

“A ROOM AND THE RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE:”  
THE IDEOLOGY OF ROMANTIC COMEDY IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD  
CINEMA

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Screwball comedy was a unique subgenre of romantic comedy occurring in American film of the 1930s and 40s, with an emphasis on fast-paced, witty dialogue, zany physical humor, and strong female characters. This dissertation examines the origins of screwball comedy in many subgenres of romantic comedy in the 1920s and 1930s, including slapstick, sophisticated comedies, flapper comedies, sentimental comedies, and anarchic pre-Code comedies, with particular focus on the way women are represented in these comedies. By building off theories of comedy and feminist film historiography, this dissertation argues for the feminist potential of these films, as their heroines create a filmic world where gender equality is possible, before studying the decline of screwball comedy with the reification of gender roles during World War II.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: "AN EMPTY ROOM AND THE RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE:" THE IDEOLOGY OF ROMANTIC COMEDY IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

At the beginning of the screwball comedy *My Man Godfrey* (1936), two wealthy men in tuxedos speak at an elegant hotel bar while, in the background, socialites bustle around with random objects—bicycles, balloons, even a goat—all as part of a scavenger hunt. One of the men at the bar says, “This place slightly resembles an insane asylum.” The other replies, “Well, all you need to start an asylum is an empty room and the right kind of people.” The joke is central to the zany humor of the screwball genre: What behavior is sane or insane and who gets to decide? The excess consumption of the upper class is shown to be ridiculous and often cruel. But when a ditzy heiress seeks out a forgotten man<sup>1</sup> for the scavenger hunt, he helps her see the error of her ways. She says: “I’ve decided I don’t want to play any more games with human beings as objects. It’s kind of sordid when you think of it, I mean when you think it over.” She falls in love with him, in keeping with romantic comedy tropes, and, by the end of the film, they marry at the ritzy new nightclub he has built to employ other forgotten men. Despite her childish character, the heroine has asserted her agency and control to get what she wants, and despite the stark economic inequality of the era, the hero has worked to improve life for himself and others. In this way, *My Man Godfrey* works to criticize contemporary gender and class roles, without radically critiquing the underlying ideologies of heterosexual romance and capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the period reference for a homeless person.



**Figure 1.1** Blake (Selmer Jackson) and Bullock (Eugene Pallette) discuss insane asylums in *My Man Godfrey* (1936).

But why was romance the (cinematic) answer to societal divisions? And why were women depicted so strongly in these films at this particular moment? My dissertation examines the ideology and role of women in romantic comedy films of the United States during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, during which time we see the development and success of a variety of subgenres, including slapstick, sophisticated comedy, comedy of remarriage, flapper comedy, sentimental comedy, and, of course, screwball comedy. This thirty-year period is significant for two reasons: first, it was during this time that the film industry became what we know today, as the star system, genres, and an oligopoly of studios crystalized; second, this was a time of major social change, particularly for women, from the flapper feminism of the 1920s through the turmoil of the Great Depression and World War II. As a popular and widespread mass medium, cinema both

depicted and coped with modernity during this tumultuous time, and women often were at the center of this depiction, as characters, consumers, and filmmakers. Although the majority of scholars working on these decades draw clear distinctions between the silent and sound eras, I seek in this dissertation to blur the lines around this technical, industrial and cultural shift.

My research focuses on American studio films, while still recognizing and integrating the significant influence and talent of "foreign" films and filmmakers in this era. American film is no more worthy of research than any other cinema, but because of the economic power of the U.S. and the cultural influence of its media, it is a critical site for analysis. Because I am looking at commercial products of mainstream ideology, which were casually racist, sexist, and homophobic in this time period, it is important to acknowledge the distinct and deplorable lack of diverse representation in the films I analyze. Yet, as is often the case, contradictions can easily be found inherent to these films. For example, jazz music and dance were a crucial part of the production of flapper culture and the feminism of white women in 1920s media, yet these were co-opted from black culture (Landay "The Flapper Film" 232). Although not the explicit focus on this dissertation, the way in which the screwball genre actively played with gender roles, usually portraying dominate women and passive men, could also be read as a kind of queerness.<sup>2</sup> This is all to say, the aim of my research is not to excuse or erase the problems of the past but rather to look for cracks in otherwise oppressive ideologies,

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<sup>2</sup> The preeminent screwball comedy, *Bringing Up Baby*, contains an oft-analyzed line said by Cary Grant's character when asked to explain why he's wearing a woman's negligée: "I've just gone gay all of a sudden!" (Russo 47). A queer reading of screwball is outside the purview of this dissertation. For an introduction to queer representation in film of the 1930s see: Lugowski, David M. "Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood's Production Code." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1999, pp. 3–35.

specifically through elements that were somewhat more easily interrogated in mainstream media, namely gender and class.

As noted in the title, my dissertation also analyzes what I call “romantic ideology.” The term ideology can be utilized in a lot of different ways. In criticism, it refers to an often unconscious body of ideas that make up collective social values. Dominant ideology can easily be oppressive because it values respecting authority, not questioning the status quo, etc. Similarly, ideology around love (romantic ideology) in American society, as often seen in the romantic comedy genre, values heterosexuality and reproduction, monogamy and marriage, and unequal, normative gender roles. Genre films often endorse dominant ideology through their codification, yet “[o]ften genre movies are conflicted in their ideological view, their more critical aspirations in tension with the constraints of generic convention,” (Grant 15). The screwball subgenre of romantic comedy creates this tension by playing with ideology. On the one hand, the couples are always heterosexual; on the other hand, they typically have reversed gender roles, with the woman dominant and the man passive. The zany nature of screwball comedy makes a farce of institutions respected by ideology like capitalism and patriarchy. The figure of the wealthy father is often mocked, as in *Easy Living* (1937), where a banker’s impulsive decision to throw a fur coat off the roof of his penthouse nearly destroys the stock market again. My project analyses the tension between dominant ideology and a more progressive, critical ideology found within screwball comedy.

### ***Feminist Comedy Figures***

My work is heavily influenced by feminist comedy scholars like Kathleen Karlyn and Lori Landay, who conceived of the important concepts of the unruly woman and the

female trickster, respectively. The unruly woman, as defined by Karlyn, is “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of the carnival” (Karlyn 10). Landay's female trickster, meanwhile, appears as a heroine in mass media who “call our attention to where we draw lines that separate what is appropriate and shocking, possible and impossible [...] creating room where others find only restriction” (Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women*, xi). Neither figure is necessarily tied to a heterosexual romance plot, but in a screwball comedy, this is precisely what happens. What is the ideological import of a film in which an inherently transgressive figure is rooted in an inherently normative paradigm? This dissertation therefore examines not only comic heroines but also how they operated through and within the broader genre of romantic comedy in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s across slapstick and screwball, silent and sound, reflecting a world in which cultural norms around gender and sexuality rapidly changed with modernity, as women voted, worked, and strove for companionate marriages. Ultimately, I argue that incorporating the unruly woman or female trickster into a heterosexual romance was the way in which the ideal of romantic love survived this particular period of chaotic modernity while offering discursive support to larger ideals of democracy and social union, particularly during the Great Depression.

### ***On Screwball As (Sub)Genre***

Any study of a genre must begin with its delineation, but assigning firm generic boundaries is notoriously difficult, as many Hollywood films blend genres and even the most formulaic of genres change over time. Janet Staiger goes so far as to argue that genres are never “pure,” and warns against the historicist fallacy which happens “when a

subjective order visible in the present is mapped onto the past and then assumed to be the order visible in the past” (204). Instead, she urges genre scholars to “analyze the social, cultural, and political implications of pattern mixing” (215). In other words, it is important to consider how and why studios combined elements of different genres to appeal to a vast audience, a relevant example being the ubiquity of a heterosexual romantic subplot across a variety of Hollywood films (208). However, rather than simple taxonomy, studying a genre presents a unique insight into the intersecting interests of film producers and consumers. Comedy within this rubric is then best understood as a mode, “a manner of presentation,” instead of a genre (*King Film Comedy 2*). This explains how comedy can appear and be activated across many film genres from the western to horror. Romance is also considered a mode (*Glitre 10*). In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson note that 95% of their surveyed films included romance. They argue that the ubiquity of heterosexual love continues “traditions stemming from chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel, and the American melodrama” (16). These traditions support goal-oriented characters in Hollywood narratives that reflect “an ideology of American individualism and enterprise” (15). Thus, the ubiquity of romance speaks to its centrality in mainstream ideology and entertainment. A romantic comedy can best be defined as a genre “in which the development of romance leads to comic situations” (Grindon 1). To further delineate the genre, I argue that the courtship and union of a couple should be pivotal to the film’s primary conflict and resolution.

Screwball comedies, in both popular and academic accounts, are most commonly seen as a cycle or subgenre of romantic comedy film, traditionally historically defined as

running from roughly the mid-1930s to the early 1940s (Grindon 31), though with an occasional, deliberately nostalgic callback, like Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Peter Bogdanovich's *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), and Bharat Nalluri's *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (2008). Wes Gehring defines screwball comedy as "the old 'boy-meets-girl' formula turned topsy-turvy, [presenting] the eccentric, female-dominated courtship of an upper-class couple"; in short, "a parody of romantic comedy" ("Screwball Comedy" 44-5). Screwball comedies are generically characterized by frantic pacing, quick dialogue, eccentric characters, and physical humor (McDonald 18-20). For Hollywood cinephiles, screwball is often looked upon with pleasurable nostalgia, particularly canonical titles such as *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940).

Screwball comedy has also been described as a cycle, or a series of similar films produced during a limited period of time, often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow" (Grindon 25). The concept of cycles is immensely useful for an analysis of romantic comedy because generic changes are often directly linked to social changes in sexual mores. For example, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, led to so called neurotic or radical romantic comedies of the 1970s, as films like *Annie Hall* (1977) challenged the reality of "true love" and monogamy (McDonald 73). However, because I am troubling the historic boundaries of the screwball comedy, by examining films produced well before *It Happened One Night*, a film often denoted as the benchmark, I will use the term subgenre rather than cycle for this project.

From a feminist perspective, I am interested in the narrative and aesthetic dominance of female characters seen across the screwball subgenre, especially its

centrality in the romantic relationship between the lead characters. Where did this comic trope of women dominating romantic relationships come from, why was it so central to screwball films, and where did it go? By studying the roots of the subgenre, which I will argue began in the early 1920s, and its historical context, I analyze the ideology operating around and through love and gender within the rise of modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.

### *Histories and Theories of Laughter and Comedy*

From Aristotle to Bergson, philosophers have long been interested in laughter. Perhaps this is because laughter and love are seen as central to what makes us human. Aristotle argued this by claiming only humans laugh (Provine 75).<sup>3</sup> There are three main philosophical theories as to why we laugh (Morreall 2-3). First, that we laugh when we feel superior to people, like when someone falls or says something embarrassing. Second, that we laugh in relief after a moment of tension, as in classic joke where the set up builds a semi-serious situation and the punchline makes it ridiculous. Third, that we laugh when we perceive a sudden, harmless incongruity. For example, I might laugh to find my car keys in the refrigerator, but not if I found a carton of milk (which wouldn't be incongruous) or a mannequin head (which would be creepy rather than funny). I find incongruity theory most useful for a larger critique of comic film, particularly screwball, as it provides a convincing theoretical framework to the subgenre's main trope (people acting screwy) and leads to analysis. Namely, what do we find incongruous and why, particularly around issues of gender, relationships, and sexuality?

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<sup>3</sup> Modern science shows this isn't true. Apes and rats laugh, though it sounds quite different from human laughter (Provine 75-76, 126).



When applied to a mode, laughter has also been subject to extensive analysis in the form of comedy. In his famous critical reading of comic plays from Ancient Greece, Northrop Frye argues that the “New Comedy,” in which “a young man wants a young woman, [but] his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will,” is the basis of most comedy, even today. This simple conflict and resolution represents a shift from one society to another (as represented by a father and son’s opposing desire), and reaffirms social connection by bringing the characters (and the audience) together in the belief that “a happy ending is [as] ‘this should be,’” (Frye 167).

Stanley Cavell further builds upon Frye’s theory to encompass screwball comedies of the 30s and 40s, defining them as “comedies of remarriage,” in which “the drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*” (2, author’s italics). What is missing from Cavell’s critique, however, is a careful examination of the historical context in which this group of films was originally conceived, produced, and exhibited. Cavell argues that the heroines of these comedies of remarriage are the daughters of the suffragette generation, realizing the next level of feminism. (17). I disagree with Cavell for two reasons. First, the narrative element of remarriage can be found in romantic comedy films before the 1930s. Second, many romantic comedy films from the 1930s do not contain a remarriage plot. What unites and distinguishes screwball films is the way in which the central couples are presented as equals, and that their zany desires reshape the world for the better.

Earlier comedies of remarriage can be found in Cecille B. DeMille-style "sophisticated" silent comedies such as *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920) (Vermillion

359). Though *Why Change Your Wife?* circles around the issue of divorce and remarriage like the screwball comedy *The Awful Truth* (1937), the films have vastly different styles of comedy. Any marital unhappiness in *The Awful Truth* is merely presented as a squabble, an excuse for fast-paced witty dialogue, with the couple's divorce trial centering around the humor of letting their dog decide who gets custody. I argue that the subgenre's definition is less determined by the plot structure—a separation and remarriage (whether literal or figurative), and more instead, its mode and style of humor, in which a man and woman are not only love interests but comedic equals in terms of dialogue, gags, and character motivation. While a romantic subplot is as ubiquitous in comedy as it is across other Classical Hollywood genres, and the desire for companionate love comes along for the modernity ride, screwball is truly unique in the history of American commercial cinema in its ability to envision a filmic world of where gender equality can exist within a romantic relationship.

### ***Chapter Outlines***

As the main structure of this dissertation is historical, its organization will be chronological. I build off theorization of the transitional era, that between 1908 and 1917, “cinema initiated the visual grammar and industrial structures it would retain well into the post-World War II era [...gaining] formal complexity as codes of continuity editing and narrative storytelling developed,” (Keil and Stamp 1). It is in this context that I begin, in 1920, a year which saw both the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment (which gave women the right to vote) and the first onscreen portrayal of an important character trope of modern comedic femininity, the flapper, with the Olive Thomas film, *The Flapper*. I trace efficacious threads from silent-era romantic comedies, which would come to

influence the screwball subgenre, through four films of the period, while also analyzing how the heroines of these films perform to articulate female desire while negotiating their gendered identity.

With *The Extra Girl* (1923), a vehicle for Keystone alum Mabel Normand, this chapter examines the way slapstick comedy changed as it adapted to a longer promotable format: the feature length film. Using this reflexive film about an aspiring actress played by a very famous actress, I analyze the ways in which mass culture (specifically cinema) reflected on its own shaping of female desire and romantic ideology, while also analyzing how a successful comedienne managed her persona as she transitioned from short to feature-length films.

