball comedy to work, romance must occur outside of marriage, and marriage must be the end of the movie.<sup>18</sup>

In these terms, if screwball comedies, or comedies of remarriage, are romances, then they would be unlikely to tell us anything about marriage. I will now explore the way romance is constructed in screwball comedy by focusing on two paradigmatic examples, *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story*. I begin with *It Happened One Night* because the triadic structure is closer to the surface and less complicated by intersecting subplots than in *The Philadelphia Story*. The film begins with both Ellen Andrews (Claudette Colbert) and Peter Warne (Clark Gable) excluded, but not involuntarily, from something: Ellen from her father and home, Peter from his boss and the newspaper. Their exile places them on the road together trying to return, Ellen to her husband, and Peter to his home and presumably a job. The resulting relationship makes Ellen and her husband, King Wesley, a pair and excludes Peter, while paradoxically also constituting Ellen and Peter as a pair and excluding King. But it is Peter, not King, who is the male subject of desire in the film, and his desire for Ellen, in fact his claim on her, is announced in an outrageous *double entendre*, his first words to her when she has taken the seat he has fought for by pitching some bundles of newspapers out the window and jousting verbally with the driver: "That upon which you sit is mine." The camera makes Ellen the object of Peter's desire and ours by giving us the first tight close-up of Colbert's face. The first part of the narrative is the story of Peter's attempting to displace King Wesley, not as Ellen's husband, but in her affections. It is irrelevant, of course, that Peter may not be conscious of this desire, for we as viewers are aware. Just when the triangle shifts is necessarily ambiguous, as it is in all adulterous situations. Of course, Peter and Ellen do not become lovers until the end of the film—when it is still not entirely clear that they are legally married—but I think we are entitled to read their "sleeping together" separated by the "walls of Jericho" as a metaphor for adultery as well as literal chastity, just as in *The Philadelphia Story* Tracy Lord can, as Cavell argues, be said metaphorically to lose her virginity with McCauley Connor, even though she was not literally a virgin and he did not actually take advantage of her (148-50). The walls of Jericho are this film's equivalent of the sword of chastity that separated voluntarily Tristan and Isolde. In fact, the paradox of adultery without sex, having been codified in the rules for courtly love, might be said to be one of the central

conventions of narratives of romantic love.<sup>19</sup> The transgression of the marriage bond without sex serves to create adventure and intensify desire. Officially, King Wesley is excluded for the first time when Ellen trespasses on the other side of the walls to tell Peter that she loves him. When Ellen is awakened by the owners of the auto court, and discovers that Peter is gone, she calls her father, and Peter is once again excluded. The final reversal occurs when Ellen flees for the second time in the film, here from King Wesley and knowingly to Peter.

The other screwball comedies I discuss here can be understood to fit the triadic pattern also, although it is least descriptive of *Adam's Rib*, the film most about marriage and least romantic. As I alluded earlier, the significance of the triangular or triadic structure is its figuring of the structure of desire. Not only is the viewing subject positioned in this structure, but his/her desire is mirrored by at least one other desirer. The films constitute a desiring subject whose desire is confirmed by the gaze of another gazer, even as his or her gaze threatens the prospect of our satisfaction. The subject these films constitute is undoubtedly heterosexual, but is not necessarily gendered as male. What distinguishes screwball comedies from dyadic narrative forms is that the woman is never merely an item of exchange between two men, but is also presented as a desiring subject. Though women in screwball comedies, as in other Hollywood films, are more often the object of the camera's voyeurism, more often presented as the object of the gaze of a male character than vice versa, men are also gazed upon. This is a formal equivalent of increased independence and importance, of the status of subject that women have in these films. While this is doubtless a progressive element, it is also a necessity for films whose topic is marriage and divorce. The belief that a woman is free to choose a mate and, if necessary, to divorce him, is an important part of the ideology of bourgeois marriage. If it is the primary cultural work of comedies of remarriage to ease anxieties about divorce, then they must portray women as capable of desiring. The issue cannot be put merely in terms of a woman's presence: she must want to remarry, and her decision must be based on her attraction to as well as love for her partner. Thus it is not a coincidence that Clark Gable begins a strip tease for Claudette Colbert, or that it is she who first breaches the walls. But even if women in screwball comedy are free subjects capable of choice, their choices are limited to the option of whether to marry one man or another.

