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## The Lady Eve



*It is a leading thought of mine about the film comedies of remarriage that they each have a way of acknowledging the issue of the relation of actor and character, in particular that each has a way of harping on the identity of the real woman cast in its principal pair.*

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**W**E can make a start in reading *The Lady Eve* (1941) without considering its generic allegiances and their Shakespearean background. From the name in its title and from the animated title cards we know that Preston Sturges is going to present us with some comic version of the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. And sure enough, the film opens with a young man and his guardian shadow leaving a tropical island on which he has been devoted to what he calls the pursuit of knowledge. That something is mixed up in this knowledge is confirmed at once by the camera's drifting, as if bored, or embarrassed, away from his delivery of his farewell speech declaring the purity of his pursuit, to discover his shadow leading a nubile native down to the shore, the pair sporting chains of flowers. This line of story is picked up as the leading lady attracts the young man's attention by clunking him on the head with an apple, and again by the intimate enmity revealed between the man's snake and the woman's dreams. Their relationship is broken, anyway their plans are, by the man's coming into new knowledge. As if this were not enough, we are shown the fall of the man repeated over and over, and the idea of "falling" is explicitly and differently interpreted by each of two characters (Curly and Eve), as if daring us to interpret it for ourselves. This line of argument has a most satisfactory conclusion in the man's closing declaration that he does not want to know. Had our common ancestor said that in the beginning, there would be no question of endings.

But even if we consider that Shakespearean romance itself tends to invoke the myth of Eden, such considerations merely scratch at the surface iconography of this film. Of course these considerations also merely pick up superficial items in the myth of Eden, or pick them up

superficially. The myth is after all about the creation of woman and about the temptability of man. Now *The Lady Eve* is about a con artist (Barbara Stanwyck, introduced as Jean, reintroduced as Eve) who calls herself, because she is a woman, an adventuress; and it is equally about the gullibility of a man (Henry Fonda), forever being called a mug or a sucker. (Jean's name for him is Hopsy; Eve's name for him, and the world's, is Charles.) But can the film be seen to be about the creation of a woman?

Jean's central con of this man requires her reappearance as the Lady Eve. Her associate Curly (Eric Blore)—"Sir Alfred McGlennon Keith at the moment"—explains her (re)appearance by telling Hopsy/Charles the story of Cecilia, or The Coachman's Daughter, filling him, as Sir Alfred puts it, with "handsome coachmen, elderly earls, young wives, and two little girls who look exactly alike"—that is, with the very farcing of romance. Jean as Eve continues Sir Alfred's image by asking, "You mean he actually swallowed that?" and is told, "Like a wolf"—as though this story was the biggest of the fruits of the tree of knowledge that he was to be handed. Eve has her own explanation of Charles's readiness to accept her story (that is, to accept her as not Jean), namely, that they really do not look the same to one another as they did on the boat because they no longer feel as they did then about one another. On the boat, she says, "we had this awful yen for one another." Whatever the psychological or philosophical validity and interest of her explanation, it is a fragment of a reasonable view of what romance is. Quoting one editor of *The Tempest*: "For romance deals in marvelous events and solves its problems through metamorphoses and recognition scenes—through, in other words, transformations of perception."<sup>\*</sup> By the time the pair find themselves alone again, riding horses through wooded paths, compelled by the beauty of a sunset to dismount and look, and the man has begun repeating his own self-declared romance to the woman (a line of story he had originally feigned to criticize as "dull as a drugstore novel")—a repetition even the horse tries to tell him is inappropriate—by that time it may dawn on us 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, and that film, with its typical stories of love set on luxurious ships or in

\* Robert Langbaum, introduction to the Signet edition.

mansions and containing beautiful people and horses and sunsets and miraculously happy endings, is inherently romantic.

Granted, then, that this film does invite us to consider the source of romance, what is the implication? That we, as the audience of film, are fated, or anyway meant, to be gulled by film, including this film? This makes our position seem the same as Hopsy/Charles's. But don't we also feel that our position is equally to be allied with the woman's, at the man's expense? Who are these people and what are their positions?

Let us approach them by getting deeper into this film's identifying of itself with the tradition of romance. Take first the feature of the action's moving from a starting place of impasse to a place Frye calls "the green world," a place in which perspective and renewal are to be achieved. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this place is a forest inhabited by fairies, explicitly a place of dreams and magic; in *The Winter's Tale* the place is the rural society of Bohemia; in *The Merchant of Venice* the equivalent of such a place contains oracular caskets; in *The Tempest* it occupies the entire setting of the action, with the framing larger world supplied by narrative speeches; in *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Awful Truth*, and *Adam's Rib*, in addition to *The Lady Eve*—that is, in more than half of the definitive remarriage comedies of Hollywood—this locale is called Connecticut. Strictly speaking, in *The Lady Eve* the place is called "Connecticut," and it is all but explicitly cited as a mythical location, since nobody is quite sure how you get there, or anyway how a lady gets there. This is Preston Sturges showing off at once his powers of parody and his knowledge of his subject, and giving us fair warning: in his green world the mind or plot will not only not be cleared and restored, it will be darkened and frozen.