Next, I examine the only non-Hollywood film in this project, the German film, *The Wildcat* (1921). As an early film by Ernst Lubitsch, who would go on to be a critically and commercially successful director of romantic comedies in Hollywood in the 1930s, *The Wildcat* is a farcical comedy with many important tropes that would later be closely associated with screwball comedy. With this earlier film, one of the last Lubitsch made in Germany, I argue for the influence of European films on Hollywood comedies and the emergence of a zany aesthetic, where the characters are not only eccentric but exist in a fantastical world, foreshadowing the primary screwball milieu. In *The Wildcat*, the female lead is a bandit scraping by in the mountains, when she falls in love with a civilized lieutenant. This leads to a comic impersonation of a wealthy lady at a drunken party, as she struggles with her class, demeanor, and appearance and considers what she truly wants.

With *Her Sister from Paris* (1925), an American comedy of remarriage, I foreground Constance Talmadge, a popular star whose persona was largely built on her romantic comedies. In this film, the heroine impersonates her alluring twin sister in attempt to revive her troubled marriage, humorously resolving issues of adultery, divorce, and marital unhappiness.

Finally, with *Exit Smiling* (1926), the chapter highlights the importance of writing and dialogue in the romantic comedy genre, even before sound technology specifically required it. The satirical film also demonstrates the decline of sentiment in films of the 1920s, eventually leading to the more parodic and absurd style seen in screwball comedies. Though *Exit Smiling* explicitly mocks melodrama, it self-consciously reworks the trope of “the vamp”—an evil woman with predatory sexuality—into an empowered way for a comedienne to actively assert her sexuality. All four silent films in this chapter use gags and plot structures that prefigure screwball comedy, while also utilizing these comic devices to reflect on, and sometimes challenge, societal ideas of how women should behave, what they should want, and who they should love and why.

The third chapter covers 1927 to 1932, beginning with the commercial introduction of synchronized sound for feature-length films and ending with the industry adoption of the Production or Hays Code, which began an era of active self-censorship in Hollywood. It was also in 1934 that *It Happened One Night* and *Twentieth Century* were released. These two films are traditionally denoted by both popular and critical scholars as the beginning of the screwball era (Gehring *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy* 11). Scott Eyman has called the first half of this period (1926–1930) the “talkie revolution” referring to the transition to sound technology (*The Speed of Sound* 1), while the latter

half (1930–1934) has been called the “Pre-Code” era, referring to a period of loose censorship in film before the Hays Code (Doherty 2). I challenge this industry-centric separation by examining films from both of these brief eras, linking the two time periods into what I call the “Liminal Era.” By identifying congruence across films regardless of synchronization or the labors of the PCA, within the romantic comedy genre, I argue for a continuum that included but also went beyond technology and censorship, as the United States entered the Great Depression, and ideals of comedy and femininity changed.

I begin this argument by looking at *Spite Marriage* (1929), Buster Keaton’s last silent film and one of his first under contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Studios. As with *The Extra Girl*, which came out nearly a decade earlier, *Spite Marriage* represents a decisive shift in the slapstick genre. In his book *Hokum! - The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture*, Rob King has argued that the “cuckoo style” of slapstick comedy “sustained a shadow existence as means of class characterization in the Depression-era screwball style, for which absurdism became a fictive marker of upper-class lifestyles” (53-54). Yet, *Spite Marriage* is not only a classic Keaton slapstick, it is also a comedy of remarriage with elements of mistaken identity, class critique, and physical comedy found in the screwball genre. I analyze this film as a link between slapstick and screwball, showing how changing ideas of marriage and gender necessarily changed the characters and narratives of romantic comedies.

The second film of this chapter that I examine is *Why Be Good?* (1929), a vehicle for popular actress Colleen Moore, who, along with Clara Bow, had a vivacious flapper persona that shaped modern femininity. In *Why Be Good?*, Moore’s character explicitly calls out double standards of sexual behavior for men and women as she pursues a cross-

class romance with her boss's son. Not only is this flapper comedy cycle rich for feminist critique, it also foreshadows the screwball subgenre with active female characters who comedically drive their narratives with their own desires for love and equality.

The final film I analyze for the third chapter is the only one in which the heroine is arguably not the center of the film's romance. *Reducing* (1931) follows a rural, working-class mother (Marie Dressler) as she moves her family to the city to live with her wealthy sister (Polly Moran). Dressler and Moran were both slapstick alumnae whose careers enjoyed a resurgence during the transition to sound, especially for Dressler, who balanced comedy and pathos in her maternal characters. Recent work has been done to recover Dressler's career. The performer was at one point more popular than Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo but had been somewhat forgotten by history (Petro 15). For my appraisal of *Reducing* and Dressler's stardom, I examine the shift away from flapper comedy, in which the heroine could be older and more mature than the youthful flapper and where the dynamic of a family gained more importance in the humor of a screwball film. Dressler and Moran made several popular comedies for MGM in the early 1930s that have been categorized as "sentimental" or "folksy" comedies (Balio 258). I argue, however, that these films balanced the anarchic comedies of the time (such as those of Mae West or the Marx Brothers) to reaffirm values of family and friendship during hard times, which would pave the way for screwball comedy's blend of zany humor and social reunification.

In the fourth chapter, the dissertation arrives at screwball proper, but I purposefully engage with a set of films that have received less generic attention. *The Good Fairy* (1935), with a semi-fantastical aesthetic and European setting draws from

sophisticated comedy, but more importantly reimagines the gold-digger, a subversive feminist figure in Pre-Code cinema, into the prosocial figure of the screwball heroine. Like flapper heroines before her, the screwball comedienne knew how to “get her man,” but her motivations are explicitly disconnected from material gain. In *The Good Fairy*, for example, the main character, a poor theater usher, decides to enter an affair with a wealthy man in order to redistribute the money to those in need.

Next, I assay *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936) for its depiction of class and gender. The film is remarkable for how clearly it balances the main couple in terms of their agency and power within the narrative. In the first half, the male love interest meddles in the heroine’s life in an attempt to “free” her from the repressive social norms of her conservative hometown. In the second half, they switch roles and she attempts to “free” him from the restraints of his upper-class life. With this film, a quintessential, if rarely discussed, screwball, I argue for the inherent feminist potential of the genre, and its ability to create a world where gender equality and love based on friendship can narratively exist.

Finally, I discuss *The More the Merrier* (1943), a popular wartime comedy that I argue signals the decline of the screwball genre. *The More the Merrier* seems like a standard screwball comedy, with comic chaos, eccentric characters, and physical humor. However, in this film, the patriarchal character is the figure of benevolent chaos instead of the heroine, negating the subversive potential the subgenre had previously shown. I argue this shift ties to a changing zeitgeist, where the critique of the status quo during films of the Great Depression gave way to support and faith in the powers that be, namely

the government, during World War II. Wartime, also divided the labor performed by men and women, which reified gender roles.

All the films in this dissertation have been chosen to both expand and study the subgenre, as they have received little scholarly or popular attention. This dissertation therefore not only recovers the feminist work of past filmmakers, but also creates a more historically nuanced picture of the range of screwball comedy's meanings to contemporary audiences.

In the conclusion, I summarize the history building up to screwball comedy and the subgenre's ideological importance, before briefly considering how and why modern romantic comedies, particularly those of Judd Apatow, differ from screwball and what that says about our current cultural constructions of companionate love. I argue that Apatow-style comedies frame the main character's growth as a struggle to mature, thus the love interest and the eventual relationship becomes a marker of maturity and a reward for the main character, not pleasurable in and of itself. In this way, our modern romantic comedy cycle is ideologically less progressive than screwball comedy, in which the pursuit of individual happiness through a romantic relationship despite social mores brings together a world divided by class. Still, some contemporary films, like *Booksmart* (2019), do harken back to screwball comedy by prioritizing the pursuit of female pleasure over "maturity."

Though these chapters chronologically build up to the so-called screwball era, my critical intent is not teleological. Rather, I examine the ways in which romantic comedy in the first few decades of Classical Hollywood traverse modernized love and sex in ways that create a framework for our current understanding of these issues. While much



excellent work has been done recently in regards to a more accurate and feminist historiography, recovering female filmmakers<sup>4</sup> and their contributions to cinematic history, my intent is to prioritize the genre of romantic comedy more so than specific comediennes, to examine cultural rather than individual mediations and representations of gender, sexuality, and desire.

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<sup>4</sup> Meaning not only directors, but writers, performers, etc.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PROBLEM WITH PLEASURE: THE ROOTS OF SCREWBALL COMEDY, 1920-1926

A 1920 advertisement for “ComedyArt Pictures” in *The Moving Picture World* described the uniqueness of their films by saying “[Our] comedies are refreshing. They are NOT all matrimonial troubles, NOT all newlywed mixups [sic], NOT all slapstick, nor all scantily-clad women” (Special Pictures Corporation 1585), which, in its rhetorical rejection, signals many of the primary tropes and themes of comedy at that moment. Divorce rates in the United States had nearly doubled from 1910 to 1920, as the wider discourse began to esteem affection and sexual gratification as the primary merits of legal union in what was called “companionate marriage” (Musser 287-288). Causing new anxieties and uncertainties as well as new hopes and freedoms, divorce was a frequent theme in both dramatic and comedic films (288), but, as Charles Musser argues, “comedy’s ability to play with explosive social topics such as divorce—to address the deep structures of social crisis—can make it vital to social well-being,” (289). This chapter examines the friction between individual happiness and social well-being that anxieties around marriage and divorce embodied and how comedic films of the time dealt with this question.

# and the Quality SUPREME

Perfection is the principle on which "COMEDYART" pictures are produced.

The comedies are refreshing. They are **BUFF** all sentimental drabbles, **NOT** all sentimental drabbles, **NOT** all sentimental drabbles, **NOT** all sentimental drabbles. **VARIETY** is the predominating feature.

### Made For Wholesome Fun Only

The scenes are set in the delightful world of human nature. The only "humorous" quality is the sparkling wit of the stars.

### Here Is a Big Punch!

The Art Color section, the new color pictures, are more beautiful than any other color film ever offered. Science has given us a world of art color. **ARTCOLOR** pictures. The 400 feet original master prints **ART** prints and prints that are of once fascination, full of absorbing interest.

### The Art Color Section Alone Is Worth More Than You Pay For the Entire Two-Real "Comedyart"

Remember—There is no need to your patrons' pleasure in it except their own. "ARTCOLOR" pictures, prints and master have all been secured in the **ART** color section.

### Mr. Exhibitor, You Can't Resist

You have our stamped, additional program, or you reply to period. Therefore, it costs you nothing to find out. Will you send it **TODAY!**

### Our Franchise Will Be a Valuable Asset to You

## SPECIAL PICTURES CORPORATION

414 W. W. BELLWAX BUILDING

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA



# COMEDYART PRODUCTIONS

Figure 2.1 A 1920 ComedyArt Productions advertisement

My particular focus is on the heroines of the comedies I examine, and how they, and the comediennes who perform them, navigate their own desires around societal expectations, during a time when women's pleasure, to marry for love, work, vote, or dress, often caused widespread cultural anxiety. In the first film I examine, *The Extra*

*Girl* (1923), the heroine (played by slapstick star Mabel Normand) yearns to be an actress and to marry against her parents' wishes. The former leads to chaos while the latter leads her to order and happiness, showing a complex negotiation of female desire and its repercussions. The second film, *The Wildcat* (1921), shows a bandit dealing with issues of class and gender behavior when she falls in love with a posh lieutenant. *Her Sister from Paris* (1925) stars Constance Talmadge in a dual role as an unhappy but dutiful wife and her sexy, night-club performing twin sister, eventually bringing both personas together and resolving her marital issues. Finally, *Exit Smiling* (1926) is able to narratively escape marriage, but with a bittersweet ending, in which the heroine's agency both saved and driven away the man she loves. In different ways, all four films deal with the complex problem of female pleasure and social well-being, simultaneously questioning and reifying cultural mores, while laying the groundwork for screwball comedy subgenre which will let its heroines have their cake and eat it too.

***“She'd Have Seemed a Genius:” Mabel Normand and Her Legacy***

In a 1930 obituary piece for Mabel Normand published in *Exhibitors Herald-World*, the author notes: “Had she been a man she'd have seemed a genius, [...] but for some reason feminine players do not become known as quite that” (Weaver 21). Years later, feminist film historians point to Mabel Normand as an important figure in the silent era (Joyce and Putzi). Beginning as a model, Normand joined Vitagraph studio as an extra in 1911 and quickly became a comic star, acting in, writing, and directing as many as 26 comic short films with Mack Sennett at Keystone from 1912-1915 (Joyce and Putzi). She not only directed herself, but other famous male comedians like Charlie Chaplin, who would come to overshadow her in historic memory. For example, in his

seminal book on comedy and film, Gerald Mast describes her as one of Keystone's greatest comics (49), but writes very little about her, while devoting entire chapters to (more minor) male comics. This is perhaps due to a perception of slapstick as "comedian comedy," focused on auteurs like Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd (Jenkins and Karnick 6), which ignores broader social contexts, including gender. Yet even in this framework, comediennes are rarely analyzed as auteurs, for even the most popular, like Normand, couldn't contemporarily access the creative control of her work in the same way male comedians could. Even today, comparatively little has been written about Normand.

Despite a lifelong battle with tuberculosis that would end her life in 1930, at the age 36, Normand had a vivacious persona and range; she could play victim, heroine, or love interest (Joyce and Putzi). At Keystone, her "spunky personality and limber body" made her a likeable, "rough-and-tumble tomboy" adept at physical comedy (Mast 47), but, by 1916, she began publicly expressing a desire for change, hoping "'to do more serious work' and to be a trifle more...dignified' than was possible in slapstick comedy" (King, *The Fun Factory*, 229), which eventually led her to feature length films, which allowed for and required more emotional range and a more complex persona, adapting her working-class slapstick comedy to a more middle class sensibility. An advertisement for her first film, *Mickey* (1918), shows her playing with a dog and claims her character is "the little girl you will never forget," retaining her tomboyish playfulness, but with an increased sense of innocence and desexualization. By contrast, an earlier advertisement for Keystone short *Mabel's Lovers* (1912) shows Normand in a bathing suit, looking

slyly away while a man kisses her hand, casting her mischievous nature in a much more overtly sexual light.



# KEYSTONE FILMS

COMEDY REEL EVERY MONDAY

The Keystone Film Company comprises the largest aggregation of famous comedians in the world, the principals being Mack Sennett, Fred Macer, Mabel Normand, Ford Sterling, and Alice Tavenport. It is an All-Star Company.

KEYSTONE FILM CO.

**A SPLIT REEL ON MONDAY, NOV. 4**

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## "Mabel's Lovers"

Mabel arrives at the summer resort and has many lovers. Possessed of a beautiful figure, she decides to put the men to a test, and when donning her bathing suit fills her stockings with numerous bumps. When she discards her coat at the beach all the men beat a hasty retreat with the exception of one who "peeped" when Mabel was fixing up. Her next appearance in her bathing suit, minus the ungainly protuberances causes consternation among the men who have been fooled.





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## "AT IT AGAIN"

This picture reviews the travesty on Sherlock Holmes, in which Mack Sennett and Fred Macer won unbounded popularity. A woman receives an anonymous letter advising her that her husband is dying, and engages the detective. They track the wrong man and apprehend, arresting him in his own home while making love to his own wife. It develops that the man is a police captain, and the "detective" are punished for their error.