The construction of romance as ideology in screwball comedies has to involve more, however, than the mere use of the triadic deep-structure. Romance requires that we invest in the hope that a certain couple will achieve the bliss discussed earlier. In screwball comedies, this is done in part by casting. We cannot imagine Rosalind Russell in love with Ralph Bellamy in *His Girl Friday*. We want her to be with Cary Grant from the moment they meet in his office at the beginning of the film. These films always tell us early on who we are supposed to root for. There is no need, for example, for *The Philadelphia Story* to open with the prologue of Dexter getting thrown out of Tracy Lord's house

except to plant the seed of a wish that Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn will get back together again.

In addition to our attraction to a Grant, a Hepburn, or a Gable, we are also invited to participate in the growth of a verbal relationship between the two. Verbal exchanges function mainly to create a sense of attraction, an “electricity” that stems first from the claim made by the man on the woman and her resistance to it. The claim may be stated as in Gable’s *double entendre*, or implicit as in *The Philadelphia Story*, where, on the day before Tracy is to be married to Kittredge, Cary Grant returns to the Lord mansion and more or less stays there until she marries him instead. In *His Girl Friday*, Grant’s scheming to keep Rosalind Russell in town and at work for the newspaper serves the same purpose. The woman’s response to this claim is to resist but not reject it. Tracy could, for example, simply have Dexter thrown out. The resistance by the woman to the man’s claim upon her produces dialogue that is the verbal equivalent of foreplay, that is to say, teasing. I say foreplay, rather than seduction, because the result of the conversations is to increase desire on all sides without making the woman seem like a mere conquest. The male side of the dialogue, however, is an odd form of foreplay. Rather than speaking seductively, the males in screwball comedies typically scold, lecture, admonish, or preach. In the codes of the screwball comedy, what this tells us is that the man cares, but it also mimics rational persuasion, something that corresponds to the presumption that the woman must choose her mate.

In addition to its expression in verbal fireworks, romance is projected onto a pastoral vision of a place where the constraints and sins of civilization may be shed, and innocence renewed. It may be the island of Peter Warne’s dreams, the landscape of the Lord estate, or the honeymoon place to which Walter and Hildy are bound at the end of *His Girl Friday*. Romance demands not just on desire and affection, but also on isolation from the claims of everyday life. It is on this point that these romantic comedies come closest to fitting the usual definition of the prose romance—as distinguished from the novel—one of the features of which is a setting far removed from everyday life: the forest, the ocean, a desert island, etc. And yet in the Hollywood comedies I am discussing, most of the action takes place well within everyday settings. It is the purpose of each of these films to do what Cavell asserts only of *His Girl Friday*: to romanticize being at home, the everyday, even the black world (186). Thus we are given a vision of a world elsewhere, but not the actual experience of such a locale, since the purpose of the vision is to make us see the everyday in rose-colored hue. What distinguishes the suburbs, be they near Philadelphia or in Connecticut, is not their exotica, their isolation—though the latter is part of their attraction—but rather the luxury, the wealth, they represent.

Luxury and the appeal of upper-class privilege are yet another means by which desire is heightened. As Cavell himself notes, luxury is “essentially an expression of eroticism” (154). Thomas Schatz has misunderstood this when he argues that the screwball comedy, beginning with *It Happened One Night*, is