Another feature of Shakespeare's late romances is an expansion of the father-daughter relationship. (This goes together with the fact that these late plays emphasize the reconciliation of an older generation at the expense of a central interest in the plight of young lovers. The comedy of remarriage is a natural inheritor of this shift of interest away from the very young.) *The Lady Eve* emphasizes the father-daughter relationship as strongly as *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story* do, but it goes quite beyond its companions in the genre by endowing its father—as Shakespeare endows a number of his late fathers—with the power, or to use Shakespeare's word, with the art, of magic. That Harry's use of cards is meant to stand for a power possessed not merely

by a shark but by a magus is declared as he sits on his daughter's bed dressed in a wizard's robe, deals "fifths" for her admiration, describing the trick as "just virtuosity," saying "you don't really need it"; and as she thereupon asks him, in their tenderest moment together, to tell her her fortune, as if for her to ask this man for a professional reading of the cards is to ask him for his blessing. In *All's Well That Ends Well* the heroine has inherited her father's book and knack of magic, which proves to be the key to the happiness she is awarded. The most famous of Shakespeare's father-magicians is the central figure of *The Tempest*, the play in which renewal or reconciliation or restoration is shown to exact the task of the laying aside of magic. I understand an allusion to this task of Prospero's, or a summary of it, when Jean returns to her cabin after a day with Hopsy and announces their love for one another to her father, declaring that she would give anything to be—that she is going, she corrects herself, to be—everything he thinks she is, everything he wants her to be (a declaration coming the day after she had created and destroyed for him the wisdom of having an ideal in an object of love), and then saying to her father, "And you'll go straight too, Harry, won't you?" "Straight to," he asks, "where?" (This mode of allusion or summary might be compared with another allusion from our genre to *The Tempest* that amounts, to my ear, almost to an echo. I am thinking of the late moment of awakening in *The Philadelphia Story*—comparable to the late moment at which Miranda more fully realizes the imminence of her departure into human womanhood and human relationship, exclaiming "How beauteous mankind is!"—at which Katharine Hepburn says, in a sudden access of admiration, "I think men are wonderful.")

I do not require immediate acceptance of Hollywood fast talk as our potential equivalent of Shakespearean thought, and yet I will have at some stage to ask attention for at least one further moment of thematic coincidence between *The Lady Eve* and *The Tempest*, the coincidence of their conclusions in an achievement of forgiveness. Such attention would mean nothing to my purpose apart from a live experience of the film within which it holds its own against the Shakespearean pressure. I mean, at a minimum, that we are to ponder the experience of this man's and this woman's concluding requests to one another to be forgiven; that this bears pondering. Two ways not to bear it are either to conclude that their treatment of one another has been unforgiveable, in

which case the ending of the film is either cynical or deluded by the ideology of Hollywood; or to conclude that there is no outstanding problem since human beings are fated so far as they have progressed, politically or privately, to cynicism, insincerity, and delusion in their relations with one another, above all in their dealings with love and marriage, so the film is after all realistic in its assessment both of their needing forgiveness and of their incapacities to grant it.

The unacceptability, or instability, of each of these conclusions (each gnawed at by the other) is a reason, I believe, that a typical reaction to such films is to develop a headache. (Then it may be such a reaction that produces the title "madcap comedies" for such films.) We are not yet ready to try to think our way beyond this reaction, but I mention that Frye calls particular attention to the special nature of the forgiving and forgetting asked for at the conclusion of romantic comedy: "Normally, we can forget in this way only when we wake up from a dream, when we pass from one world into another, and we often have to think of the main action of a comedy as 'the mistakes of a night,' as taking place in a dream or nightmare world that the final scene suddenly removes us from and thereby makes illusory."\* *Bringing Up Baby* and *Adam's Rib* also explicitly climax or conclude with a request for forgiveness, and *The Awful Truth* and *The Philadelphia Story* do so implicitly. *His Girl Friday* notably does not, which is a way of understanding the terrible darkness of that comedy.

I should perhaps pause, still barely inside the film, to say that I am not claiming that these films of remarriage are as good as Shakespearean romantic comedies. Not that this is much of a disclaimer: practically nothing else is as good either. But I am claiming a specificness of inheritance which is itself more than enough of a problem to justify. Another two sentences from Frye will locate my claim: "All the important writers of English comedy since Jonson have cultivated the comedy of manners with its realistic illusion and not Shakespeare's romantic and stylized kind . . . The only place where the tradition of Shakespearean romantic comedy has survived with any theatrical success is, as we should expect, in opera.\*\* I am in effect adding that the Shakespearean tradition also survives in film (thus implying that film

\* *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 128.

\*\* *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

may provide an access for us to that tradition) and adding as well that such claims are all but completely up in the air, and will pretty much go on being left in the air by what I have been or will be saying here. The claim sits in the quality of one's experience of film, in the nature of film, and I am at best assuming that experience and that nature, and preparing the ground for inviting the experience of others.

I have sometimes found it useful to think of the nature of film by comparing what camera and projection bring to a script with what music brings to a libretto. Whatever the strains of the comparison its point here would be to locate what it is, in any medium that can seriously be thought of as maintaining a connection with Shakespeare's plays, that bears the brunt of his poetry. The signal weakness in comparing the poetry of the camera (of, so to speak, the photogenetic poetry of film itself) with the music of opera is that this misses, as the comparison of film with theater generally misses, the mode of uniqueness of the events on the screen. Plays may be variously produced, and productions may or may not change in the course of a run, and may be revived; films can only be rerun or remade. You can think of the events on a screen equally as permanent and as evanescent. The poetry of the final appeals for forgiveness in *The Lady Eve* is accordingly a function of the way just this man and this woman half walk, half run down a path of gangways, catching themselves in an embrace on each landing, and how just this sequence of framings and attractions of the camera follow these bodies as they inflect themselves to a halt before a closed door, and just the way these voices mingle their breaths together. These moments are no more repeatable than a lifetime is. The uniqueness of the events of film is perhaps better thought of in comparison with jazz than with opera. Here the point of contact is that the tune is next to nothing; the performer—with just that temperament, that range, that attack, that line, that relation to the pulse of the rhythm—is next to everything. Of course a session can be recorded; that is the sense in which it can in principle be made permanent. But that session cannot be performed again; that is the sense in which it is evanescent. Succeeding performances of a play arise from the production, not independently from the play; succeeding sessions of a jazz group arise from the state and relations of the players, and if from a preceding performance, then as a comment on it. (Modern performance may negate such distinctions; it does not annihilate them.) I daresay the themes moving from Shake-