**KEYSTONE FILM CO. 150 East 14th St. NEW YORK CITY**

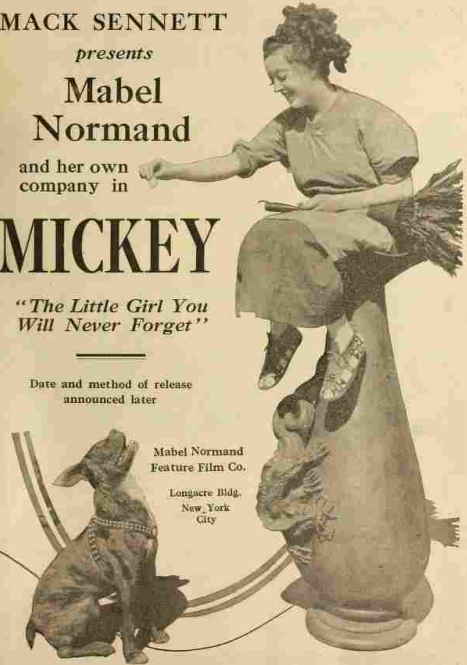
MUTUAL FILM CORPORATION, 60 Wall Street      Sole Agent for the U. S. and Canada

July 7, 1917.      MOTION PICTURE NEWS      49

**MACK SENNETT**  
presents  
**Mabel Normand**  
and her own company in  
**MICKEY**

*"The Little Girl You Will Never Forget"*

Date and method of release announced later



Mabel Normand  
Feature Film Co.  
Longacre Bldg.  
New York City

We have escaped good advertisers to talk to YOU. Listen to them!

**Figure 2.2** An advertisement for *Mabel's Lovers* (1912) from an issue of *Moving Picture World* from November 2, 1912. **Figure 2.3** An advertisement for *Mickey* (1918) from July 1917 issue of *Motion Picture News*.

Paralleling Normand's shifting persona, the film industry of the 1910s was rapidly changing. By 1915, most dramatic films were feature length, rather than one or two-reel shorts. Comedy, as a genre, however, struggled with the shift to a longer length (Koszarski 174). Though Normand played a major role in what is considered the first feature length comedy, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), she didn't star in her own feature until *Mickey* in 1918, which was produced by her short-lived production company, Mabel Normand Feature Film Company. *Mickey* was a commercial success, but Normand's subsequent career in the early 1920s was hindered by ailing health and connections to various scandals that marred the public's perception of her as well as the wider film industry.

First, in 1922, Normand's close friend, director William Desmond Taylor was murdered. Though there was no direct evidence connecting her to the crime, the (still) unsolved case was splashed across the popular press at the time and Normand's name became associated with it in public imagination. In 1924, only a few months after *The Extra Girl* was released, another of Normand's friends, businessman Courtland Dines was shot by her chauffeur with her gun. Those present at the shooting gave conflicting testimonies, and though Dines survived, Normand's career ultimately did not (Louvish 206). Normand's name was already well associated with scandal in the public mind, including rumors of a drug addiction that continues to this day. After the Dines shooting, Normand only starred in a few comic shorts until her death in 1930.

Normand's downfall wasn't unusual. In the early 1920s, many other scandals like the Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle rape trial and Olive Thomas's mysterious death tainted people's perception of the film industry as full of hedonism and vice. Increased



awareness and concern for many people whose perceptions of Hollywood failed to match the reality of the industry was a topical theme in the U.S. in the early 1920s. Though the idea was not limited to young women,<sup>5</sup> the public imagination and anxieties primarily focused on the “extra girl,” a young woman whose love of film took her to Hollywood to work as an extra, and her vulnerability to economic and sexual exploitation. Heidi Kenaga explains that

“the problem of the 'extra girl' in Hollywood becomes not only an important labour [sic] issue but a key ideological concern as well, because it foregrounds how the industry's interests and economic power negotiated with civic, cultural and social elites a 'proper place' for movies, especially the right role female spectators might play in relation to the cinema and the act of film consumption” (129).

This force of this social anxiety was powerful enough to compel Hollywood to respond with the formation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America in 1921, the Central Casting Bureau in 1925, and the Hollywood Studio Club in 1926, all with the intent of protecting and controlling the industry’s image (Kenaga 129). These “movie-struck” women and “extra girls” symbolized broader cultural anxieties about women in the public space and the collision of mass culture and female desire.

These historical intersections can be seen in the film I focus on for this chapter, *The Extra Girl* (1923), Normand’s last before the Dines shooting ended her career. As a comedy, *The Extra Girl* explores cultural anxieties about women through comedy, using the heroine’s dream of Hollywood as source of humor, but in so doing, emphasizes the

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<sup>5</sup> Harry Leon Wilson’s popular novel, *Merton of the Movies* (serialized in 1919, published as a novel in 1922) follows the comic misadventures of young man who dreams of being a Western star.

sometimes-chaotic power of female desire and how it intersects with love and sexuality. In this way, this film, though still very slapstick, is an important precursor to screwball comedies of the 1930s.

*The Extra Girl* centers on Sue Graham (Mabel Normand), a young woman from River Bend, “a long way from Hollywood,” who dreams of being an actress. Her childhood friend and love interest, Dave (Ralph Graves), supports her aspirations, while her parents (Anna Dodge and George Nichols) disapprove of her interest in both Dave and acting. With three distinct segments, the film feels more like a series of shorts than a more modern feature-length film, harkening back to Normand’s earlier career at Keystone. In the first segment, Sue resists her father’s attempts to marry her to his preferred suitor, the wealthy town pharmacist. After a thrilling car and wagon chase, she flees her wedding and catches a train to Hollywood to pursue a career as an actress. The second segment follows Sue’s comic mishaps as she tries to make it in Hollywood, working in the props department, botching an audition, and accidentally letting loose a lion in the studio. The third segment has Sue losing and regaining her family’s money, after which she abandons Hollywood and marries Dave. Despite this segmentation, important themes and motifs connect all three acts, as Sue balances family and independence, romantic and sexual desire, and identities explored through role-playing and acting.



**Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5** Sue performing as vamp and virgin.

In the first scene, Sue rehearses roles in her family living room, while Dave and her mother watch. Though the setting is sentimental, coded with themes of family and tradition, Sue playfully oscillates between vamp and virgin through costume and gesture, reducing both tropes and their respective ideologies to whimsy. Sue's mother grows bored and leaves, so Dave and Sue practice a romantic scene. As her father returns home with the suitor he wants her to marry, they see the silhouettes of the "actors" in the window. This play of shadows and interpretation are cinematic, playing with the fantasy and reality of desire in a humorous way. A striking parallel can be found in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), sometimes categorized a screwball comedy, where the shadow of two people talking on a nearby bed emphasizes sexual tension.



**Figure 2.6 and Figure 2.7** Shadows and desire in *The Extra Girl* (left) and *Trouble in Paradise* (right).

The silhouettes of *Trouble in Paradise* playfully skirt censorship, aided by a fanciful narrative set in France, but in *The Extra Girl*, the sexuality is diffused into a playful parody. An interior shot shows Dave and Sue kiss. She says “Ah! My sheik!” He replies, “Yes, my sheikess!” and they laugh. Their relationship is not only characterized by play and humor, but a clear remediation of mass culture, specifically the popular romance film, *The Sheik* (1921). *The Sheik* and its star, Rudolph Valentino, were often mentioned in other films of this culture, as would Clara Bow’s coyly titled film, *It* (1927), a few years later, demonstrating a convergence between popular culture and discourses of sexuality. Feminist film scholars have explored the significance of the way in which women became important consumers in the 1920s, particularly in the film industry:

“If modern advertising and the department store had mobilized the female gaze in the service of consumption, the cinema seemed to have institutionalized women’s scopophilic consumption as an end to itself, thus posing a commercially fostered threat to the male monopoly of the gaze. The conflict between economic opportunism and patriarchal ideology provoked a profound ambivalence toward

the female spectator—as a subjectivity simultaneously solicited and feared, all the more so because of its collective dimensions” (Hansen 122).

While feminist scholars have argued that the female gaze can only be masochistic or narcissistic, Hansen argues that historical context complicates this. Hollywood maintained an ambivalence toward female desire, making allegorical films that at once empowered and contained the female gaze, and female sexuality in general (Hansen 122). The popularity of *The Sheik*, in particular, drew attention to the power of feminine desire (Hansen 259). Thus, references to *The Sheik* in *The Extra Girl*, connect Normand’s character with active sexual desire and imagination, and all the cultural anxiety that entails. Yet this scene simultaneously mocks the melodrama of *The Sheik*, as Sue and Dave soon laugh at their own performance. This scene shows how a comedy can add nuance to the idea of love. Here, love is not just passionate, but also playful, uniting sexual desire and friendship in a way that foreshadows relationships in classic screwball comedies of the 1930s.



**Figure 2.8 and Figure 2.9** Sue and Dave’s relationship is characterized by passion and play.

Despite their love, Sue’s father forbids the relationship between Sue and Dave, forming the central romantic conflict of the film along with Sue’s desire to be an actress.

Both conflicts stem from Sue's diverging desires from her parents. Sue plans to elope with Dave but succumbs to guilt and finds herself unable to leave her family; the resulting narrative foregrounds the heroine's desire for independence without completely rejecting familial ties. This echoes larger social shifts occurring in the 1910s and 20s about a woman's place in her family, particularly around issues of marriage. As Beth L. Bailey notes in her book *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America*, dating slowly became a wide practice in the United States from 1890 to 1925, replacing the earlier practice of courtship, where a man would come to woman's house (the private sphere). With dating, women entered the public sphere, changing the control of the relationship from the family to the individuals (20). In addition to how people found someone to marry, the ideals of marriage itself were changing. Social scientists of the time, like Ben Lindsey

“portrayed sexual intimacy as the cement of marriage and birth control as a necessary support; they called for greater privacy and freedom from parental control for young couples; and they demanded sexual and psychological equality for women. Companionate marriage reflected a more individualistic society and a vision of marriage as the union of two individuals bonded through sexual love, rather than the traditional institution of childbearing, kin, and property relations” (Simmons 108).

The first act of *The Extra Girl* draws from these historic changes for its central conflict but cannot completely reject traditional ideas of marriage and family. The slapstick comedy genre's transition to longer films and a middle-class audience required more proper ideas of love and sexuality, in contrast to the working-class, anarchic appeal of

earlier comic shorts. This is also why Normand's persona also changed, as evidenced by the posters in Figures 2.1 and 2.2. To reconcile the conflicts of the individual and the family, the film leaves the slapstick world of the first act, where authority is challenged with gags involving throwing objects at people and chases, and enters the screwball world of the second act, where Sue must negotiate the zany world of Hollywood.



**Figure 2.10** In a melodramatic scene, Sue is torn between love and family.

### Slapstick Versus Screwball Worlds

Fittingly, act one ends with a chase, a common trope of slapstick comedy. Visually, we see one vehicle following another in a straight line to the destination. By contrast, act two begins with the screwball version of a chase. A long shot shows cars following each other in a circle around a camera filming the action. People rush about, falling in and out of cars, partially obscured by random clouds of smoke and fake gun shots. An intertitle explains this is “Hollywood: Any Day.”



**Figure 2.11 and Figure 2.12** A slapstick versus a screwball chase.

Sue has left a slapstick world and entered a screwball one, but she isn't quite a screwball heroine; she gets lost in this chaos rather than creating it. Like a slapstick gag, her plan of becoming an actress has failed, when the studio manager sees her appearance doesn't match the photo sent in. Instead she is assigned to work in the costuming department, another place of zany *mise-en-scène* with mannequins in historical costumes, stuffed ducks mounted on the wall, and bizarre animal masks. Still the film portrays Sue as "movie-struck" despite her participation in manufacturing the illusion of Hollywood, as seen when she admires an actor dressed as a sheik, thus making her a consumer rather than producer of the sexual desire created by the film industry. Screwball heroines of the 1930s, by contrast, actively manufacture or increase the zaniness of their screwball world as part of a broader scheme to pursue their love interest, often through role-play. Screwball films, therefore, connect comedy with the heroine's agency and desire.





**Figure 2.13 and Figure 2.14** Sue retrieves hats in a comic sight-gag, participating in the screwball world of Hollywood, but still believes in the illusory desires created by Hollywood, as symbolized by the “sheik.”

Sue may not be as active as a screwball heroine, but the film makes her desires clear. When she reunites with Dave, the film draws a parallel with the early joke of her being smitten with the “sheik,” by using similar framing and mise-en-scène. The film’s repeated, though playful, associations with the sheik emphasize that he is an object of sexual desire for Sue. Yet, Sue’s other desire, to be an actress, prevents her marrying Dave.



**Figure 2.15** Sue smiles at Dave across the prop counter, echoing an earlier shot where she admired a handsome actor.

Shortly after Dave’s arrival, Sue gets to audition for a director. The audition is arranged by another man at the studio, and not Sue, further reducing the power of the female

character within the narrative. In fact, Sue is not even referred to as a woman in her introduction: “This is the little girl of whom you promised to make a test.” Even Sue’s failure of the audition is beyond her control. First, she steps on some chewed gum, causing a brick from the path she walks to stick to her shoe. On the next take, she sits on a stagehand’s oiled glove which leaves a handprint on her pantaloons, which is revealed when she bends over to pick up a fallen prop.



**Figure 2.16 and Figure 2.17** Sue unknowingly fails an audition through various visual gags.

Sue remains unaware of this last accident but seems pleased with the test. She tells Dave: “I’ve had my test and the director said I was just naturally funny.” Dave, who watched the test, urges her: “Give up this foolish idea of a career and let’s get married.” Sue angrily walks away. Though *The Extra Girl* positions its female character’s desires as comic, it also acknowledges the power of these desires in another comic scene.

### ***The “Problem” of Female Desire***

In the course of her work in the costuming department, a director asks Sue to dress a large dog as a lion, for the safety of the actors. During a shoot, the dog is switched with a real lion, which Sue unknowingly leads through the studio on the leash, as everyone flees in terror. When she realizes her mistake, she runs to the managerial office where the lion follows her and wreaks havoc. Dave eventually saves the day with the help

of a fire hose and other stagehands. The scene ends with Sue remarking to the haggard studio manager: “That’s some pussy cat!”



**Figures 2.18 and Figure 2.19** Sue accidentally releases a lion in a film studio, representing the chaotic potential of female sexuality.



**Figure 2.20** “That’s some pussy cat!”

This scene crystalizes the central problem of the “extra girl,” that she confuses Hollywood fantasy for reality. And, on some level, it makes sense: if a dog can be a lion, why can’t a lion be a dog? The chaos the extra girl causes in this scene symbolizes cultural views of female sexuality in the 1920s. Though “ideologies of modernization seemingly restored to women their sexual desires [...], they in fact posited a bifurcated female self, whose sexuality belonged to the elusive subconscious rather than to the proprietary, rational female self-capable of claiming and acting upon desires” (Haag 550). The lion can thus be seen as a symbol of this subconscious animal instinct, that

disturbs even the power of capitalism (represented by the studio manager's office). Sue's comic understatement emphasizes her inability to recognize and control the power of her desire.



**Figure 2.21 and Figure 2.22** Sue reacts with surprise and embarrassment as she watches her old audition, finally separating herself as “performer” and “viewer.”