fundamentally about the overcoming of class differences. Thus, according to Schatz, if a “working-class stiff” (Peter Warne) and a “spoiled heiress” (Ellen Andrews) “can overcome their ideological disparity and finally embrace, then we should not lose faith in the traditional American ideal of a classless utopian society.”<sup>20</sup> His definition of the genre leads Schatz to go so far as to include in it populist melodramas like *Meet John Doe*. While it seems to me that one of the ideological activities of the screwball comedy was to paper over the reality of class difference, this can hardly be seen as a “prosocial thematics,”<sup>21</sup> for reconciliation in these films never occurs at the expense of the power and privilege of the rich. To call Peter Warne a working-class stiff is misleading since he works for a newspaper. Like the Horatio Alger hero, Warne is middle class—in education, income, and employment, if not entirely in manners—and his solid middle class values make him appealing to Ellen’s father. Yet even this degree of interclass marriage makes *It Happened One Night* an exception. More typical is *The Philadelphia Story*, which proposes and rejects intermarriage when Mike Connor proposes and is rejected by Tracy. Hildy and Walter of *His Girl Friday* are both professionals, and they are distinguished not from each other, but from various less “classy” of their journalistic cohorts. *My Man Godfrey*, one of Schatz’s major examples, involves the marriage between an heiress and a forgotten man—who is in fact the renegade heir, so properly bred that he can instantly succeed as her family’s butler, a position he holds until his identity is revealed. Only then is he fit material for the inevitable marriage at the film’s end. Like all narratives of manners, screwball comedies depend upon class differences to create, on the one hand, comedy in the form of jokes at inappropriate behavior and, on the other, romance by enhancing the appeal of the hero and heroine. Of the two, it is far more important to the demands of romance that she be rich. Working class women do not fit well on pedestals.

The creation of desire and construction of romance are then what consume—and produce—most of the energy of screwball comedies. But do these films tell us anything about marriage? They tell us, in spite of themselves, that marriage is the instantiation of patriarchal dominance. There remains an element of dyadic narrative in many screwball comedies expressed in the frequent importance of the bride’s father in spite of his extraneousness to the basic narrative structure. As artifacts of the patriarchal organization of culture, these films cannot abandon the daughter as an object of exchange between the father and husband. In both *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story*, the father has been betrayed or rejected by the daughter: in the former by Ellen’s marriage to King Wesley and in the latter by Tracy’s specific refusal to invite her father to her wedding and her more general refusal to be father’s girl, a substitute for the mistress she has forced him to seek. In each film, the concluding marriage results in a state of affairs acceptable to the father. Such approval is necessary so that the ending can be unambiguously happy.

Both *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story* make it clear that married women must become little girls. Men, on the other hand, spend a



lot of time being parental in these films.<sup>22</sup> The representation of this “parenting” in *It Happened One Night* includes not only “nurturing”—or preparing breakfast and offering carrots—but also the repeated reference to Ellen as a child or “brat,” protecting her against external threats (the detectives, Roscoe Karns’s salesman), but most importantly from her own incompetence. What the journey proves to us and perhaps to Ellen herself is her own helplessness, her need for a protector like Peter. Peter Warne may be both Ellen Andrews’s mother and father, but she is only his child, and not a parent to him of either gender. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy Lord’s metaphorical journey from Lord of her household to safe Haven as Dexter’s wife parallels Ellen’s, for Tracy also learns to lose her self-confidence and the habit of thinking for herself. She is accused by each of the significant men in the film of being unapproachable—a virgin, a goddess, one who belongs in an ivory tower—but what they are really charging is that she behaves like a man. Her high standards would be a mark of character in a male character, but make a woman “a prig” or “a spinster.” Near the end of the film when she and Dexter will remarry, she says “I don’t know what to think anymore,” and Dexter gives his approval to this lack of certainty. In another comedy of remarriage, *My Favorite Wife*, Irene Dunne declares to both her husband, Cary Grant, and the man she spent seven years with on a desert isle, Joel McCrea, that she can do fine without either of them, and promptly falls into a swimming pool. Actually, however, it is less important that the woman take on any particular characteristics than that she submit to the man who will become her husband. Thus Rosalind Russell’s Hildy certainly demonstrates ability and intelligence—even a kind of professional independence—but she must submit to Walter Burns. The women give unmistakable signs of their submission. Just before her confession of love, Ellen finally does eat the carrot Peter has been trying to feed her. Tracy Lord says exactly what Dexter tells her to, just before they will remarry, and Rosalind Russell’s Hildy following Walter Burns’s orders allows all sorts of nasty things to happen to her fiancé and his mother.