peare to film are richer than the tunes of jazz. But the matter of life and death, of whether these themes actually survive in film, is a matter of whether they find natural transformations into the new medium, as in moving from life in the water to life in the air. The feature of the medium of film I have just emphasized suggests that acting for film is peculiarly related to the dimension of improvisation, that there is for film a natural dominance of improvisation over prediction, though of course each requires (its own form of) technique and preparation. (This dominance is a specification of a description I have given elsewhere concerning film's upheaval of certain emphases established in theater, namely, that for film there is in acting a natural ascendancy of actor over character. This matter of the film actor's individuality will come back.)

I was talking about the emphasis on the father-daughter relation in these dramas. The classical obligations of the father in romance are to provide his daughter's education and to protect her virginity. These obligations clearly go together; say they add up to suiting her for marriage. Prospero describes or enacts his faithfulness to these obligations toward Miranda with didactic explicitness. In comedies of remarriage the *fact* of virginity is evidently not what is at stake. Yet all the more, it seems to me, is the *concept* of virginity still at stake, or what the fact meant is at stake—something about the possession of chasteness or innocence, whatever one's physically determinable condition, and about whether one's valuable intactness, one's individual exclusiveness, has been well lost, that is, given over for something imaginably better, for the exclusiveness of a union. The overarching question of the comedies of remarriage is precisely the question of what constitutes a union, what makes these two into one, what binds, you may say what sanctifies in marriage. When is marriage an honorable estate? In raising this question these films imply not only that the church has lost its power over this authentication but that society as a whole cannot be granted it. In thus questioning the legitimacy of marriage, the question of the legitimacy of society is simultaneously raised, even allegorized.

The specific form authentication takes varies in the various films. All, however, invoke the continuing question of innocence, sometimes by asserting that innocence is not awarded once for all, but is always to be rewon (I take this to be a way of telling the story of *Adam's Rib*); sometimes by asking what it means to lose innocence, and even to ask how

the burden of chastity can be put off, or anyway shared (*The Philadelphia Story* is about the mystery in putting aside what we may call psychological virginity, an issue of Blake's poetry). In "Leopards in Connecticut" (Chapter 3) I argue that *Bringing Up Baby* contains, even consists of, an extended allegory of this question of sharing the loss of chastity; but a fully hilarious consciousness of the problem occurs right in the first of these films, with *It Happened One Night*, where the mutual happiness in the loss of virginity, or the happiness of mutuality, is said to require nothing less than what authorized the tumbling of the walls of Jericho, trumpet and all.

These parodies are themselves further parodied in *The Lady Eve*, as befits its mode, in its use of the "slimy snake" as an object of terror to the woman, conscious and unconscious—an object from which she awakens screaming, saying she dreamed about it all night. We are being clunked on the head with an invitation to read this through Freud. But the very psychological obviousness of it serves the narrative as an equivalent, or avatar, of the issue of innocence. It demonstrates that sexuality is for this sophisticated and forceful woman still a problem. No doubt this pokes fun at the older problem of virginity; what used to be a matter of cosmic public importance is now a private matter of what we call emotional difficulty. We live in reduced circumstances. But the obviousness also, I think, pokes fun at our sophistication, when that goes with a claim that we have grown up from ancient superstition. If virginity was a superficial and even idolatrous interpretation of the problem of innocence, with what has our sophistication replaced this idol?

One consequence of our sophistication is that if we are to continue to provide ourselves with the pleasure of romantic comedies, with this imagination of happiness, we are going to require narratives that do not depend on the physics of virginity but rather upon the metaphysics of innocence. In practice this poses two narrative requirements: that we discover, or recover, romance within the arena of marriage itself; and that a pair be capable of discussing with interest not merely the promises of love (topics of courtship—described by Harry in *The Lady Eve* as "whatever it is young people talk about") but the facts of marriage, which the facts of life they have shared require them to talk about. Comedies of remarriage typically contain not merely philosophical discussions of marriage and of romance, but metaphysical discussions of



*We may take the world she has in her hand as images in her crystal ball, but however we take it we are informed that this film knows itself to have been written and directed and photographed and edited.*

the concept that underlines both the classical problem of comedy and that of marriage, namely, the problem and the concept of identity—either in the form of what becomes of an individual, or of what has become of two individuals. On film this metaphysical issue is more explicitly conducted through the concept of difference—either the difference between men and women, or between innocence and experience, or between one person and another, or between one circumstance and another—all emblemized by the difference, hence the sameness, between a marriage and a remarriage.