In this context, the only happy ending for Sue is the resolution that comes when she can see the difference between production and consumption, fantasy and reality. This happens in the final scene, when she and Dave, happily married with a small child, watch footage of her audition. In contrast to the first scene, where she playfully recreates a scene from *The Sheik* to construct a romantic relationship with Dave, Sue now can now separate the idea of herself as a performer and as a viewer. With this, *The Extra Girl* shows that the heroine's initial, inner desire fails to match an outer reality, whereas a screwball film would use the heroine's desires to shape the filmic world. *The Extra Girl*, however, can only reconcile this contradiction between desire and reality by falling back on traditional ideals of marriage, domesticity, and motherhood.

This film's rejection of fantasy and play may seem a poor choice for an example of early screwball, but it captures a moment of changing ideas around love and female desire, that are reconciled by performativity. Though Sue's dream of Hollywood wasn't

feasible, neither was a marriage arranged by her parents. Entering the screwball world of filmmaking was essential to the narrative arc of *The Extra Girl*, though it couldn't provide a utopic ending. The problem of the extra girl existed at the intersection of two historic anxieties: women's desire and their increasing presence in the public realm. Despite this apprehension, many films about extra girls were comedies. Through humor, these films emphasized the incongruity of the extra girl (her desire for something that doesn't exist or is impossible to attain) through comedy, but also provided some resolution by steering these modern heroines to traditional romances ending in marriage.

Still women's desires and their potential for acting on them present an undeniable chaos that could not be resolved. Later films about the extra girl, *Ella Cinders* (1926) and *Show People* (1928), had similar premises to *The Extra Girl*, but with different nuances and resolutions. In *Ella Cinders*, the titular heroine also accidentally releases a lion in a film studio. She runs into the nearest room, which happens to be an active film set, and cries "Help—please—a lion." "No—no," the director replies, taking her for an actress, "it's your baby that's burning up." Ella, while still a bit hapless, remains anchored in reality, while the filmmakers themselves are lost in a fantasy. Though both Sue and Ella are rural, working-class, movie-struck girls, Ella, played by flapper actress Colleen Moore, is savvier. She, too, is eventually rescued from Hollywood by her love interest, but overall, *Ella Cinders* allows its heroine more agency and is much less melodramatic, playing with zany visual gags, that would come to characterize screwball comedy.

Two years later, in *Show People*, Peggy (Marion Davies) plays a naïve country girl with Hollywood aspirations. She is mentored by her love interest and fellow actor, Billy (William Haines), and quickly surpasses him as a great star. She becomes arrogant

and pretentious until Billy reminds her of the joy and ridiculousness of film through slapstick antics. Though Peggy remains a great actress, she learns the error her ways and is reunited with Billy. In just a few short years, the trope of the movie-struck girl changed rapidly. While Sue could only find happiness by disavowing the fantasy and play of cinema, Peggy finds happiness only when she remembers joy and play. In this way, *Show People* reconciles a successful career with a successful romance, and does through comedy and play, paving the way for screwball comedy.

The weight of the Dines scandal overshadowed *The Extra Girl* and it was Normand's last major film. Yet Normand might have been left behind anyway by the rapidly changing depictions of modern femininity in film. In the same year *The Extra Girl* was released, 1923, powerful and beloved star Mary Pickford departed from the girlish style, which she had made famous and which Normand emulated, by starring in a womanlier role in the drama, *Rosita*, directed by a prestigious foreign director, Ernst Lubitsch. Meanwhile, Colleen Moore redefined the girl-woman trope as a teenage flapper in *Flaming Youth*.<sup>6</sup> While the physicality of slapstick comedy would be crucial element in screwball comedy, the archetypal narratives of a boy or girl surviving the modern world would not. Screwball comedies, with their emphasis on witty dialogue and playful subversion of social norms, needed more complex plots about adults, not just surviving the modern world, but transforming it into a place of joy and pleasure. For this aspect of screwball comedy, its origins are best found in sophisticated comedy of the 1920s.

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<sup>6</sup> Olive Thomas, of course, was the first onscreen flapper in *The Flapper* (1920), but Colleen Moore's star persona was shaped by the trope in a way Thomas's was not. For more information, see Ross, Sara. "Screening the Modern Girl: Intermediality in the Adaptation of *Flaming Youth*." *Modernism/modernity* 17.2 (2010): 271-90.

### *Lubitsch and the Comedy of Excess*

Sophisticated comedy “grew out of the long-standing comedy of errors and of manners that played with infidelity among married couples” (Musser 311). The genre focused on scenario and dialogue, rather than physical humor, and had a distinctly European influence. An early and popular example of sophisticated comedy in theater was the French play *Le Divorçons* (1880), which was adapted into a four-reel film by Biograph in 1915 (Vermillion 367). The genre continued with popular Cecil B. DeMille films like *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920). Sophisticated comedies point to several important aspects of film and popular culture including globalization, the influence of theatre on cinema, and, perhaps most importantly, growing cultural anxieties around divorce and modern marriage.

So, while Charles Musser and others have complicated Stanley Cavell’s claim that comedies of remarriage were an entirely new film genre in the 1930s, the question remains how this elegant European genre transformed into the chaotic American genre of screwball, and what opportunities this genre would afford to female comedienne. To this end, this section examines two films: *The Wildcat* (*Die Bergkatze*, 1921) and *Her Sister from Paris* (1926). A German film, *The Wildcat* was directed by Ernst Lubitsch, German director who was so famous for his historical dramas, he was, as mentioned, brought to the U.S. by Mary Pickford to direct for her. Yet he would be best remembered for his romantic comedies, of which *The Wildcat*, is an early, notable example. Meanwhile, the American film, *Her Sister from Paris*, is a prime example of the 1920s comedy of remarriage, combining the prevalent tropes of roleplaying and mistaken identity,

emphasizing the narrative importance of performativity and identity around modern femininity.

As seen with Mabel Normand, the sexuality of slapstick comedy had to be downplayed to appeal to middle- and upper-class viewers. Sophisticated comedy, however, used sexuality as a marker of its bourgeois sensibility. Featuring upper-class characters and often set in Europe (even if the film was American), these films used “Europeanness” as an excuse to flirt with adultery and lust, though still affirming marriage and love in the end. In his career, Lubitsch mastered this blend of style, wit and sophistication with what is still referred to as “The Lubitsch Touch,” using imagery and dialogue to slip sexual jokes and carnal themes past the censors. However, *The Wildcat*, flopped in his home country, and thus wasn’t originally exported to the United States (Eyman *Ernst Lubitsch* 72). Lubitsch himself theorized its failure at the time that German audiences were in no mood for a film which parodied the military in the wake of WWI (Drössler 221).<sup>7</sup> In subsequent years, this delightfully bizarre parody of German Expressionism has received little critical attention in scholarly works focusing on either Ernst Lubitsch or its star Pola Negri. Lubitsch’s later influence on the screwball comedy genre, however, makes this early comedy noteworthy. The film’s use of physical humor, zany world, and playful romance fits well within the structures of what I see as proto-screwball comedy which define the genre and its slippage, despite cultural and institutional differences.

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<sup>7</sup> Negri has very little to say on the film in her autobiography, instead describing the dissolution of a relationship with a man she loved at the time, who sent her champagne and flowers while she was filming *The Wildcat* in a remote skier’s lodge in Bavaria (184). Though not relevant for this analysis, there is an interesting parallel between Negri’s personal life and the ending of the film.





**Figure 2.23** The opening shot of *The Wildcat* (1921).

*The Wildcat* begins with a shot of a mountain military outpost with an absurd number of cannons neatly framed by an entryway, immediately establishing this cinematic world as carefully constructed but farcical. A bugle sounds in the courtyard. In the sleeping quarters above, one soldier stumbles out of bed to close the window, while the rest sleep, undermining the idea of order and duty associated with soldiers and setting up the film's larger parody of the military. The plot begins when the commander of the outpost (Victor Janning) receives a letter explaining that Lieutenant Alexis (Paul Heidemann) will be transferred to his mountain fort. The commander is only allowed to read the letter after his wife and daughter have, immediately showing who is really in charge of the base.

The military has sent Alexis away as punishment for being a womanizer, yet the women of the town give him a formal farewell, thanking him for his services. In one shot, women line the street as Alexis's car drives by in a parody of a military parade. This joke juxtaposes the value of making love over making war. The gag works for sophisticated comedy, as it completely disregards any value for marriage and monogamy, but is so

visually excessive, it easily harkens to related slapstick gags, particularly in *Seven Chances* (1925) in which Buster Keaton runs away from hundreds of women who want to marry him for an inheritance. And, though years before Rudolph Valentino's well-attended funeral, the image of throngs of women mourning the loss of a single man speaks to a new idea of mass culture and female desire.



**Figures 2.24** A large crowd of women bid Alexis farewell.

**Figure 2.25** Alexis graciously receives their thanks.

Meanwhile, in the mountains, we are introduced to a camp of bandits. Like the outpost, the *mise-en-scène* is excessive. The tents and costumes are decorated with cartoonish skulls. After a dispute, the bandits turn on their leader who cries out for his daughter, Rischka (Pola Negri) to save him. She rushes out and beats the revolting bandits, who seem delighted. Already, in all three settings (the outpost, the town, and the bandit camp), female authority has been established as the norm, yet the male characters seem happy with this arrangement, foreshadowing the screwball trope of the dominant woman and the often-passive man as a successful couple.

Negri was an interesting choice for this comedic role. Best known as a dramatic actress, an early *femme fatale* or vamp with “exotic” beauty, the Polish star was internationally popular and had worked with Lubitsch many times, most notably in their

celebrated historical epics *Madame DuBarry* (1919) and *Carmen* (1921). Even in the tomboyish role of Rischka in *The Wildcat*, she exudes a sense of her own sexuality and power. When her bandits raid Alexis's passing sled, she immediately takes a liking to the lieutenant and prevents her bandits from killing him. Instead, she steals his clothes, forcing him to walk to the military outpost in his undergarments. Her loose, layered costuming, wild, curly hair, and confident movements portray Rischka as an active, even masculine character who pursues her desires. Alexis, who at one point lays out handkerchief on the snow before he sits down, is shown to be much more fastidious, giving him more traditionally feminine characteristics. This play with gender within a heterosexual relationship subtly undermines ideology around gender under the guise of comedy, while also setting the stage for more equal opponents in a battle of the sexes. At one point in the scene where Alexis first meets Rischka, he kisses her hand. Confused, she pulls her hand away and wipes the kiss away, but before she lets him go, she kisses his hand, swearing in with a menacing gesture that any insult or injury he gives to her she will return. This playful set up for both the conflict of the film (the military versus the bandits) and their relationship foreshadows classic screwball comedy by subsuming any hint of violence or danger into play and farce.



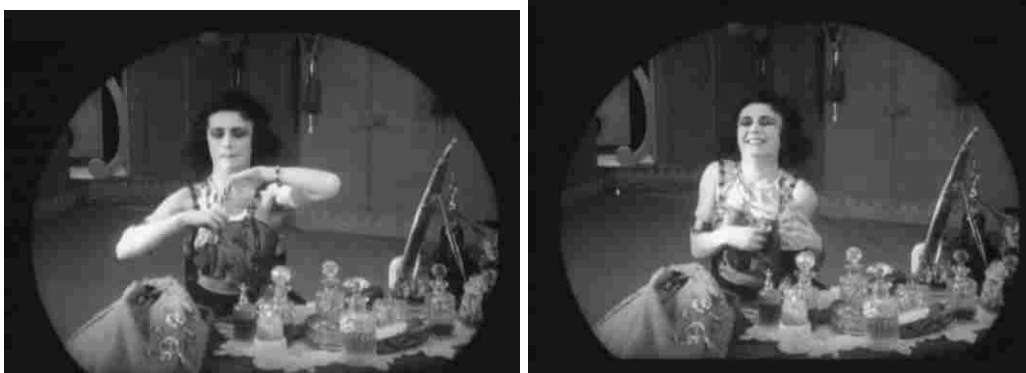
**Figure 2.26** Alexis and Rischka undermine gender norms.

### ***Cinematic Portrayals of the Modern Woman***

It is important here to discuss what kind of modern woman Rischka is, if any. Though the idea of a new woman existed before the 1920s, the best-known example from that era are flappers. Sara Ross argues that flapper actresses like Colleen Moore and Clara Bow carefully balanced innocence and sexuality in their performances. For example, Ross analyzes a scene in *Flaming Youth* (1923) in which the teenage protagonist, Patricia (Moore), puts on make-up and perfume at a mirror (415). Moore alternates between posing sensually and laughing in delight. Ross argues that this comedic juxtaposition of playful enthusiasm and sexuality, preserves the character's innocence, undercutting the power of female sexuality but making it more palatable to the average filmgoer. I would add to this argument, that in this scene, the character's behavior is role-playing a different identity, in this case a child pretending to be an adult. A very similar scene occurs in *The Wildcat*, but with a very different implication for the character and how she mediates identity.



**Figures 2.27 and Figure 2.28** Role playing in *Flaming Youth*.



**Figures 2.29 and Figure 2.30** Role playing in *The Wildcat*.

As justice for the theft of Alexis's clothes, the military sets out to fight the bandits. After a comic battle between the two groups, with many a thrown snowball, the commander decides they have won and throws a party back at the fort to celebrate. Rischka leads the bandits to the fort where they intend to sneak in and steal everything during the festivities. In so doing, Rischka enters the room of the commander's daughter, and decides to put on her dresses, make-up, and perfume. In contrast to Patricia in *Flaming Youth*, Rischka seems more delighted in the sensual delights of wealth. For example, she not only admires herself in the mirror but also pours perfume on down her shirt and laughs at the sensation. Her behavior is excessive and ridiculous, but she is far from alone. The bandits, also disguised as party guests, gorge themselves on food and drink, leading to various sight gags, such as a bandit drunkenly attacking a statue. The

real party guests create comedy through their excess, especially when the commander of the fort stumbles around, lost in his own ornate building. In this way, *The Wildcat* portrays Rischka as part of a larger world of zany, fairy-tale attributes. This world may be screwball in terms of how its humor operates, with events unfolding with a zany logic, but Rischka presented as a subject to this world, not a creator of it. Classic screwball heroines of the 1930s actively create their own world. For example, in the screwball film *Ball of Fire*, the heroine, a nightclub singer played by Barbara Stanwyck, is forced to hide from the police. She installs herself in a house of eccentric academics who are writing a dictionary, by offering to teach them slang, which they know nothing about. While the film established the academics as eccentric, Stanwyck's character deliberately increases the zaniness of their home and interactions through her playful antics. Rischka enters an already surreal world, as evidenced by the film's mise-en-scène and the way the other characters behave with or without Rischka.



**Figure 2.31** The commander stumbles through the zany mise-en-scène of *The Wildcat*.

Yet Rischka's difference from comic modern woman, as performed by Colleen Moore and other flapper-actresses, is significant. Her difference is one of class and

culture, not age and maturity. This establishes her as a woman capable of making her own decisions, but also beholden to the rules, even of this world. So, while the film isn't a screwball, because she can't make her own world, it is a portrayal of active female sexual desire. Ross's argument is important, because it explains the centrality of comedy to the depiction of modern female sexuality in cinema. Yet this style of comedy also lessened the power of female sexuality. In *The Wildcat*, the comedy is used to ridicule, rather than soften. Though its cinematic world is excessive to the point of being a fairy tale, its depiction of human failings hit a little too close for comfort, at least in post-war Germany. By contrast, screwball comedies like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) or *Theodora Goes Wild* would use zaniness to soften their social critiques.