I want to emphasize, however, that I don’t believe that the major point of these films is to tell us that wives should be submissive if marriages are to work, because I do not believe that the films are mainly about marriage. In fact they suggest that spunky, strong women are attractive, but that their submission is required for the romance to be consummated, for marriage to take place. In this sense, they are comedies of conquest, the woman being not like one more bird taken in the hunt, but like the duchy one wishes to annex. But for the marriage to occur, these films often ask us to believe that their heroines are changed utterly as a result of experiences described in the narrative. This change is often represented in a sudden reversal of the woman’s repeatedly stated position or attitude, the most striking example of which, in this genre, is Tracy Lord’s last minute acceptance of Dexter. We accept the happy ending in part because of the romance that has been constructed as erotic tension seeking to be relieved in orgasm. In this sense, the ending functions as a consummation of our desire as well.

In most of the films, the endings are metaphors for sexual consummation, but the ending of *The Awful Truth* is quite explicit about this. While it is true that *It Happened One Night* ends with “the walls of Jericho” being blown down, it is merely a coda. *The Awful Truth* gives us a picture of the couple’s re-attraction to each other, and ends with Jerry and Lucy Warriner (Cary Grant and Irene Dunne) in bed together (or so it is implied; we don’t actually see this). This occurs only after an extended series of contrivances, first by her and then by them both. Lucy has disrupted Jerry’s visit with the family of the woman he plans to marry after their divorce becomes final—at midnight that night—and then taken him off to her Aunt Patsy’s cottage in Connecticut. On the way she disables the car so that Jerry must spend the night, and when they arrive we find Lucy pretending to be surprised that Aunt Patsy is not there. This obviously codes as setting the scene for a seduction, but it turns out to be a negotiation as well. Lucy and Jerry retire to separate but adjoining bedrooms, and Jerry first finds and then looks for reasons to cross over to her room. If we witness, as Cavell describes it, Lucy’s “all but open sexual arousal, under the bedsheet” (259), we also experience Jerry’s response, his own desire to be in her bed. Their negotiation is an all but nonsensical exchange on the paradox of sameness and difference, but it leads to Jerry’s promise that he will no longer doubt her. The film thus ends with an actual if underdeveloped reconciliation. Yet even in this film the ending radically reverses the course of events that had been expected at the beginning of the same day. When he woke up, Jerry was planning to marry someone else, but when he goes to sleep that night he finds himself remarried to Lucy.

Such reversals may seem to treat marriage ironically, as an absurd social convention. A case could be made that *The Lady Eve* does render marriage in just such terms because the couple’s first marriage is an absurdity, the result of a con game. But even in this film, the final reuniting of the couple wipes out the earlier failure, in this case because the man doesn’t recognize her as the same woman. The endings of these films differ from those of earlier traditional comic genres—“old” or “new” comedy to use Cavell’s terms—in the enormous burden that the endings must bear. All comic endings are resolutions, but the screwball comedies I have been discussing typically end with a complete reversal for which no plausible explanation is offered. In traditional and screwball comedy, the end is achieved after obstacles are overcome. But the obstacles that lovers in traditional comedy must overcome are externally imposed, while in most screwball comedies, they are primarily a function of the couple’s own actions. And since these are thoroughly bourgeois comedies, there is no sense of festival accompanying the marriage. Marriage is a private matter, a fact that the invasive camera of *Spy* magazine, which records Tracy and Dexter’s wedding, only serves to underline. The ending leaves the couple isolated in their own bliss; the troubles of the temporary partners they jettison never trouble them or us. As Dana Polan has argued, the ending is an “absolute point,” an eternal moment “in which all contradictions are resolved under the force of a force that allows

no difference, no excess.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, there is no possibility of *post coitum triste*, but rather the explicit denial of the temporality of satisfaction. It is in this illusory eternity that marriage is rendered mystical, in spite of whichever of its realities the film has indulged earlier.

What I think I have shown so far is that while these “comedies of remarriage” can be made to reveal many of the conventions of marriage under patriarchy, they seek to hide these realities by constructing a romantic mystification of marriage. Marriage is presented as the natural end toward which love must inevitably tend. I now want to examine *Adam’s Rib* and the recent *Desperately Seeking Susan* as films that suggest a critique of marriage and of the ideology of romance in their reversal of some of the conventions of the screwball genre.