We got into the topics of virginity and chastity or innocence in naming the father-magician's obligations. The second obligation was that of seeing to his daughter's education, and really we are already addressing this topic in registering the necessity for philosophical or metaphysical discussion in these film comedies, because the form the woman's

education takes in them is her subjection to fits of lecturing by the men in her life. For some reason Katharine Hepburn seems to inspire her men with the most ungovernable wishes to lecture her. Four of them take turns at it in *The Philadelphia Story*, and throughout *Adam's Rib* Spencer Tracy is intermittently on the verge of haranguing her. His major speeches take the form of discourses, one of them presenting his theory of marriage as a legal contract. Rosalind Russell does not escape this fate even from the Cary Grant of *His Girl Friday*. In *The Lady Eve*, the man's tendency to lecture nobly is treated to an exposure of pompous self-ignorance so relentless that we must wonder how either party will ever recover from it. (The woman describes this exposure as teaching a lesson, the spirit of which is evidently revenge; earlier she had saved him from what he calls "a terrible lesson your father almost taught me," namely, about games of so-called chance. Or was the lesson about disobeying this woman? She expressed particular impatience with him, quite maternal impatience, in saying, "You promised me you would not play cards with Harry again.")

Comic resolutions depend upon an acquisition in time of self-knowledge; say this is a matter of learning who you are. In classical romance this may be accomplished by learning the true story of your birth, where you come from, which amounts to learning the identity of your parents. In comedies of remarriage it requires learning, or accepting, your sexual identity, the acknowledgment of desire. Both forms of discovery are in service of the authorization or authentication of what is called a marriage. The women of our films listen to their lectures because they know they need to learn something further about themselves, or rather to undergo some change, or creation, even if no one knows how the knowledge and change are to arrive. (It turns out not to be clear what the obligations are for suiting oneself for remarriage.) In *It Happened One Night*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Awful Truth*, and *The Philadelphia Story* the woman imagines solving the problem of desire, or imagines that the problem will take care of itself, by marrying the opposite of the man she took first—an action variously described as the forgoing of adventure, and choosing on the rebound, and the buying of an annuity. Even if this man is not in fact older than her former husband, he is a father or senex figure, who must be overcome in order for the happiness of a comic resolution to happen. What our films show is that in the

world of film if the woman's real father exists, he is never on the side of this father figure but, on the contrary, actively supports the object of her true desire, that is, the man she is trying, and trying not, to leave.

If this acceptance by the father of the daughter's sexuality, which means of her separation or divorce from him, the achieving of her human equality with him, is part of the happiness of these women, of their high capacities for intelligence, wit, and freedom, it also invites a question about the limitations of these comedies, about what it is their laughter is seeking to cover. The question concerns the notable absence of the woman's mother in these comedies. (The apparent exceptions to this rule serve to prove it.) The mothers that do figure in them are, blatantly, the mothers of the senex figures, separation from whom would not be contemplated. No account of these comedies will be satisfactory that does not explain this absence, or avoidance. I offer three guesses about regions from which an explanation will have to be formed. Psychologically, or dramatically, the central relation of a mother and son has been the stuff of tragedy and melodrama rather than of comedy and romance. (Shaw's *Pygmalion*, explicitly about the creation of a woman, is a notable exception to this rule; here the hero and his mother are happy inspirations to one another. But no less notably, if the central man and woman of this play find their way together at the end, it is explicitly to occur without marriage and its special intimacies.) We seem to be telling ourselves that there is a closeness children may bear to the parent of the opposite sex which is enabling for a daughter but crippling for a son. Eve will say to Charles on the train, "I knew you would be both husband and father to me." She says it to deflate him for his insincerity and hypocrisy, but what she says is true, and it is the expression of a workable passion. Whereas no one would be apt to hope for happiness (given the options we still perceive) should a man say to his bride, "I knew you would be both wife and mother to me." Whether you take this as a biological or a historical destiny will depend on where you like your destinies from. Mythically, the absence of the mother continues the idea that the creation of the woman is the business of men; even, paradoxically, when the creation is that of the so-called new woman, the woman of equality. Here we seem to be telling ourselves that while there is, and is going to be, a new woman, as in the Renaissance there was a new man, nobody knows where she is to come from. The place she is to arrive is a mythological locale called America. Socially, it

seems to me, the absence of the woman's mother in these films of the thirties betokens a guilt, or anyway, puzzlement, toward the generation of women preceding the generation of the central women of our films—the generation that won the right to vote without at the same time winning the issues in terms of which voting mattered enough. They compromised to the verge of forgetting themselves. Their legacy is that their daughters will not have to settle. This legacy may be exhilarating, but it is also threatening.

Complementing the inability to imagine a mother for the woman is the inability to envision children for her, to imagine her as a mother. The absence of children in these films is a universal feature of them. What is its point? One might take its immediate function to be that of purifying the discussion, or the possibility, of divorce, which would be swamped by the presence of children. But what this means, on my view of these comedies, is that the absence of children further purifies the discussion of marriage. The direct implication is that while marriage may remain the authorization for having children, children are not an authentication of marriage. (This is an explicit and fundamental consequence of Milton's great tract on Divorce, a document I take to have intimate implications in the comedy of remarriage, as will emerge. By the way, the only claim among related comedies I know that a child is justified apart from marriage, even apart from any stable relationship with a man, merely on the ground that you bore it and want it and can make it happy, occurs in Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*, I suppose the last comedy to study remarriage.)