### *The Duality of Constance Talmadge*

*The Wildcat* ends with Rischka and Alexis realizing their class differences are too great and returning to their respective partners, similar to Lubitsch's later masterpiece *Trouble in Paradise* (1932). The "European" style of sophisticated comedy wasn't limited to Ernst Lubitsch. His friend and frequent screenwriter, including for *The Wildcat*, Hans Kräly<sup>8</sup> also emigrated to Hollywood where he wrote scripts through the 1920s and 1930s (Hake 37), including *Her Sister from Paris* (1925), starring Constance Talmadge.

Though Talmadge never directed, she was a powerful figure in Hollywood because of her both her broad popularity and her familial industry connections. Her sister, Norma Talmadge, was a celebrated dramatic actress and was married to producer, Joseph

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<sup>8</sup> Very little has been written about Hans Kraly in English, though interestingly he, along with 34 other screenwriters, responded to a questionnaire for an article published in 1935 academic psychology journal about Hollywood writers. See: Metfessel, Milton "Personal factors in motion picture writing." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1935, Vol.30 (3), pp.333-347.

M. Schenck. Their other sister, Natalie Talmadge, though less successful, was married to slapstick star, Buster Keaton. Beginning as teenagers at Vitagraph in the 1910s, Norma and Constance quickly rose to stardom, and by the 1920s, they were important stars (Jacobs "The Talmadge Sisters" 65).

*Her Sister from Paris* begins with an intertitle reading: "Typical of the gay, easy-going Viennese are the Weyringers, a novelist and his wife--with their air of peace and old-world courtesy," followed by a shot of the Weyringers fiercely arguing. What the couple is fighting about is unclear, but Helen Weyringer (Constance Talmadge) says "I know-- I know-- you don't love me anymore." From the narrative's perspective, love is integral to the success of a marriage. Joseph Weyringer (Roland Colman) meanwhile tosses her homecooked doughnuts out a window, then smashes the plate they were on, while Helen sobs and flaps her arms dramatically. While the opening joke relies on the discrepancy between the set-up of the intertitle and the reality, the humor of this scene is driven by the very physical, almost violent interactions, harkening to a slapstick style. This type of physicality is present elsewhere in the film, giving this sophisticated comedy a slapstick edge. A joke most clearly showing the two styles of comedy at play is a later scene in which a button pops off a man's shirt and falls down Helen's cleavage. Furthermore, the romance between Joseph and Helen (roleplaying La Perry) is characterized by emotional turmoil and comically exaggerated facial expressions, as seen in the screenshots below.





**Figure 2.32** A promotional still for *Her Sister from Paris* with Roland Colman (left) and Constance Talmadge (right) as an unhappy couple in the midst of a humorously exaggerated fight.

**Figure 2.33** Talmadge enacts her revenge by seducing the conflicted Joseph in the back of a car.

Helen leaves to return to her mother's house, though Joseph tries to stop her. After she leaves, Joseph receives a letter from Helen's identical twin sister, Lola, who is a famous dancer known as La Perry and is coming to visit Vienna. Joseph and his friend, Robert, decide to attend La Perry's show that evening. Meanwhile, Helen runs into her sister at the train station as she is being greeted by adoring fans. Helen tells La Perry her troubles, who says "My dear, it's always the wife's fault when the husband gets indifferent." She proceeds to give Helen a makeover, giving her fashionable clothes and cutting her long hair into a bob. By the end, the two are indistinguishable except for a mole on La Perry's chin. Helen puts a fake one on her own chin. After La Perry's performance, Joseph asks to see her. La Perry and Helen conspire to switch places, so Helen can teach her husband "a good lesson," thus setting into motion the comic premise of the film.



**Figure 2.34** La Perry (left) listens to Helen's (right) sorrows.

**Figure 2.35** Helen (left) admires her makeover while La Perry (right) smiles.

Like *Why Change Your Wife?*, this film presents the main problem in the unhappy marriage as the wife's not being modern and desirable. In her analysis of DeMille's sophisticated comedies, Sumiko Higashi sees "the sentimental heroine converted into a sexual playmate, a transformation accomplished by visual strategies emphasizing not only set and costume design but didactic intertitles [reflecting] the social change of the postwar decade [as] consumption became a pleasurable aspect of modernity" (142). Though sets and costumes of *Her Sister from Paris* are lavish, as they were with many films Norma and Constance Talmadge starred in,<sup>9</sup> the plot and tone are noticeably different. While the dowdy Gloria Swanson and fashionable Bebe Daniels compete for a man's affections in *Why Change Your Wife?*, Helen and La Perry work together to fix Helen's marriage. Rather than setting up a dichotomy of good and bad women, the film synthesizes the two into the ideals of a modern marriage, that is loving and monogamous, as well as sexual and playful. Through role-playing her sister, Helen becomes more empowered and her relationship with her husband stronger. Joseph, too, is required to

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<sup>9</sup> Lea Jacobs notes that the Talmadge sisters' studios stayed in New York City, when many others moved to California, to give them access to the best fashion designers. Their sense of fashion was an important element of both sisters' star personas ("The Talmadge Sisters" 71).

change. By the end of the film, the central conflict is resolved, for Helen, by Joseph proving his love. While he still believes she is La Perry, he begs to be set free. She agrees but says: "You must swear you love your wife better than anyone in the world," at which point the deception is revealed. While this deception is problematic, it propels the film's narrative in such a way as to balance comedy and drama, showing that by the mid-1920s, films had become more adept at blending genres while tackling complex social issues, paving the way for screwball comedy. Sophisticated comedies like *Her Sister from Paris* were as crucial to screwball comedies as slapstick.

### ***Beatrice Lillie and the Camp Vamp***

So far, the films discussed have shown a comedic heroine role-playing different identities to explore their desires, particularly sexual desire for male love interests. In *The Extra Girl*, Sue pursues a career as an actress due to her belief in the fantasy that Hollywood films present. While Sue is coded as sexually innocent with her ringlets and shapeless dresses, her desire had destructive potential, as shown by the scene where she accidentally releases a lion. With sophisticated comedies, *The Wildcat* and *Her Sister from Paris*, the heroines are portrayed as less naïve and more womanly, active in their desires, which often translates to mischievous behavior, but nothing morally compromising. The last film I examine more directly tackles the question of morality and female sexuality by parodying the melodramatic trope of "the vamp," a proto-femme fatale whose sexuality destroys men. While the four films analyzed for this chapter all contain elements of satire, whether the targets are the film industry, the military, or the institution of marriage, *Exit Smiling* (1926) is the most direct in its parody, with its plot of a hackneyed theater troupe performing melodramatic plays in small towns. The heroine is

the troupe's maid, but she dreams of playing the lead role of the vamp in their play. Through a convoluted plot, she uses performance to playfully reworks a misogynistic, male-centered stock character into a figure of individual desire, agency, and sexuality, directly subverting typical portrayals of gender in Hollywood films paving the way for more complex comedic heroines during the conversion to sound and the classic era of screwball comedy.

A predatory beauty, the vamp or vampire symbolized a Victorian hostility toward women and their sexuality, while acting as a textual foil to the virginal heroine. It first became a popular film figure in the 1910s, after Theda Bara's iconic performance in *A Fool There Was* (1915), (Higashi 58). Recently, Janet Staiger has situated the vamp as part of a larger "fallen woman" trope in both film and literature. She argues that the vamp becomes more humanized in cinematic representation, in the sense that the character has some narrative motivation than seen in earlier literature. For example, in an early scene in *A Fool There Was*, Bara's character is snubbed in a scene in which where she tries to help a child who has tripped and is ignored by the child's upper-class mother. Thus, her later seduction of a wealthy man is framed as an attack on repressive ideas of class and decorum. Ultimately, however, Staiger argues for the limits of the figure's disruptive potential and that the vamp functions to test the masculinity of her would-be victims; with ideal men having the moral fortitude to resist her charms. While reinforcing gender ideology certainly lies at the heart of any vamp character, her meaning becomes complicated when inserted into a slapstick framework. As Anthony Balducci shows in his taxonomy of gags, the vamp appears many times in comedic films in the 1920s, confirming the cultural pervasiveness of the character type beyond its home in

melodrama. In slapstick, the vamp character usually is typically employed to emphasize the childishness or oddness of the male comedic protagonist. Perhaps the most notable example is Harry Langdon's wide-eyed terror at what he perceives to be aggressive sexual advances from Gertrude Astor's vamp in *The Strong Man* (1926).



**Figure 2.36** The aggressiveness of Gertrude Astor's vamp terrifies Harry Langdon's innocent character in *The Strong Man* (1926).

In the scene above, the visual and performative<sup>10</sup> contrast between Astor and Langdon fuel the humor. Astor's height, aggressiveness, cigarette, and revealing skirt clash with Langdon's shorter build, ill-fitting clothes, cowering gestures, and childish bag of popcorn. If we accept the idea that humor derives from incongruity, then the comedic vamp functions because it temporarily turns this era's cultural ideology around sex upside down: the woman pursues while the man resists. Thus, the vamp as a character trope provides a performative framework for assertive female sexuality. In melodramatic roles,

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<sup>10</sup> Though alluding to Judith Butler's classic idea of identity as repeated actions (xv), I used "performativity" to mean either an actor playing a character and/or a character playing a different character within a film.

her seduction is successful and destructive. The comedic vamp, by contrast, is merely ineffectual and inconvenient, but this stems more from the personality of the male comedian, rather than any specific characteristic of the vamp herself. If Bara was able to seduce her victim in *A Fool There Was*, because he was, indeed, a fool, the comedic vamp fails to capture her man because he is too foolish.

Therefore, both the dramatic and comedic vamp arguably say more about the male character and his masculinity, than about the female character and her sexual agency. This is, of course, not absolute, and *The Strong Man* presses against this idea a bit: here, Astor's vamp character is feigning interest in the hero in order to recover ill-gotten money she hid in his jacket earlier. The film thus portrays her desires as a bit more complex, connecting money and sexuality in a disreputable character and playing into ongoing anxieties about modern women during this era, as they entered the workforce and donned shorter skirts. If a comedic film were to frame the vamp trope as a gag to develop a female, rather than a male, comedian, it would reveal a more complex reading of the stereotype and the cultural ideology it represents. *Exit Smiling* is arguably such a film.



**Figure 2.37** Theda Bara and Edward José in *A Fool There Was* (1915).  
**Figure 2.38** Beatrice Lillie and Harry Myers in *Exit Smiling* (1926).

Directed by Sam Taylor, who also directed Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last!* (1923), *Exit Smiling* (1926) falls easily into the slapstick genre with its use of physical humor, parody, and a convoluted plot, but most notably, it stars a female comedian, Beatrice Lillie. This was her only silent film, and it was not well-received, making it a unique choice for analysis. Still, Lillie was a popular vaudevillian, famous for her humorous songs on stage in comedy revues of the 1910s and 20s, and contemporarily called "the funniest women in the world," (Cullen 685).

In *Exit Smiling*, Lillie plays Violet, a maid and bit player for a traveling acting group. This troupe performs a play called *Flaming Women* (played straight in the film, but rhetorically positioned by the sarcastic intertitles as a parody of terrible melodramas) in which the heroine pretends to be a vamp to distract the villain long enough to save her lover. Violet dreams of playing this role, as repeated frequently in the intertitles, but the theater director and other actors laugh at the idea. When Violet runs into Jimmy (Jack Pickford), a young man fleeing a false accusation of embezzlement, she convinces him to join the troupe. She falls in love with him, but he pines for a girl back home. Eventually they return to his hometown and Violet plays the vamp in "real" life to distract the actual embezzler long enough to reveal Jimmy's innocence. She succeeds and Jimmy returns to his sweetheart, with only Violet knowing what she did for him and that she finally succeeded in playing the vamp.

Lillie's character, Violet, differs from the typical comedic vamp of the period for two important reasons. First, her vamp is performative, something the character Violet *does* rather than *is*. By layering performances (a film actress playing a stage actress playing a character playing a vamp), the narrative explicitly emphasizes the constructed

nature of identity. Even the other ‘actors’ in the play contradict expectations, from the beer-loving, chain-smoking lead actress who plays the virginal heroine to the queer, flamboyant actor who plays the traditionally masculine hero.<sup>11</sup> This self-reflexive performative/masquerade element is not uncommon in silent slapstick, though it will happen much more frequently in later screwball comedies. Colleen Moore, Mabel Normand, and Marion Davies also play aspiring actresses in *The Extra Girl* (1923), *Ella Cinders* (1926), and *Show People* (1928) respectively. Yet in these films, the heroines all dream of becoming Hollywood stars. Violet stands out by desiring to play a certain role. Violet begins the film as a maid playing a maid. Her character’s repeated wish to play the vamp illustrates the desire to break down representation through play and masquerade. The film’s emphasis on the heroine’s specific desire and the way in which it shapes the plot allows for a careful analysis of the vamp and what its parody does for the film.



**Figure 2.39** Beatrice Lillie (on the left) performing masculinity. **Figure 2.40** Lillie performing femininity.

The playfulness of comedy is central to the disruption of identity in the film. In *Exit Smiling*, the physical gags work to literally strip away gender signifiers. In one scene, Violet dresses in drag to play the villain quite convincingly, until her mustache

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<sup>11</sup> Played by Franklin Pangborn, a character actor who appeared in many screwball films.



falls off. In the vamp scene, the feminine props and costumes become fodder for jokes: her long feather fan gets caught in electric fan, her tiara falls down over her eyes, and her pearl necklace breaks, the beads tickling her as they fall down through her dress. With this masquerade falling apart, Violet finds more success in detaining the villain when she physically intervenes by tackling him or ripping the phone out of his hand. Thus, the female comedian shifts the physicality of the vamp away from causing malevolent, passive destruction (based on men reacting to her body) to a playful, active destruction (with men being acted upon by the female body). In this scene, issues of masculine identity are moot, making a Violet a very different kind of vamp than the more typical one theorized by Higashi and Staiger.

One could argue that this simply means that Violet is not a vamp. On a narrative level, this proves true, but on a character level, the aforementioned breakdown of identity makes the categorization less clear. After all, Violet's active desire for Jimmy puts her in the dangerous realm of female sexuality that vamps evoke. This leads to the second reason Violet differs from other comedic vamps. Namely, that the humor of the "seduction" scene in *Exit Smiling* primarily comes not from the man's failure to succumb, as in *The Strong Man*, but from the incongruity of Violet as a vamp. This incongruity originates not only from Lillie's physical comedy, but in the character's sincere belief that she is succeeding. For example, when the man calls a doctor, Violet tells him that perhaps it is love and not dizziness which ails her. Rather than falling into her arms, the man simply looks at her and speaks more emphatically into the telephone, presumably assuring the doctor that she is delirious. Rather than the eccentricity of the male character, as we would see with Harry Langdon, Violet's steadfast devotion to the

performance drives the humor. This contrast of sentimental melodrama and wry comedy emphasizes the humor of the film in both the intertitles (which routinely poke fun at *Flaming Women*) and the highly histrionic and grandiose style of acting used by Violet and others while on stage. The key to understanding a comedic reworking of a melodramatic character trope lies in the parodic intersection of these two genres (comedy and melodrama) in *Exit Smiling*.