Cavell observes of *Adam’s Rib* that it is with one minor exception the only comedy of remarriage where we see the pair at home, but he finds this merely an interesting variation and has more trouble explaining why he considers this a comedy of remarriage at all, since Adam and Amanda Bonner (Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn) never get divorced. I believe these are both significant differences that demand that we treat *Adam’s Rib* as a member of a different subgenre. Like another Tracy/Hepburn film, *Woman of the Year*, *Adam’s Rib* is a screwball comedy, but it is about marriage in ways the paradigmatic films I have been discussing are not. This film is explicitly concerned with feminist issues, something that is true about the others only in the sense that they seek to defuse the threat posed by women who reject the roles imposed by patriarchy. Amanda Bonner initiates the action of *Adam’s Rib* by taking the case of a woman who has wounded her husband after following him to his lover’s apartment and shooting the lock off of the door. Her defense of this woman is explicitly a defense of women as a class and a protest against the double-standard of sexual morality that generally excuses male philandering (something that the father in *The Philadelphia Story* did explicitly). In taking the case, Amanda knows that she will have her husband as an opponent; in fact, it is his call to tell her that he has been assigned to prosecute the case that motivates Amanda to seek out and offer to defend the woman. Thus she is not only challenging gender privilege in the society at large, but her husband’s authority publicly in court. In winning her case, she proves to be her husband’s superior as a professional, and—although not unambiguously—she also makes the case for the right of women to resist male domination.

As a result of having taken the case, Amanda and Adam quarrel, and he finally leaves. His accusation that she has no respect for the law either as it pertains to attempted murder or marriage makes it explicit that she has challenged patriarchy. Before this occurs we have seen a marriage in which sexuality is clearly acknowledged, but we also see the husband and wife prepare dinner on the cook’s night off. That is, we see a couple who are sexually related and attracted to each other, but who live lives that are not dominated by sex. We cannot mistake their relationship as one of absolute bliss. Thus the romantic

element of this film remains on the margins until the end. In spite of its romantic elements, the film represents a critique of romance at several levels. For not only does the film show us the difficulties of married life, but the only real love triangle in film, shown as a kind of prologue, is the tawdry one that results in the assault and the trial. That we do not find this triangle in the least appealing suggests that class is a decisive factor in the construction of romance. There is, however, another triangle: that formed by the Bonners and their neighbor Kip. Kip is completely extraneous to the major narrative action of the film. His only purpose can be to build romance by making Amanda seem desired. Like the spurned, would-be husbands in the paradigmatic films, Kip is completely unsuitable as a mate and we cannot believe him as a threat. Nevertheless, he does attempt to woo Amanda after Adam leaves her. The second romantic element is the house in Connecticut. The romance of this location is treated ironically earlier in the film by means of home movies for which Kip provides a running commentary. At the end, however, Adam and Amanda go there to reconcile, and it is hard not to understand the place as an unambiguous retreat from the world of courts and competition. Like the other films, *Adam's Rib* ends with an unexplained change of sentiment, but this time it is the man whose feelings suddenly shift. The issue here is not that we cannot believe that Adam Bonner would change his mind and decide to stay married, but rather that the problems the film raises about the difficulties of two genuinely adult professionals living together as equals get papered over. The narrative displaces the social conflict onto the drama of a single marriage. Furthermore, the patriarchal status quo is restored by Adam's impending election to a judgeship— where he will represent, rather than merely practice, the law. The ending makes us happy that the couple are reunited, forgetful of the problems that caused the conflict in the first place, and unworried by any significant change in the patriarchal order.

*Adam's Rib* alters some of the conventions of the screwball comedy to produce an examination of conflict in a marriage that seems ideal, but the film nonetheless affirms marriage. This film was produced during a period when a single marriage remained the expectation of most men and women. After World War II, divorce became so common that some observers began to describe the marriage system of our culture as "serial monogamy." Hollywood films could no longer treat divorce merely as something to be avoided. Too many members of the film audience had already failed to avoid it. While it took some time before Hollywood could ratify this social fact, in the 1970s and 1980s a series of films appeared that might be called comedies of remarriage in an altogether different sense, since they take as their situation the plight of the post-married and repeatedly married. Among these films are *Choose Me*, *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Something Wild*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and most recently, *When Harry Met Sally*. The cultural work of this group of films may involve a partial critique of romance, but it also includes a reinforcing of heterosexual love as the social norm.