But the films of our genre are so emphatic in their avoidance of children for the central marriage that its point must be still more specific. In *His Girl Friday* the woman's choice to remarry is explicitly a decision to forgo children as well as to forgo the gaining of a mother-in-law. In *The Awful Truth*, what room there is for a child is amply occupied by a fox terrier. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Grant's life without Hepburn is said by him to be, or described as, one in which he might as well part with a boat he devoted a significant piece of his life to designing and building—named *True Love*—on the ground that it is only good for two people. He means that to mean that one person is one too few for it, but his words equally mean that three is one too many. In *Adam's Rib*, as the principal pair are preparing some leftovers for supper, having chosen to stay home alone on cook's night off, there is a knock at the door which

they know to be their wearisome childlike neighbor from across the hall. Tracy says to Hepburn, "Now remember, there's just enough for two." (I have not included George Stevens's *Woman of the Year* in my central group of comedies of remarriage because I do not find it the equal of the six or seven I take as definitive. But it speaks radically to the present issue. In it Spencer Tracy takes a child back to an orphanage from which Hepburn had adopted it out of concern for her public image as a leading woman. It is equally to the point that the older woman in this film, said by Hepburn always to have been her ideal, is not her mother but marries her father late in life, in the course of this film, in a scene that enables the younger woman to try for a reconciliation of her own.)

I do not think we are being told that marriages as happy as the ones in these films promise to be are necessarily incompatible with children, that the forgoing of children is the necessary price of the romance of marriage. But we are at least being told that children, if they appear, must appear as intruders. Then one's obligation would be to make them welcome, to make room for them, to make them be at home, hence to transform one's idea of home, showing them that they are not responsible for their parents' happiness, nor for their parents' unhappiness. This strikes me as a very reasonable basis on which to work out a future.

(It is perhaps worth making explicit that only when a period of culture is reached in which contraception is sufficiently effective and there is sufficient authorization for employing it conscientiously is it pertinent to speak of marriage quite in this way. There was a time—perhaps lived climactically in the generation of the absent mothers—when for a woman prepared to demand the kind of autonomy demanded by the women in our films, chastity, or anyway the absence of intimacy with men, would have presented itself as autonomy's clearest guarantee. The issue then would have been whether to have a recognized sexual existence at all, and hence, if marriage requires a sexual existence, whether to marry. But then if such a woman as dominates our films does choose to marry, risking children; if, that is, she requires a marriage in which children *can* be made welcome; then she is looking for a household economy which can undergo this transformation without her being *abandoned* to motherhood. This all the more for her puts the issue of marriage before the issue of children. The question of pregnancy is



surely one of the reasons that feminism is thought to lack a sense of fun. Yet each of the women of our films is who she is in part because of her sense of fun, a sense apart from which the man in her life does not wish to exist. The question becomes what the conditions are—and first the requirements upon the man—under which that sense of fun can be exercised. So the conditions of the comic become the question of our genre of comedy.)

The insistence of these films on the absence of children seems to me to say something more particular still. Almost without exception these films allow the principal pair to express the wish to be children again, or perhaps to be children together. In part this is a wish to make room for playfulness within the gravity of adulthood, in part it is a wish to be cared for first, and unconditionally (e.g., without sexual demands, though doubtless not without sexual favors). If it could be managed, it would turn the tables on time, making marriage the arena and the discovery of innocence. *Bringing Up Baby*, on my account, is the most elaborate working out of this wish, but the value of it is fully present, for example, in the repeated remark of *The Philadelphia Story* that the divorced pair “grew up together”; and when Spencer Tracy goes into his crying act at the close of *Adam’s Rib* (and we already know that their private names for one another are Pinky and Pinkie), he means to be demonstrating a difference or sameness between men and women, but he is simultaneously showing that he feels free to act like a child around this not obviously maternal woman. *The Awful Truth* ends with the pair dressed up in clothes too big for them, then being impersonated by two figurines doing a childish jig and disappearing together into a clock that might as well be a playhouse. This is in turn a further working out of the woman’s having in the previous sequence put on a song-and-dance act in which she at once impersonates a low-class nightclub performer and pretends to be the man’s sister, thus staking a final claim to have known him intimately forever.

The form taken by the search for childhood and innocence in *The Lady Eve* is given in that fantasy or romance the man tells the woman with its moral that he feels that they have known one another all their lives and hence that he has always loved her, by which he says he means that he has never loved anyone else. His attempt to repeat this story and to draw this moral again in Connecticut with Eve presents the most difficult moment of this comedy, the moment at which, as I put it

earlier, their behavior toward one another appears unforgivable, hence the moment at which we may doubt most completely that a happy end for them can be arrived at. Some such moment must be faced in any good comic narrative; Sturges carries the moment to virtuosic heights in this film. And the question we have known awaits us is whether he succeeds in bringing the consequences safely to earth, or in blowing them sky high, in any case whether the film arrives at something we will call happiness for each of this pair and whether we are happy to see them arrive there.