### ***Parody and Sentiment***

In *The Decline of Sentiment*, Lea Jacobs traces a cultural shift in 1920s America, as certain plots and modes came to be considered old-fashioned and sentimental (2). *Exit Smiling* was written by former Algonquin Round Table member, Marc Connelly, and his wry parody of ‘legitimate’ theater in *Exit Smiling* illustrates this cultural shift as it applies to comedy, by repeatedly mocking the play within the film. Combined with Staiger’s idea of humanization, the vamp loses her fearsomeness and becomes more complex in the 1920s, laying bare the cultural ideology she represents. However, the best jokes contain an element of truth, and the film acknowledges the power of pathos. For example, during the play’s dramatic but ultimately happy ending, the film cuts to two teenage girls in the audience looking on in suspense and then happiness, as the heroine saves her love interest. Likewise, Violet seductively cuddles up to the villain in order to clear Jimmy’s name, but this expression of displaced passion (both for Jimmy and her dream of acting) brings the greatest importance to the silliest scene.

After successfully distracting the villain, Violet returns to the troupe’s train car, with her vamp costume concealed by a robe. She finds Jimmy has already heard the good news of his proven innocence and is eager to return to his sweetheart. Violet helps him pack and

smiles through tears as he says goodbye and that he hopes she gets to play the vamp part someday. He leaves and Violet opens her robe slightly to look at the vamp costume underneath. The final shot of the film, Violet smiling at the camera through tears, foreshadows Chaplin's acclaimed ending of *City Lights* (1929), where the Tramp's love interest, a formerly blind flower girl, recognizes him as the man who restored her sight, but not as the millionaire he pretended to be. *Exit Smiling* also ends with a close up of the main character smiling, torn between the joy of helping another and the sorrow of unrequited love. In his seminal book on comedy, Gerald Mast notes the poignancy of *City Light's* ending, but also argues that the ambiguity of this moment solves Chaplin's key dilemma, by avoiding "the joy of home but the horror of domestication" (109). Awarded this luxury by gender, talent, and fame, Chaplin could continue to wander as the Tramp, while Lillie returned to the stage, but not without contributing to a genre eager to explore women's roles in society and love.



**Figure 2.41** Charlie Chaplin in the final shot of *City Lights* (1931).

**Figure 2.42** Beatrice Lillie in the final shot of *Exit Smiling* (1926).

Like a slinky black dress under a heavy floral robe, discourse on female sexuality in the 1920s often hid itself behind careful social constructs. In her analysis of the

personas of sexualized flapper stars of the 1920s, Sarah Ross argues that Colleen Moore and Clara Bow both maintained a crucial element of innocence in their physical performances. The comedic nature of Moore's acting allowed for shifts between "pretending and being," resulting in the ability to "appear knowing and sexual, and at the same time, appear to be merely playing at being sexual" (420), while Bow, like a proto-Marilyn Monroe, exuded a naturalness that kept "it" from indecency. This careful interplay allowed for a safe, cinematic exploration of female sexuality before the stricter censorship codes of the 1930s. In a similar vein, advertisers of the 1920s and 30s marketed birth control (then illegal under federal obscenity laws) under the guise of "feminine hygiene products." These "ads in women's magazines portrayed the body as a source of sexual pleasure and marital happiness" (Sarch 31-2). The cultural discourse existed, and by camping the vamp, *Exit Smiling* framed Violet as a character with sexual desire and agency, but failed to envision this character in marriage, leaving the ending as hopeful and sad as Lillie's teary smile.

It may be easy for modern audiences to read feminism into a 90-year-old film, but what did contemporary audience think? Despite positive reviews from *Variety* and *Los Angeles Times*, *Exit Smiling* seems to have brought in poor to mediocre revenue, as based on feedback from exhibitors published in *Motion Picture News* ("The Check-Up" 454).<sup>12</sup> This could be due to different causes. First, although Beatrice Lillie was an acclaimed stage female comedian, her stage acts primarily hinged on her performance of humorous songs. Deprived of her voice in a silent feature, Lillie may have been alienated from fans

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<sup>12</sup> *Motion Picture News*' report is based on a small sample of reports from theatre managers around the country, on a scale of "poor," "fair," "good," or "big." Seven managers deemed *Exit Smiling* "poor," four "fair," and one "good." By contrast, another comedy of the same year with a female lead, *Ella Cinders*, received five votes for "fair," twenty-three "good," and nine "big."

by the disassociation from her usual vocal persona. The bittersweet ending may have been another factor. Genre theorists have called a film that uses the conventions of a certain genre but ends without a typical generic resolution as an anti-genre film. These generally make audiences uncomfortable because they imply that individuals are powerless. Yet, if this is the reason for *Exit Smiling*'s failure, it indicates a romantic comedy was well-established enough that audiences seemed disappointed when a film's ending failed to conform to the genre's conventions.

Regardless of its lack of financial success, *Exit Smiling* and its heroine illustrate important changes in cinema around women, comedy, and sexuality, laying the framework for the screwball genre, in which a zany heroine can create her identity as she sees fit and still pursue a successful romantic relationship.

### ***Conclusion***

All films discussed subtly challenged social ideas around gender and sexuality and used comedy to create romance. Yet the radical potential of willfully disregarding social rules is carefully couched in narrative explanations of role-playing or mistaken identity, and all in the name of the greater goal of love, deviating from the anarchic comedy of slapstick and allowing for a better ideological fit for an industry that would soon create the Hays Code, which required any deviant behavior within a film to be resolved by its ending. With the transition to sound and the dawn of the Great Depression, the cinematic and social landscapes would allow for even more ideological questioning, as comediennes became increasingly anti-heroic, shifting from flappers to gold-diggers, which I explore in the next chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### “CHASING OUR BLUES AWAY:” ROMANTIC COMEDY DURING THE LIMINAL ERA, 1927-1934

"In the days when the talkies were only a probability, who was among the first in chasing our blues away? None other than Marion Davies! A sure cure for the blues. If you can see Marion and not laugh, then there's no hope."

- Lucille Teets, fan letter to *Screenland*, August 1930

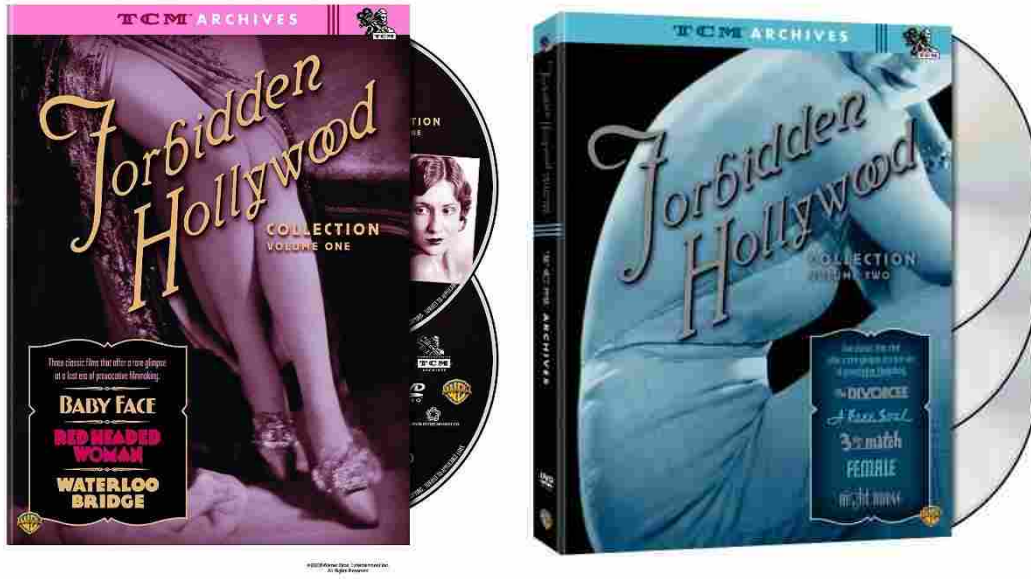
While it would be an analytical mistake to presume every film reflects its zeitgeist, this fan letter, extolling Marion Davies' comedic talents, with its references to the “blues” and “talkies,” laughter and hope, reflects the tumultuous era that was the first few years of the Great Depression and the transition to synchronized sound technology in film. In the first year of the Great Depression, as the unemployment rate began its steady incline from 3.2% in 1929 to 23.5% in 1932 (Morgan and Davies 4), "chasing away our blues" gained even greater importance, but the comedy of many films in this era not only distracted from a harsh reality, but also commented on and processed a changing landscape of emotional and economic labor. Whether she played a flapper, a mother, a gold digger, or a diva, the female comedienne was crucial to navigating this new cinematic and social world.

This chapter explores what I call the "liminal era"—roughly delineated from *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to the beginning of the Hays Code in 1934—in all its complexity, including the transition to talkies, the Great Depression, the borrowing of theatrical and radio traditions, the further solidification of the studio system and Classical Hollywood style, and the representation of sex and violence during the few brief years of toothless

ensorship.<sup>13</sup> In the previous chapter, I analyzed performative critiques of ideology around gender and heterosexual love in various films while comic subgenres—slapstick, sophisticated comedy, and parody—for the roots of the 1930s screwball comedy. In this chapter, I continue exploring different genres—a slapstick comedy of remarriage, the flapper film, and a sentimental or folksy comedy—which I argue made important contributions to the screwball genre, most importantly, for my feminist critique, by laying the groundwork for a more progressive framework of/for women in film. For various historical reasons, the liminal era was a moment of transgression and changes, where popular culture pressed hard against dominant ideology, if not ultimately disrupting it. While screwball would come to contain critiques of gender and class, by confining strong female characters to marriage and painting the wealthy as lovable buffoons, the films of the liminal era used comedy to challenge cultural ideals and values, even these challenges were contained by the larger narrative. I argue that the transgressive force of these liminal era comedies was absorbed, rather than rejected by the following period, post Hays Code, both helping to create a screwball comedy and giving the new genre its progressive views.

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<sup>13</sup> In cinema studies, the transitional period refers to the shift from a cinema of attractions to more narrative based films roughly 1905-1915 (Singer 76). Scott Eyman calls the transition to synchronized sound a “talkie revolution.” I prefer, the word “liminal,” with its connotations of being at a threshold, for this period of great change, 1927-1934, where several historical elements worked synergistically to create a unique and important period in film history, namely: synchronized sound technology and its effects on aesthetics, a larger cultural shift around the beginning of the Great Depression, and a pushing of boundaries before the establishment of the Production Code in 1934.



**Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2** Sexualized images of women used to market Pre-Code film on DVD.

The liminal era has often been romanticized as the “Pre-Code” era, in which active censorship was minimal and films were filled with sex, violence, and mature themes in way that wouldn’t happen again in the United States until the implementation of the ratings system in the 1960s. Marketing has doubtlessly contributed to this idea, as the only way to get many films from this era are from Turner Classic Movies’ “Forbidden Hollywood” DVD boxsets which feature sexualized close-ups of women’s bodies. The reality was more complicated—the Hays Code began in 1930, but would not be regulated by the strict requirement of certificate from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) until 1934—but there is some truth to the idea of the “Pre-Code” era, and many of these films challenged more than just censorship. As Thomas Doherty explains:

“Pre-Code Hollywood negotiated the cultural dislocations by venting insurrectionist impulses and reformulating American myths during a time uncongenial to their straight-faced assertion. Newly audible and becoming



articulate, relatively free and open to risk, it uttered challenges to traditional verities and flirted with political controversy, anything to lure back a lapsed audience with depleting reserves of discretionary income,” (Doherty 16-7).

These films not only depicted sexuality, but explored serious themes like prostitution, divorce, class, and gender dynamics, that pressed against societal ideals. Even breezy comedies, like Ernst Lubitsch’s *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), questioned dominant ideology including the feasibility of monogamy and the ability of love to transcend class distinctions. And like the DVDs pictured above, these ideological questions often focused on women. In this chapter, I explore these questions and the way they coalesce around comedic female leads in much more explicit way than will be seen “post-Code,” and the way in which these films will lay important groundwork for the subtler dynamics of the screwball genre.

The second important factor in the transgression of liminal film is a larger cultural shift in ideas of value in art. This began after World War I, in what Lea Jacobs describes as the “decline of sentiment,” as “[j]ournalists and reviewers first began to criticize films on the grounds that they were cloying, foolishly optimistic, or too intents on achieving big dramatic effects.” (Jacobs *The Decline of Sentiment* 9), while Rob King explores the relegation of slapstick to “hokum,” or films that would supposedly only appeal to rural or working-class audiences with no taste, specifically in early sound shorts. Though screwball comedies would receive more cultural acclaim—a good example being *It Happened One Night*’s Oscar sweep—King argues that comic logic of hokum, what he calls the “cuckoo style,” would survive in screwball comedy:

“[The cuckoo style] sustained a shadow existence as a means of class characterization in the Depression-era screwball style, for which absurdism became a fictive marker of upper-class lifestyles—whether negatively, as the sign of the elite’s irresponsible dissociation from the real world (in *My Man Godfrey*, 1936), or, more positively, as the sign of their repudiation of moribund class rituals in a supposedly democratic spirit of play (e.g., *Holiday* or *You Can’t Take It with You*, both 1938),” (*Hokum!* 53-54).

The synergy of high- and low-brow comedy in screwball, often clever wordplay with silly visual gags, is as crucial to understanding the genre’s handling of class as the narrative contrivances that bring a cross-class romance to fruition. But before this can be analyzed, we must first examine how the decline of sentiment and rise of hokum affected comedy and women in the liminal era.

The last factor to consider is the technological and resulting aesthetic changes in films of the liminal era. Sound technology not only fundamentally changed the aesthetics of film, but also the content and style. Studios invested heavily in importing Broadway scripts and talent (Jenkins 143), which changed the nature of comedy. Ernst Lubitsch found success with comic operettas starring Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier, which playfully negotiated sex and love in a fairy tale version of continental Europe (Balio 212-4). The anarchistic comedy of the Marx Brothers and other vaudevillians “celebrate[d] the collapse of social order and the liberation of the creativity and impulsiveness of their protagonist[s]” (Jenkins 22). Finally, Mae West played the iconic unruly woman in the popular film *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) (Karlyn 119).

Despite the game-changing technological shift to synchronized sound, the first two films I examine are not "talkies," although both include synchronized music and sound effects. This choice is, in part, to challenge the traditional split between the silent and sound eras in film history and emphasize the liminality of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Though the stars of the films I analyze—Buster Keaton, Colleen Moore, and Marie Dressler—were all important stars who have received critical attention, I am more interested in the ways in which their star texts shaped the narratives of their films and how these films commented on contemporary ideology.

My first film, *Spite Marriage* (1928), is commonly dismissed as unimportant in Keaton's larger oeuvre. Because critics often view Keaton and other slapstick giants (like Chaplin and Lloyd) with an auteurist lens, *Spite Marriage*, his last silent film and under the studio control of MGM, is often disregarded (Mast 143) by critics and fans. I argue, however, that the film has been overlooked as a significant silent comedy of remarriage that uses slapstick rather than sophisticated comedy. While my previous chapter analyzed *The Extra Girl* as a female-led slapstick feature, in this chapter I focus on the equality between the male and female lead (Keaton and Dorothy Sebastian) in both the narrative and the comedy as a crucial precursor to the screwball genre.