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While many of the films I have just mentioned borrow and modify conventions of the screwball comedies of the classical period, I have chosen to focus on *Desperately Seeking Susan* here because it does so more explicitly and systematically than the others. But I have also chosen to look more carefully at this film because it seems most explicit in affirming independence and divorce as potentially positive choices. Since this film was made more than forty years after the others I have discussed here, we can assume that its director, Susan Seidelman, would have greater distance on the genre than earlier directors of screwball comedies and that she used genre conventions not (or not only) as a blueprint for the production of a popular commodity, but as a historical form to be self-consciously used as needed: transformed, parodied, played-off against, etc. However, it would be ludicrous to leave the impression that a Howard Hawks or a Preston Sturges was incapable of transforming or reversing genre conventions. In fact, these directors incorporate some significant reversals of gender roles into their screwball comedies, *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Lady Eve*, where we find examples of weak, bumbling men being pursued by strong, competent women.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, but to greater effect, *Adam's Rib* alters the conventions of the genre by beginning with a strong woman but allowing her to remain strong, to defeat her husband and make him submit—if only in a charade—by crying. It is thus not the director's genius to which I appeal in trying to account for *Desperately Seeking Susan's* reversals. Obviously, changes in American culture contributed to the possibility of these reversals. However, the director's *gender* is also a reasonable explanation for her having been able to revise the conventions of screwball comedy in a way that male directors were not.

*Desperately Seeking Susan* picks up some potentially oppositional moments in screwball comedies and explores them further. The first of these is the possibility of life and sex outside of marriage, for although the screwball comedies set out to affirm marriage through romance, they must present an alternative to marriage in the representation of a threat to it. In other words, in representing the situation these films seek to resolve, they must acknowledge that marriage is not inevitable. In depicting women who at first are not helpless or house bound, these possibilities are made available to the viewer. Secondly, as I argued earlier, women in screwball comedies tend to be less the object of the camera's gaze and even occasionally the gazing subject. Thus *Desperately Seeking Susan* is not an "anti-screwball comedy," but one that acknowledges its debt to the classical films. It does this by means of several striking allusions. One is its beginning in a beauty parlor recalling Cukor's *The Women*, which featured an all female cast. A more significant allusion is to *It Happened One Night*: Roberta and Des spend the night together in his nearly empty apartment separated by a make-shift room divider apparently constructed of old doors. These rickety "walls of Jericho" serve the same function as the blankets did in the earlier film, but we now are able to see what it barely suggested: both man and woman sexually aroused and frustrated by the arrangement.

These references to particular screwball comedies are just the tip of the iceberg. The film may be seen as systematically reversing most of the conventions of the genre. For example, instead of beginning with an investment in marriage lost, we begin with an interest in adventure to be found. The first dialogue we hear tells us that Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) has been following a series of personal ads that feature as a headline the title of the film and that have been placed by Jim. Roberta, a bored suburban New Jersey housewife whose husband, we learn later, is having an affair, finds this desperation romantic: the film thus begins with its heroine explicitly seeking the kind of fantasy that screwball comedies typically present. What happens to Roberta eventually is that she gets amnesia, finds herself mistaken for Susan (Madonna) and living Susan's life. During this period, Roberta learns that she can rely on herself, and that she does not want to go back to her husband. The film ends with her involved with—not married to—Des (Aidan Quinn) but also paired with Susan as heroes who have recovered stolen antiquities.

By using the device of amnesia and mistaken identity, the film greatly complicates the typical narrative structure by proliferating the triangular relationships. In fact one could understand this film as “coupling” almost everyone with almost everyone else at least for a brief moment. This constitutes, of course, the particular zaniness of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, but it also serves to create erotic tension by thrusting various characters together and then keeping them apart. This eroticism is sustained by visual rather than verbal pyrotechnics: the repeated use of match cuts, for example, to link Roberta's and Susan's stories. When Des and Roberta have sex for the first time—on the second night she has spent in his apartment—it serves the same function as the concluding wedding of other films, the release of erotic tension, but it is not the end of the movie. There remains a tension between Roberta's desire for Des and her identification with Susan. The final scene of the film, like that of *The Philadelphia Story* recorded in a still photograph, shows Roberta and Susan together receiving an award for the recovery of the earrings. Thus, the end of the film suggests three triangles, though it is ambiguous who is excluded by the pair of Roberta and Susan, since the other triangles include Des and Jim respectively.