But just what is the difficulty of this most difficult moment? Presumably that in repeating his romantic vision to Eve the man loses all claim to sincerity, which was really all that has recommended him to our attention. His story was hard enough to listen to the first time, when he told it to Jean, but we went with it because the woman’s belief ratified it for us. On his repetition of it we do not know whether to be embarrassed more for him or for ourselves in being asked to witness this awful exposure. But how is his insincerity exposed? It is exposed only on the condition that we take him not to know or believe Eve and Jean to be one and the same woman. But must we so take him? I do not, of course, claim that he does know or believe that they are the same, that he is having to do with just one woman. But we have had continued evidence that he is in a trance (his word for this is “cockeyed”); and the fact of the matter is that he *is* saying his words to the same woman. What he says to Jean at the end is hard to deny: “It would never have happened except she looked so exactly like you.” Furthermore, the comic falls the man keeps taking are more Freudian clunks on the head to tell us—as in the case of her reaction to his snake—that genuine feeling has been aroused, and moreover the *same* feeling that had been aroused by the woman on the boat whom he encountered by falling and who will once more enter his recognition through that same route of access. So his inner state as well as his external senses tell him that she is the same person. (So maybe the horse stands not merely for a horse laugh but also for the man’s own natural instincts, but baffled by his efforts at domestication.) His intellectual denial of sameness accordingly lets him spiritually carve her in half, taking the good without the bad, the lady without the woman, the ideal without the reality, the richer without the poorer. He will be punished for this.

If we understand his perceptions and his feelings to be the same now

as then, then we must understand ourselves to be embarrassed not by the openness of his insincerity but by the helplessness of his sincerity. He desperately wishes to say these words of romantic innocence to just this woman, even as she desperately wished to hear them. (This was a piece of her education.) Yet knowing this she feeds him with the fruit of the tree of stupidity. For this she will be punished.

Note the confluence of conventions Sturges activates in making up his story about identical twins. He gets the narrative and psychological complexities of early romantic comedy, with its workings out of mis-identifications and climaxes of recognition, together with a succinct declaration of the nature of film by way of showing its distinction from theater. For the stage, a convention allows two people dramatized as identical twins to be treated as though they cannot be told apart. For the screen, where two characters can be played by one person, and even shown side by side (a fact enjoyed in films from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to *The Prisoner of Zenda*), a comparable convention allows a person to be treated as though he or she *can* be told, so to speak, apart from himself or herself, even where—and here Sturges rubs it in—she looks no different from one role to the other. If we had taken Charles (or to the extent that we take him) simply to believe that Eve was not the same woman as Jean, then (to that extent) we had been gulled as he had been—by the same story of romance; or anyway gulled at one remove from that story—by the film that suggests that he could simply believe such a story. (There are theories that believe so too, that assume that we do not know the difference between projections of things and real things and that therefore projections of reality are “illusions” of it.) How could we have believed this?

You might wish to give some further psychological explanation of the man here, but that would be to compete with him on his own level, for he has what he calls a piece of “psychology” that explains away to himself Eve’s strategy. I think the ambiguity about whether he does or does not believe in her difference from herself is as fixed for us as it is for him. What it is fixed by is the photograph Hopsy is shown in order to reveal to him the (criminal) identity of Jean, along with Harry and Gerald. Hopsy learns this identity not from the photograph itself but from reading the caption printed on its back. The information contained in the caption is, of course, not news to us; what is news for us is the photograph itself. As it fills the screen, slightly inflected so as



*They and their reflections are visible together to us, showing us that while these two can view the two worlds they move between, the one world from the conning perspective of the other, they may not occupy either wholly, or not at the same time (as with a thing and its filmed projection).*

clearly to resist coincidence with the photographic field of the moving film images, what we are shown, and are meant to recognize that we are being shown, is a photograph of Barbara Stanwyck, Charles Coburn, and Melville Cooper. Or at the very least or most we are shown a photograph of Barbara Stanwyck as Jean Harrington, of Charles Coburn as Harry, and of Melville Cooper as Gerald. (It would be just like Sturges were the object we are shown to be, what it seems to be, a production still from the set of this film.) What this presenting of the photograph means to me is that we have a problem of identification isomorphic with this man’s problem, one which lets his deluded or self-manufactured problem get a foothold with us, one which associates us with him in the position of gull. The relation between Eve and Jean is not an issue for us, but the nature of the relation of both Eve and Jean to Barbara

Stanwyck, or to some real woman called Barbara Stanwyck, is an issue for us—an issue in viewing films generally, but declared, acknowledged as an issue in this film by the way it situates the issue of identity.

It is a leading thought of mine about the film comedies of remarriage that they each have a way of acknowledging this issue, of harping on the identity of the real women cast in each of these films, and each by way of some doubling or splitting of her projected presence. I have already mentioned Irene Dunne's scene of impersonation in *The Awful Truth*; this bears comparison with Katharine Hepburn's gun moll routine in *Bringing Up Baby*, which refers back to it (by using the name "Jerry the Nipper"). From *It Happened One Night* through *The Philadelphia Story* to *Adam's Rib*, this splitting is investigated as one between the public and the private, where the public is typically symbolized by the presence of newspapers (or a news magazine)—a major iconographical or allegorical item in virtually every one of the films of our genre. It seems that film, in contrast to the publicity of newspapers, symbolizes the realm of privacy. In *Adam's Rib* this symbolism is most explicitly worked out as a split or doubling between what happens during the day and what happens at night, which amounts to a split or doubling between reality and something else, call it dreaming. The idea of the privacy of film is both confirmed and denied in *Adam's Rib*, say it is puzzled, by the showing on the first night of a home movie. (In another of George Stevens's films adjacent to our genre, *Talk of the Town*, the mode in which a copy of a newspaper is presented in order to reveal a hero's identity at the same time reveals newspapers to be things full of borscht. Again, by the way, this moment in which a front-page photo of a wanted man is the object of concern to two men and a woman about to have a meal together must be a reference to a moment in Hitchcock's *39 Steps*. We have here, I believe, one genre claiming its relationship to another.)