With *Why Be Good?* (1929), I discuss the flapper and her relation to comedy. Sarah Ross explains that flapper comediennes like Clara Bow and Colleen Moore carefully balanced sexuality and innocence in their performances, but I argue that within this balance existed an explicit critique of double standards that society imposed on young women in this era. In flapper films, the heroine's affection for the male love interest is shown to be sincere, but also not disinterested from his wealth. In both *It* and

*Why Be Good?*, the flapper-heroines are shop girls attracted to their bosses' sons within scenes where they express interest and admiration. One exclaims, in a line that emphasizes youth culture with its slang, "Hot socks! It's the new boss!" With this view of the flapper and what she represents, a savvy young woman who understands her position as an object of sexual desire and uses it to gain love and economic security, it is easy to see how this character transformed to the more cynical but still sympathetic gold-digger of the early 1930s, after the stock market crash made class divisions even starker. And while screwball comedies would adopt a more disinterested view of love (Sharot 583), cross-class pairings would remain, with women and men on both sides of the divide. Examples include working class woman and wealthy man in *Easy Living* (1937) and the opposite in *It Happened One Night* (1934) or *My Man Godfrey* (1936). This chapter will explore the ideological underpinnings of this cynicism and celebration of anti-heroes like the gold-digger and the gangster in the "Pre-Code" era, and how it later gave way to both the humanist screwball comedies of Frank Capra and dark screwball comedies like *Twentieth Century* (1934) and *Nothing Sacred* (1937).

With *Reducing* (1931), I examine an entirely different blend of cynicism and sentiment with the unusual stardom of Marie Dressler. Despite earlier success on stage and in film, including a starring role in the first feature-length comedy film *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), Dressler's career had declined in the 1920s until a sudden resurgence, when the actress was in her late 40s, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Though she began playing over-bearing mothers in films like *The Patsy* (1928), she soon starred in a number of MGM films where she played a heroic, working-class mother for both drama, *Tugboat Annie* (1933), and comedy *Prosperity* (1932), often co-starring with

fellow slapstick veteran Polly Moran, with whom she shares an onscreen friendship-rivalry. I argue that their film, *Reducing*, most clearly critiques materialism, youth culture, and even romantic love, while simultaneously affirming values of family and motherhood. In screwball comedies of the mid- to late-1930s, parental figures were often comically ineffectual fathers and flawed mothers, who were nonetheless crucial to setting up the zany world in which the main couple could come together. Films like *Reducing* helped set up this dynamic.

While many scholars have examined separate aspects of this time period—the transition to sound, the Great Depression, lax censorship before the strict implementation of the Hays Code—my analysis attempts to look at these different facets synergistically, to understand how filmmakers and viewers coped and found comedy with a rapidly changing and often tragic world, to show that laughter, especially female laughter, was more than just escapism, but a powerful socio-cultural rebuke.

Because, after all, "if you [can't] laugh, then there's no hope."

### ***Spite Marriage as Remarriage - How Slapstick Became Screwy***

In *Spite Marriage* (1929), his last silent film, Buster Keaton grapples not with a boat or a train, falling rocks or a rampaging bull, but with a woman, as his character tries to carry his sleeping wife (Dorothy Sebastian) to bed after a night of champagne (Figure 3.3). The comedy of the scene derives from Keaton's struggles to lift her up onto the bed, as Sebastian slips through his arms, no matter how he tries to lift her. When he finally succeeds, taking off her shoes and tucking her in, the bed collapses. As Keaton's second

film under contract to MGM, it makes for an excellent case study of how slapstick comedy evolved under studio control during the transition to talkies.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3.3** Elmer (Buster Keaton) struggles to tuck a drunk Trilby (Dorothy Sebastian) into bed.

Scholarship on slapstick films tends to argue that figures like Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd represent the little guy combating forces of modernization, negotiating the relationship between man and machine in an industrialized world. Keaton especially demonstrated these motifs through his physical gags, which often “involve his ability to occupy a mathematically precise point within a dangerous process, allowing buildings to collapse around him while he remains unscathed within the tightly circumscribed safety zone of a window” (Gunning 75). Though the romance of these early, slapstick films often works as a catalyst to create these meanings, the love subplot is of little importance, and female characters have little

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<sup>14</sup> Keaton reportedly wanted *Spite Marriage* to be a talkie, but MGM refused, probably due to a limited number of sound stages (Bengtson and Vance).

opportunity for comedy or character development. For example, in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, Keaton's character loves the daughter of his father's rival. Though love forms the central conflict, the focus of the film is on the protagonist's relationship with his father, as he proves himself to be a capable steamboat captain. In *Spite Marriage*, however, a new approach to romance and humor illustrates changing views on gender and comedy even before the advent of sound could allow for witty, rapid-fire banter.

Histories of the romantic comedy genre generally begin in the 1930s, with screwball films like *It Happened One Night* (1934). However, screwball comedy, one of the most popular subgenres of romantic comedy in Classical Hollywood Cinema, relies heavily on slapstick elements—specifically absurd, physical comedy. Though slapstick films primarily showcase the physical comedy of the male protagonist, the narrative is fueled by attempt of “the boy” to win “the girl.” In this way, slapstick can be viewed as a kind of proto-romantic comedy, the roles of the “leading woman” reflecting changing social mores around gender and love. Though the technological innovation of sound caused drastic changes in cinema with regard to genre and narrative, this paper examines the broader historical context, particularly the societal changes that allow for a shift in comedy, from slapstick to screwball, where the physical humor remains but is augmented and heightened by characterization and a complex interplay of gender roles.

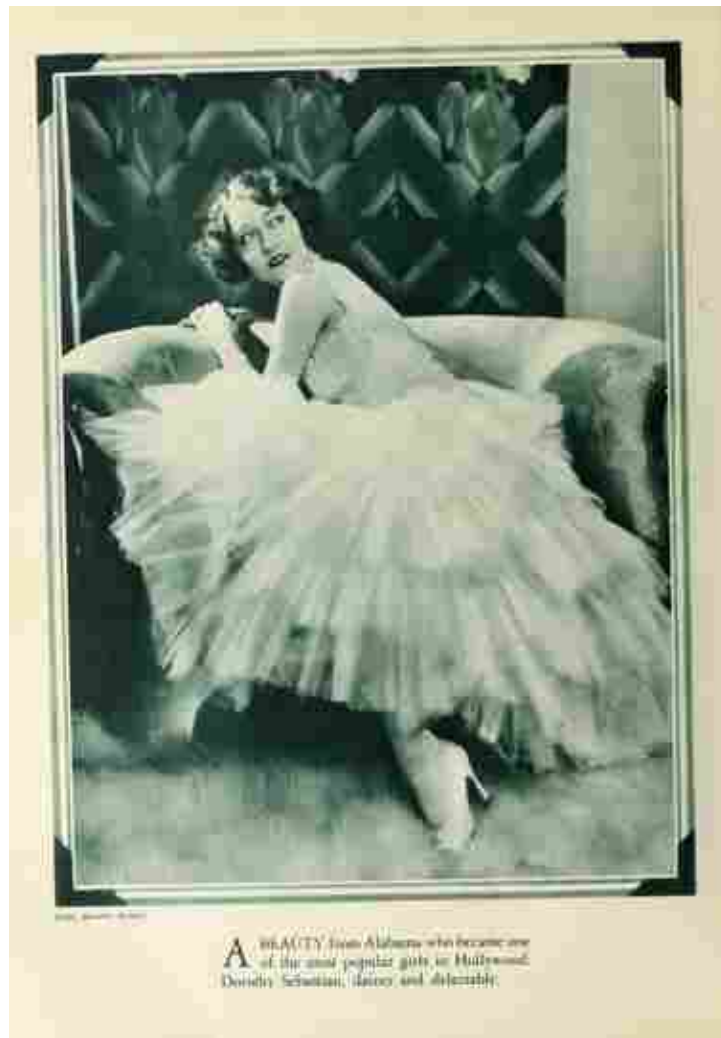
With a long and influential career in cinematic comedy, beginning with the short *The Butcher Boy* with Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle in 1917 and ending with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1966, Buster Keaton makes for an excellent subject in studying the evolution of American film comedy. And because *Spite Marriage* was shot and released during the transitional period from silent to sound cinema, it is an

ideal entry point into the discussion of Keaton's work and the changes that occurred in cinematic comedy during this time period. This film is also unique in Keaton's oeuvre, as his recent contract with MGM limited the usual creative control he had over his work, marking a change from his earlier slapstick films, like *The General* (1926) and *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928) which he largely wrote, directed, and produced. These two films in particular are now widely acclaimed, but were critically and commercially unsuccessful when they opened, indicating that audiences were seeking a new kind of comedy. At MGM, Keaton made two silent films, *The Cameraman* (1928) and *Spite Marriage* (1929), both directed by Edward Sedgwick, before moving on to sound comedies that were based on Broadway farce (Kramer 51). Though largely disregarded by modern critics, Keaton's MGM films turned profits (Tatara), indicating that these films were more reflective of contemporary tastes.

Less has been written about Dorothy Sebastian, but at this time she was an up-and-coming star, whom film magazine *Screenland* described as a "beauty from Alabama who became one of the most popular girls in Hollywood," (72). She appeared in both drama and comedies, from 1924 to 1948 ("Dorothy Sebastian"). In her review of *Spite Marriage*, *Screenland* editor Delight Evans says "[Sebastian] emerges as one of the best little comediennes on the screen. 'Spite Marriage' is as much her picture as it is Buster's" (52). The recognition of Sebastian's comedic talent and its importance to the film is significant, especially from a contemporary, female reviewer. Film historians have been less interested in Keaton's oeuvre once he joined MGM, arguing that studio interference compromised his auteurism (Knopf 32). Alan Dale describes Trilby as a "contemptuous, bitchy Circe," and sees her as part of larger pattern in Keaton's films, where romantic



relationships are never idealized (97-98). Yet not being ideal and being a bitch are separate things. *Spite Marriage* is not only interesting for showing how slapstick adapted to the studio system at the dawn of the sound era, but for how it incorporates changing views of women and love. Rather than the boy-meets-girl scenario typical of slapstick and Keaton films, the plot of marriage, divorce, and reconciliation drive the comedy and character development of the film.



**Figure 3.4** A promotional photo of Dorothy Sebastian from a February 1929 issue of *Screenland*.

In *Spite Marriage*, Keaton stars as Elmer, a lowly employee of a dry-cleaning shop, who is in love with celebrated stage actress named Trilby Drew (Sebastian). In an attempt to impress her, Keaton poses as a millionaire by borrowing his customers' evening suits and attending all her performances. However, Trilby only has eyes for her handsome co-star, Lionel Benmore<sup>15</sup> who has recently left her for a "society blonde." In an attempt to make her ex jealous, she impulsively marries Elmer, divorcing him once she has sobered and discovered his real identity. Fate throws them together again when they find themselves on the same luxury boat, she as a passenger and he as a sailor. After the others evacuate the ship during a false alarm, the two are left alone. When the boat is captured by rumrunners, they must work together in order to escape danger. In so doing, they fall in love. Though the film ends with the usual climax, in which Keaton uses his comedic acrobatics to save his love interest, *Spite Marriage*'s narrative takes a radical departure from previous Keaton films by focusing more on internal than external conflict and showing character development for both Elmer and Trilby as essential to the success of their relationship. Both characters idealize someone (Lionel for Trilby, Trilby for Elmer) and use manipulation and deception in attempt to get closer to the object of their affection. It is only when comic predicaments force them to accept each other's flaws that their relationship can succeed. In this way, the film is a clear comedy of remarriage and important precursor to screwball comedy of the 1930s.

As defined by Stanley Cavell, a comedy of remarriage, which he identifies as a unique genre seen in Depression-era American cinema, in which a couple divorces or separates then comes back together (1-2). Examples include *His Girl Friday* (1940) and

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<sup>15</sup> A playful reference to real actor, Lionel Barrymore.

*The Awful Truth* (1937). Though Cavell avoids the word “screwball,” his film selection overlaps too neatly with a traditional canon of screwball comedies to ignore. The significance of remarriage as a plot structure is its departure from traditional New and Old Comedy as delineated by Northrup Frye, both of which end in marriage. Cavell’s heavily philosophical book argues that the comedy of remarriage is an important indicator of more equality for women and modern cultural ideals of happiness. While David R. Shumway disputes the idea that comedies of remarriage provided any significant challenge to the cultural ideology of marriage (464), the genre itself is still historically significant. Though the genre fails to radically challenge ideologies of gender and sexuality, the general equality seen between a male and female lead in screwball/comedies of remarriage remains notable when today’s romantic comedies still struggle with this.<sup>16</sup>

Later scholars have noted that comedies of remarriage occur earlier than the 1930s and 40s, most notably with Cecil B. DeMille’s divorce comedies (*Vermillion* 359). Yet *Spite Marriage* differs from these because of its use of slapstick genre conventions. Keaton humorously interacts with cars, boats, and other set elements in a style similar to his earlier movies. In one scene, he jumps from a speeding car just before it drives off a dock. In another gag seen in his earlier films *A Haunted House* (1921) and *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), Keaton accidentally gets glue on himself and struggles to interact with objects as they stick to his hands. Other than the two protagonists, the characters are played straight,

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<sup>16</sup> Consider the popularity of Judd Apatow -directed, -produced, or -inspired romantic comedies in the past 10 or 20 years, where marriage or a romantic partnership is seen as a marker of maturity, rather than inherently fulfilling. *Trainwreck* (2015), for example, swaps the typical gender dynamic so that an immature woman (Amy Schumer) must mature to make her relationship with a sensible doctor (Bill Hader) succeed, but neglects to show why marriage is preferable. Unlike a screwball comedy, the couple adjust to society rather than creating their own.

in keeping with traditional slapstick, which centers on an unusual character defamiliarizing the normal world (for example, Charlie Chaplin's Tramp character) rather than the screwball motif of a more or less normal character put into surreal circumstances (like William Powell in *My Man Godfrey*). However, *Spite Marriage* had several traits that are essential to the slapstick genre seen within the film's characterization, narrative, and humor, as well as the careful interplay between these three aspects.



**Figure 3.5** The opening shot of *Spite Marriage*, in which Trilby (Sebastian) is emphasized by framing and costuming.

In terms of characterization, Trilby is particularly unique in comparison to Keaton's other heroines. The female characters in Keaton's earlier slapstick films are often characterized by their families, who play a role in the nature of the girl's romance with Keaton. In *Sherlock Jr.* (1923), the girl's father forbids the romance because he thinks Keaton's character is a thief. In *The General*, the girl's father thinks he is a coward for not enlisting in the Confederate Army. In *Our Hospitality* (1923) and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, it is a family rivalry that keeps the two would-be lovers apart. The narrative is then

driven by Keaton's attempts to redeem or vindicate himself to the girl's family. Trilby's family, however, is never seen or mentioned. What is seen is her luxurious costuming—fur wraps, fashionable dresses, and jewelry. These indicate her financial independence, due to her career as a successful actress, which allows for her own desires in love and courtship. Her ostentatious costuming places the focus on her as an individual character rather than letting external factors determine who she is and how the audience views her.