If the end is ambiguous on the point, the film as a whole strongly suggests that the relationship between Roberta and Susan is its primary focus. This is represented by the match cuts that, by replacing one woman with the other who is not in the scene, disrupt expected shot/reverse shot sequences and the process of suture.<sup>25</sup> These match cuts are the visual representation of the two characters' identification with each other. The narrative constructs a romance—though not literally a sexual relationship—of Roberta's about Susan, a romance of identification. It is, after all, Susan who Roberta is daydreaming about as the film opens, and it is *as* Susan that her adventures, her romance, begin. Given the lack of female identification by women in screwball comedies or other Hollywood films, Roberta's identification with Susan must be regarded as a politically significant reversal of convention.

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Let me summarize *Desperately Seeking Susan's* other major reversals of genre conventions. The film begins with marriage and ends with divorce. It opens in the suburbs, but its zone of adventure is the city. Rather than being claimed by her lover, Roberta chooses Des. In fact, Roberta is a full-fledged subject. We are sutured into her position, or Susan's, but rarely into those of the male characters. Rather than affirming the values of the middle class, the film endorses bohemian or counter-cultural values by Roberta's willingness to leave New Jersey and comfort for New York, excitement, but relative poverty. The film deals with adultery, but this convention is also reversed because it is here explicit and undertaken by Roberta in full knowledge of what she is doing, having by this point regained her memory. Romance in the film, whether its object is Des or Susan, is used not to mystify marriage, but to critique it, to show that marriage fails to live up to its billing. Thus *Desperately Seeking Susan* ends with a vision of a kind of personal liberation, one undermined to be sure by its status as a film fantasy, but one that is also made more significant by its tenuousness and ambiguity. It is a happy ending to be sure, but not one that claims a happily-ever-after.

This is not to say that *Desperately Seeking Susan* represents a full scale critique of bourgeois or even patriarchal ideology. In affirming divorce, the film affirms individual freedom over social solidarity. Traditionally, marriage has been understood as the foundation of society or at least as a symbol for the social. It is this understanding that allows Tony Tanner to read the theme of adultery in the novel allegorically and thus to neglect the sexual politics of the topic.<sup>26</sup> Critique of marriage is prohibited when marriage and society are identified. We need new ways of envisioning society that do not assume the naturalness of marriage, but the best *Desperately Seeking Susan* can do is offer Roberta and Susan's relationship as a hint at such a vision. While this is a decided limitation, to dismiss Roberta's liberation because of it would be to forget that the personal is the political. It is not only the relation of marriage and society, however, that the film fails to address adequately. The film's conception of class is also impoverished. Middle-class New Jersey is contrasted not with either a genuine site of poverty and oppression or a utopian social vision, but rather with a fashionable bohemia, increasingly the focus of contemporary middle-class dreams of mobility or escape. Yet the failure to provide a critique of class politics does not negate the useful critique of sexual politics the film gives us.

What films like *Adam's Rib* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* show us is that romance is not synonymous either with patriarchy or with false consciousness. Hence, we are entitled to speak of Roberta's relationship with Susan as both a romance and an antipatriarchal statement, and romance itself as having a utopian character in this film. This is not to deny Firestone's contention that there is an intimate connection between male culture and romance, but rather to argue that romance is a model of desiring that may, like other models, float away from the context of its production. Romance may be in one manifestation "love corrupted by . . . the sex class system," but it has become a structure, a narrative

chain of floating signifiers, that continues to serve the interests of patriarchy not by any restricted connection to it, but because ideological structures always tend to affirm the status quo. Screwball comedies typically construct a narrative in which the interpellated viewer experiences marriage mystified by romance, but in films such as *Desperately Seeking Susan*, romance returns to the work it may have performed in medieval culture, the suggestion of alternatives to patriarchal social practices and structures.