From the first of the major films of remarriage, *It Happened One Night*, the genre is in possession of the knowledge that the split or doubling is between civilization and eros. Newspapers are a medium of scandal, but what they mean by erotic scandal consists of triangles, crimes of passion, sensational marriages, and ugly divorces. What our films suggest is that the scandal is love itself, true love; and that while it is the nature of the erotic to form a stumbling block to a reasonable, civilized

existence, call it the political, human happiness nevertheless goes on demanding satisfaction in both realms. This is in effect the terrible lesson Jean/Eve teaches Hopsy/Charles. When she vows to her father that she is going to be everything the man wants her to be, she means it as a blessing to them both. When she is treated to his treacherous lack of trust, or his overtrust in the wrong thing, the public thing, she turns the blessing into a curse. As if to say: Even after you know our passion for one another, and our fun together, you are still a sucker for romance and cannot acknowledge that passion may have a past of flesh and blood; very well, I'll show you the reality of your ideal; I'll give you a new perspective in Connecticut; I'll turn the night into an endless day for you. You refused to believe in me earlier, now I'll give you something you will feel compelled to believe; you thought you believed the worst about me before, here is something you will find worse. She is gambling, carrying out her instruction the night of their honeymoon on the train, that he will take the bait that makes the taker mad. Had he found a sense of humor to outlast his credulity and her anger, he would be able to charge her with stalling on her wedding night by putting up a barrier, between her and her husband, of a thousand and one bawdy tales. The possibility that she is stalling further compromises the purity of the lesson she thinks she is teaching, makes it even funnier and, if possible, even uglier.

It is not news for men to try, as Thoreau puts it, to walk in the direction of their dreams, to join the thoughts of day and night, of the public and the private, to pursue happiness. Nor is it news that this will require a revolution, of the social or of the individual constitution, or both. What is news is the acknowledgment that a woman might attempt this direction, even that a man and a woman might try it together and call *that* the conjugal. (It is roughly what Emerson did call that; but then, as you would expect, he did not expect to find it between real men and women.) For this we require a new creation of woman, call it a creation of the new woman; and what the problems of identification broached in these films seem to my mind to suggest is that this creation is a metaphysical enterprise, exacting a reconception of the world. How could it not? It is a new step in the creation of the human. The happiness in these comedies is honorable because they raise the right issues; they end in undermining and in madcap and in headaches because there is, as yet at least, no envisioned settlement for these issues.

How does the film at hand end? How can any happiness at all be found in this revenge comedy?

Before drawing to its, and closer to our, conclusion, I note the most daring declaration of this film's awareness of itself, of its existence as a film. This comes by way of its virtual identification of the images seen on the screen with the images seen in a mirror. One plausible understanding of our view as Jean holds her hand mirror up to nature—or to society—and looks surreptitiously at what is behind her is that we are looking through the viewfinder of a camera. In that case this film is claiming that the objects it presents to us have as much independent physical reality as the objects reflected in a mirror, namely, full independent physical reality. Their psychological independence is a further matter, however, since we are shown Jean creating their inner lives for us, putting words into their mouths ("Haven't we met some place before? Aren't you the Herman Fishman I went to the Louisville Manual Training School with? You aren't?"), and blocking their movements for them ("Look a little to your left, bookworm. A little further. There!"), and evaluating their performances ("Holy smoke, the dropped kerchief!"). We may take the world she has in her hand as images in her crystal ball, but however we take it we are informed that this film knows itself to have been written and directed and photographed and edited. (Each of our films shows its possession of this knowledge of itself. *The Lady Eve* merely insists upon it most persistently.) That the woman is some kind of stand-in for the role of director fits our understanding that the man, the sucker, is a stand-in for the role of audience. As this surrogate she informs us openly that the attitude the film begins with is one of cynicism or skepticism, earned by brilliance, and that she is fully capable of being thus open and yet tripping us up so that we are brought from our privacy onto her ground, where her control of us will be all but complete. Frye notes that the inclusion of some event particularly hard to believe is a common feature of Shakespeare's comedy, as if placed there to exact the greatest effort from his dramatic powers and from his audience's imagination. And it is well recognized that the final two of Shakespeare's romances, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, most clearly and repeatedly give consciousness to their own artifice, that they are plays with casts, as if no responsibility of art shall go unacknowledged. Then it may be in their awareness of themselves, their responsi-

bility for themselves, that the films of remarriage most deeply declare, and earn, their allegiance to Shakespearean romance.

Further discussion of the significance of the phenomenon of mirroring in this film would have to take up the passage in which, the morning after Jean's triumph over her father at cards ("Know any more games, Harry?") and her ensuing receipt of Hopsy's proposal on the bow of the ship, she and her father begin an interview (as she is seated before the standing dressing mirrors in her stateroom and her father enters from the far door behind her, reflected in the mirror, and walks toward his reflection across the room to her) looking at one another in the mirror, speaking to each other's reflection first, communicating through the looking glass. What does this mean in this context? The mood is one of sober, even pained, sincerity and tenderness between them, as though the reflection of mirrors is not to be ceded to the realm of appearances but provides an access, or image, of self-reflection and thoughtfulness, of a due awareness of the world's awareness of you, hence of the other side of its reality to you. (The conjunction of mirrors with moments of sincerity, in a world of fashion and gossip, occurs notably in *Rules of the Game*.) In this interview the father warns his daughter that her admirer might not respond well to the truth about her and her father's lives: "You are going to tell him about us, aren't you?" She replies that a man who couldn't accept the truth wouldn't be much of a man. But all the time they and their reflections are visible together to us, showing us that while these two can view the two worlds they move between, the one world from the conning perspective of the other, they may not occupy either wholly, or not at the same time (as with a thing and its filmed projection). Here the camera especially ponders the meaning of a point of view, seeing these people and seeing what these people see at one and the same time, a feat they have to forgo in order to stand face to face.