## Notes

The number of debts I must acknowledge here seems to require Churchillian language: never has a mere essay owed so much to so many. The late Linda Singer encouraged me to take up the project in the first place and gave me insightful readings of several drafts. Others who provided helpful comments and criticism include the members of "Pittsburgh Theory," especially Jane Feuer, Lucy Fischer, Jim Kavanagh, Peggy Knapp, Brian McHale, and Dana Polan; Peter Brunette and Diane Carson, who heard the paper when it was presented at the 1986 Conference on Literature and Film at Florida State University; and, most recently, Paul Smith. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Scholars have had a difficult time defining screwball comedy. For discussions of this difficulty see Wes D. Gehring, *Screwball Comedy: A Genre of Madcap Romance* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 3-12; Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983), 94-97, 158-63; Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 311-13. On the other hand, James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Knopf, 1987), xi-xii, simply identifies screwball comedy as romantic comedy during Hollywood's classic period. I agree in general with Harvey's move here, but, for my purposes, it is only necessary to note that screwball comedy is a recognizable kind of Hollywood product.
2. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1; all future references will be included in the text.
3. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), 204.
4. Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 167.
6. *Ibid.*, 2-7.
7. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 151; 233, 32 n. Luhmann cites studies by Ernest R. Mower (1927), Ernest W. Burgess (1926), Paul H. Landis (1936), and Francis E. Merrill (1949).
8. May, *Great Expectations*, 75.
9. *Ibid.*, 76.
10. Donald Maddox, "Triadic Structure in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *Assays* 3 (1985): 22-29. Cf. Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 1-52, where, in spite of the subtitle, triangular desire is treated as a figural element of novels, rather than as proper to their narrative structure.
11. Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Beligion (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 15-23.



12. Maddox, "Triadic Structure," 31-32; Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 38-72.
13. For an overview and commentary on theories of suture and interpellation, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 194-236.
14. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 16. Their study of an "unbiased sample" of 100 Hollywood films made between 1915 and 1960 showed 85 to have heterosexual romantic love as the leading line of action.
15. Romance as an ideology has been held to be a fundamental element of patriarchy by such theorists as Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), and Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam, 1971), who argue that romantic love is a corruption that results from the unequal balance of power between the sexes (146). Mitchell, Greer, and Firestone all cite de Rougemont, although Mitchell remains closest to him in asserting that romance is something that must die out once its goal is attained and that romance presupposes a fundamental connection between love and death (106).
16. "Bliss of genitality" is paraphrased from Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1963), 264. Erikson argues that genitality, as the stage of true sexual maturity, is misunderstood as a permanent state of sexual bliss. Nevertheless, Erikson seems to contribute to this vision of heterosexual paradise when he calls genitality the "utopia" of his system (92).
17. Mitchell, *Women*, 106.
18. In an article written after *Pursuits of Happiness* (Stanley Cavell, "Two Cheers for Romance," in *Passionate Attachments: Thinking About Love*, ed. William Gaylin and Ethel Person [New York: Free Press, 1988], 85-100), Cavell suggests that we read these endings as the beginning of an "adventure or quest" (95), but he doesn't explain why the adventure of marriage is never shown in the films. In this article the relevance of the feminist critique of romance is acknowledged, but Cavell does not allow it to modify his own position. In fact, he describes "romantic marriage" as an "insulation from the larger world of politics" (90-91). While Cavell quite properly connects romantic marriage to the bourgeois constructions of "privacy" and the "personal," what he apparently cannot see is that these constructions are precisely political.
19. de Rougemont, *Love*, 32-34.
20. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 152.
21. *Ibid.*, 159.
22. Cavell makes much of Gable's being "parental" in *It Happened One Night*, but fails to see any connection between being parental and patriarchy, 90.
23. Dana Polan, "The Felicity of Ideology: Speech Acts and the 'Happy-Ending' in American Films of the Forties," *Iris* 3 (1985): 36.
24. I owe this insight to Diane Carson's unpublished paper, "A Feminist Reading of Screwball Comedy."
25. *Desperately Seeking Susan* could easily be read as an extended commentary on contemporary film theory.
26. Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).