One more preliminary to a conclusion, again having to do with fathers and movies and reflections that declare the presence (or distance) of real people. The opening of the shift to Connecticut discovers and follows Eugene Palette walking down a long flight of period stairs as he sings, thoughtfully, "Come landlord fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over. For tonight we'll merry merry be, tomorrow we'll be sober." Criticism is being challenged to net in mere words the hilarity, the sur-

realism, the dream perfection of these juxtapositions; of its being just this human being doing just these things in just this setting. Here is Preston Sturges glorying in the modes of conjunction specific to film, and some specific to Hollywood, and indeed to America, making sure that we know that he knows what he is doing. The pivot of these conjunctions is that voice, declared by, of all things, singing, which declares the presence (by absence) of the only man who could possess it, call him Eugene Palette, who brings with him, on that Tudorish staircase singing that Elizabethanish ditty, the world of Robin Hood in which he was (or perhaps is) Friar Tuck. (Melville Cooper was the Sherriff of Nottingham in the same production.) The existence of this man in that part no more and no less proves the irresponsibility and resourcefulness of Hollywood than the presence of Tudor mansions just north of New York City proves or disproves the irresponsibility and resourcefulness of American captains of business (though in both cases these presences bespeak a particular set of fantasies). By the time this ale merchant finishes his drinking song and his descent into the world, answers a telephone from which he learns that there is to be a party at his house that night, hangs up the receiver and responds by delivering an observation—"Nut house"—to no one in particular, casting a glance at his surroundings offscreen, we can sense that he is speaking for Sturges and that what he is looking at offscreen is a Hollywood sound stage. This memorable establishment of the hero's father as a character in possession of an inner life of independent judgment prepares him for a decisive function in the conclusion to be drawn by this film.

Now, how can this woman accept back her trusting/untrusting man, after what she has done to him? How can she hope for happiness with him, who at the end still does not know what has happened to him, hope that with him all will be well that ends well? She had said early on that he's touched something in her heart, and later on she confesses this awful yen for him. This combination of tenderness and sensuality is just what the doctor ordered for grown-up love in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. This text also contains, near its conclusion, a sentence that may stand as the motto for the entire genre of remarriage: "The finding of an object is in fact the refinding of it." But how does this woman work her way back to it? No doubt the man's very innocence, the completeness with which this mug appreciates her, the fervor

as well as the sappy deliberateness with which he twice appeals to her to find an innocent past together, the very fact that he is what her father calls "as fine a specimen of the sucker sapiens as it has been my fortune to see"; no doubt all this, from being an object of her kidding, and of her scorn, finally elicits again her response in kind. And my question is, how?

I take the answer to be given in the man's father's appreciation of her (and the feeling is mutual) as he conveys his son's refusal to meet her sole condition for agreeing to divorce, that he come to her and ask her to be free. Here is a further thematic coincidence with *The Tempest*. (And what does "ask me to be free" mean? Ask me to let him go?; or, Ask me to let myself be free?) The father tells her he thought it was a pretty fair offer and says he thinks she is a sucker to make it. The father's lawyers are aghast at this businessman's sudden artlessness. Harry and Gerald are aghast at this metamorphosis of artist into sucker. She has become what the man is, a member of his species, the sucker sapiens, the wise fool; she has found what Katharine Hepburn at the end of *The Philadelphia Story* calls a human being; she has created herself, turned herself, not without some help, into a woman. She has done it by laying aside her art, call it her artifice; and in her long and passionate declaration to the man as she shuts them behind her cabin door, she virtually repeats his old story back to him, with the ending: "Don't you know I've waited all my life for you, you mug?"—thus confessing herself to be a mug. This concludes her education.

*Mug* is almost the last word we hear in the film, as it is one of the first, when her father responds to one of her professional questions by saying, with unquestionable wisdom, "A mug is a mug in everything." Her answer at the end of the film is, in effect: If to be at one with humanity is to be a mug, then as E. M. Forster almost put it, better a mug of the confidence game than a mug of the lack of confidence game, a mug of magic, of exemption. I should, of course, like to say that what she gets in return is another magic, not of control, but of reciprocity. But then you would think me a romantic.

But the word *mug* is not quite the last. The last is reserved for the character actually named a mug by the author of the film, anyway named a diminutive or a diminished mug: Mugsy (William Demarest). He has been remorselessly present from the beginning, but at the last

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possible moment he is expelled (fictionally, not cinematically, not in the same way). His provenance is clear enough. He is the melancholy that comedy is meant to overcome, the mood Frye notes as forming the opening of at least five of Shakespeare's comedies. This film further specifies this mood as the creature of suspicion and literalness. I think of him privately as a certain kind of philosophical critic, almost the thing Iago describes himself to be—"nothing if not critical." And faced with romantic flights of fantasy, with interpretations of feeling and conduct that make up dreamworlds of eternal and innocent love, who is there who will deny the truth of what Mugsy—the spirit of negativity—says?: Positively the same dame.