Though there were certainly slapstick comediennes in earlier films, these women usually replaced their male counterparts as the comic lead, as we saw with Mabel Normand in *The Extra Girl*, or supported a male comedian as a love interest, without their own character development, as we see with Edna Purviance and Charles Chaplin in the majority of their films. Comparing two female characters in Keaton's films demonstrates this shift in how women are portrayed in comedy clearly. *Spite Marriage* draws a comparison to *The General* in particular, as Trilby performs the role of a Southern belle in the play Elmer attends, echoing Keaton's love interest Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack) in *The General*. In a scene where Keaton and Annabelle Lee fuel the train engine as they flee from the Yankees, she throws away a large cord of wood because it has a knot in it, then hands Keaton a small (but aesthetically pleasing) stick to throw into the fire. Keaton begins to throttle her in exasperation, but instead kisses her. Though the female character does share in the physical comedy, the humor does not contribute to her characterization. In this case, Annabelle Lee is funny because she is inept—yet this is not a quality of her character, but rather a stereotypical assumption about women. Annabelle Lee is not a character, but an archetype—the damsel in distress.



**Figure 3.6** Trilby (Sebastian) comically throws a tantrum in her dressing room.

By contrast, Trilby's humor stems from her character. In a scene where she comedically throws flowers around her dressing room, wildly flapping her arms, after being rejected by Lionel, Trilby conveys the rage and despair that will motivate her actions to the audience, even though the viewer may laugh at her spoiled behavior. Though still physical, this humor differs from Annabelle Lee's; Trilby throws tantrums not because she is a woman (her rival, the society blonde, is noticeably cool and collected), but because she is a diva. Here Trilby is more similar to Keaton's typical characters rather than his slapstick heroines. Trilby's actions derive from her character (which includes her occupation as an actress), while Annabelle Lee's actions derive from her type (a damsel in distress). In this way, Trilby and Elmer are put on more equal footing, in terms of what their comedy is and what it conveys to the audience.

This distinction is crucial in mapping the differences between the slapstick and screwball genres. In a screwball romantic comedy, the characterization of the heroine is essential to the narrative and the humor. For example, in *Bringing Up Baby*, Katherine

Hepburn's decision to marry Cary Grant sets up the various, absurd situations (like chasing the dog around the yard and house in hopes of finding a missing dinosaur bone). Likewise, Trilby's decision to marry and divorce Elmer creates the comedy of remarriage in the film. Like her humor, this narrative control also puts her on more equal footing with her male counterpart. Though Trilby at first seems selfish and cruel, her actions stem from her developed character. Before her spite marriage, Trilby tells her co-star, "I have a millionaire who gives me flowers! That's more than *you* ever did!" In the context of the scene, in which she confronts Lionel for flirting with another woman, it is clear that she is telling him how she wants to be treated, rather than expressing potential interest in Elmer. Though her relationship with Lionel illustrates the degree to which she is driven by her own desires, her romance with Elmer forms the overall narrative. Millionaire or not, Elmer must win Trilby's heart rather than conform to a societal expectation of who he should be in order to earn love.

But the fact that Elmer is not wealthy is also crucial to categorizing the romance of the film. The relationship between a wealthy heroine and middle- or working-class hero recurs in screwball comedies of the 1930s and 40s (*It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby* being two prevalent examples). Critics have argued that this dynamic reflects increased awareness of class differences during the Depression, but, in so early a film, this theme has broader implications. With financial independence, a woman can enter a relationship with more equal footing. The increased gender equality of screwball comedies reflects changing social views toward love, marriage, and gender relations (Lent 315).

This gender equality is important, as the plot structure of *Spite Marriage* is based on whether or not the couple will fall in love, rather than the more slapstick trope of saving the girl from certain danger, like Keaton did in *Our Hospitality* with the spectacular stunt of catching the girl as she fell down a waterfall. In her article “Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy,” Tina Olsen Lent analyzes two common narrative arcs in screwball comedies: the marriage plot and the remarriage plot. Lent contextualizes her film analysis with historical conditions during the 1920s—one in seven marriages ended in divorce, and fewer people were getting married (314). This societal shift reflected changing gender roles and relations as the “New Woman” of the 1920s began voting, working, and flirting. Lent argues that the screwball romantic comedies of the 1930s addressed changing social views of love and marriage—which had become more about companionship and less about financial security.

These themes can be seen in marriage comedies like *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *Holiday* (1938). In each, a character is about to marry someone for practical reasons rather than love, until another character comes along with whom he or she eventually finds mutual sexual and emotional attraction. In comedies of remarriage, like *His Girl Friday* (1940) or *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), the couple divorces because of a problem (he works too much or she is emotionally and sexually distant) that is ultimately resolved, leading to their remarriage. For both plots, friendship and compatibility must be obtained in order for the relationship to succeed. This resolution stands in marked contrast to slapstick films where the hero only has to rescue the heroine in order to earn her love. In slapstick, a character like those played by Keaton must prove he can conform to society’s ideals of bravery despite his comedic foibles, as



in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, when the foppish lead is suddenly able to work the steamboat and save the girl during the climactic flood. In screwball, however, it is the character's eccentricity that earns him or her love—a love based on individual desire rather than societal expectations, as seen in the relationship between the reserved paleontologist and the impulsive heiress in *Bringing Up Baby*. *Spite Marriage* uniquely combines marriage and remarriage plot, as well as slapstick and screwball conceptions of love.

The relationship between Trilby and Elmer is characterized by elements of both marriage and remarriage. Because they did not actually know each before marriage, they must fall in love by the end of the film, but this union is building toward an implied remarriage. Like other remarriage plots, their relationship must restart after their divorce; both must grow as characters in order to resolve their differences. This disillusionment happens halfway through the narrative, just before the setting changes from the city to the boat, allowing for a slapstick solution (Keaton rescues the girl from the villains) to a screwball problem (divorce).

After Trilby impulsively marries Elmer to spite her old flame, the two go to a ritzy nightclub where she gets drunk on champagne, fights with Lionel and his new love interest, is kicked out of the club, and passes out. Elmer carries her to bed (as described earlier in the chapter) before going to sleep in a separate bed in the adjoining room. Scene then cuts to an intertitle reading, “The dawn after a spite marriage,” then to a close-up of Trilby's face with a miserable expression and far-off look in her eyes, indicating remorse—a physical and emotional hangover. The camera zooms out, revealing that she is sitting on the bed with Lionel and another man (presumably her manager) standing on either side of her. They urge her to leave, arguing that the news of her marriage to a lowly

“pants-presser” will hurt her image and assuring her they will get rid of Elmer (the truth of Elmer’s identity, though known to the audience, had not yet been mentioned previously, implying that Trilby had only just learned this information). Not only is her successful career as an actress at stake, but also her financial independence. The initial close-up on Trilby’s sad expression highlights the humor of the situation as she grasps the potential consequences of her impulsive actions, while simultaneously forcing the viewer to empathize with her. The positioning of the two men standing over her also implies a power dynamic and degree of influence. All these factors paint Trilby as a sympathetic and believable character, which makes her later reconciliation with Elmer more convincing as a romantic resolution to the narrative.

The next scene shows that Elmer has bought a stuffed animal for Trilby in attempt to cheer her up; her drunken shenanigans have not put a damper on his affection. He enters her room to find Lionel and the manager who explain that Trilby has left him. As they leave the hotel, Lionel tells Elmer, “You see, my dear fellow, your wife is actually in love with me.” Upon hearing this, Elmer punches Lionel in the face. Violent physical humor is rare for Keaton; he is much more likely to evade an enemy than confront him (Bengston and Vance). Even in *The General*, where he eventually becomes a Confederate soldier, he is only able to kill Union soldiers through comedic accidents. This violence toward Lionel conveys the emotion not seen in his famously deadpan expression, while his anger, jealousy, and sadness cause his disillusionment with Trilby that will force their relationship to restart when they next see each other. The significant role that emotions and character motivations play in forming the narrative distinguishes *Spite Marriage* from a typical slapstick and place the film more in the genre of romantic comedy.

Elmer begins a new job as a deckhand on the boat, culminating in a humorous sequence where he struggles to paint the mast of the ship. As he falls and struggles with the ropes, the physical humor derives from his precarious location. A clever overhead shot reveals how high he is above the deck and rushing water, emphasizing the danger he is in each time he slips on the ropes. After he learns how to maneuver on the ropes and can finally begin his job in earnest, he learns Trilby is a passenger on board the ship when he sees her lounging on deck, flirting with Lionel, who assures her the blonde meant nothing to him. This high angle shot establishes his point of view, making the next shot his reaction. In this reaction shot, he falls again, but the humor has changed; rather than simply struggling with the physical world in typical slapstick fashion, his physical reaction is a manifestation of his shock. He quickly descends and requests permission to work below deck. Throughout the film, physical humor is not just used for comedic effect, but is also subtly linked to characterization and narrative, as it helps the audience better understand the romantic relationship between the two main characters.

The use of a physical gag could be crucial to the narrative in silent comedies. In his autobiography, Keaton recounts a gag he used for his film *The Navigator* (1924), in which he directed schools of fish underwater as if they were cars at a traffic stop. Audiences laughed at the gag when it was shown in a trailer, but when it was shown with another test audience in the larger context of the film, there was no response. Keaton argues that “it fell dead because it showed the hero interrupting the job of saving himself and the girl” (Keaton 175-6). As comedy cinema shifted from shorts to feature length films, the plot had to be more narrative driven in order to sustain an audience’s comedic interest. As comedy shifted again from slapstick to screwball, the focus on narrative

became even more important, to the extent that characters could no longer be archetypes (“the girl” and “the boy”). Instead they became more unique and complex characters working with each other through their problems. Clearly, audiences expected more complexity, not only in their dramas but also in their comedies. As Keaton’s anecdote above demonstrates, physical gags were still enjoyed, but only when they worked in concert with narrative and empathetic characters.

The acts of physical comedy in *Spite Marriage* (Trilby throwing tantrums, Elmer punching Lionel and falling off the mast) not only develop the characters, but also allow the audience to understand their desires and their potential for romance. Many theorists have discussed the relationship between gag and narrative in slapstick. Donald Crafton argues that slapstick gags disrupt the narrative (356). In an analysis of the Hal Roach short, *His Wooden Wedding* (1925), which, naturally, ends with marriage, Crafton argues: ““man and woman are joined (visually wed) at the moment that the division between narrative and spectacle is balanced, but not resolved, and the film must end” (361). In other words, marriage symbolizes an orderly, narrative closure to the disruptions caused by gag-spectacles. As with traditional feminist critique, marriage is an ideological and filmic dead end.

However, I argue that with a narrative shaped by the concept of remarriage, the gags instead function as important character and relationship development. For example, in *Spite Marriage*, the same scene is played twice. First, Elmer watches a scene from the Civil War play Trilby stars in. A later night, the scene is played again, but this time Elmer replaces one of the extras on stage. As he continually fails in his performance from over-applying make-up and facial hair to destroying the set, the façade of theatre slips away.

Because he idealizes Trilby as a star, this scene foreshadows his disillusionment with Trilby, which will eventually allow his character to fall in love with her as flawed person rather than an idealized image.



**Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8** Trilby (Sebastian) and Elmer (Keaton) playfully work together to achieve their goals.

At the film's climax, Trilby and Elmer work together to defeat the bootleggers, as she lures them into hallway on the yacht with a flirtatious pose, where Elmer jumps out of a doorway and knocks them unconscious with a champagne bottle. Instead of disrupting the narrative, this gag playfully emphasizing the teamwork and camaraderie of the couple as they achieve their goals. Lent argues that these playful antics are a crucial element of screwball comedies. A major reason for this emphasis on jovial, physical comedy comes from the limitations imposed by the Hays Code: "The extreme physicality allowed the characters to touch intimately, but humorously, offering alternative outlets for repressed sexual energy. Furthermore, the screwball antics paired the would-be lovers to show their physical harmony and compatibility" (328). Though the Hays Code was not yet in effect when *Spite Marriage* was filmed, the physical play of the couple forms the majority of their scenes together and provides the chief characterization of them and their

relationship. The playful, fun element of their antics is emphasized by the structure that they must work together to solve some problem but are not usually in danger. This light-hearted play pauses the narrative but develops the romantic relationship. The levity of the situation remains and the audience's amusement transfers to the characters and their relationship.



**Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10** Keaton plays the “straight man,” reacting to Sebastian’s comically drunk but haughty performance.

The first scene of their play occurs shortly after their marriage. The newlyweds go to Café Bohème, a luxurious speakeasy that “catered to actors...and those who paid,” as an intertitle explains. Initially, Trilby plays the straight man, as Elmer struggles to light her cigarette without lighting a napkin on fire or pour her champagne without knocking over the vase of flowers at the center of the table. Trilby angrily glares at Lionel and the society blonde seated at a table across the room. She quickly drinks glass after glass, oblivious to her husband’s bumbling. However, the dynamics of the humor suddenly shifts as Elmer realizes the amount of alcohol Trilby has just consumed and gives her a dumbfounded look; he has become reasonable and she is now absurd. This shift between who plays it straight and who is absurd emphasizes the dynamics of their relationship and

how well they complement each other; the comedy of one could not be complete without the reactions of the other.

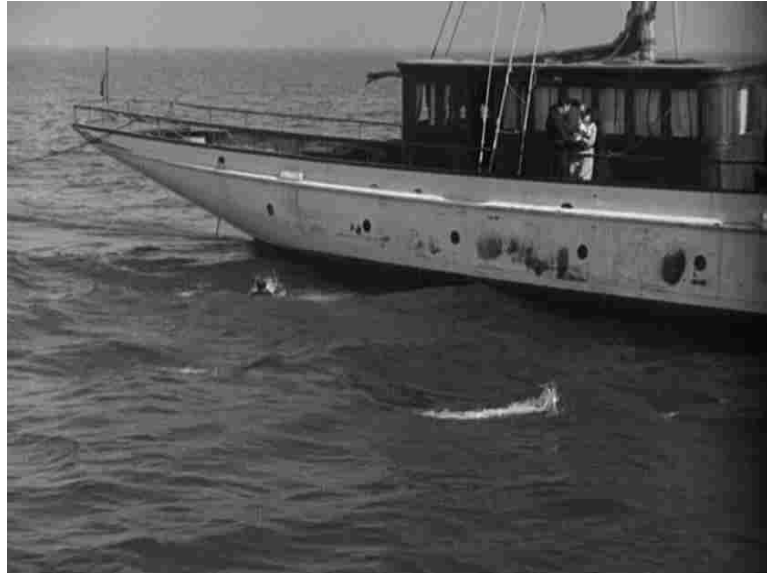
The humor of their actions also humanizes them and endears them to the audience. During her drunken tantrum, a waiter touches Trilby's arm in attempt to calm her down. Elmer angrily smacks his hand away and yells at the waiter, while Trilby continues causing chaos. Despite her ridiculousness, Elmer is still loyal to and protective of her. As they leave the club, Trilby haughtily wraps her fur around her shoulders and stumbles away with her head held high in an attempt to make a dignified exit—only to realize that she has somehow lost her shoes and is now barefoot. Elmer quickly retrieves them for her, but has trouble putting them back on as she is revealed to be very ticklish. The reaction shots of Lionel and his blonde, appalled by the scene, emphasize the humor. Trilby and Elmer are not just embarrassing themselves; they are refusing to operate within the bounds of decorum, establishing themselves as sympathetic individuals. They are perhaps alienated from their surroundings but have found companionship within their romance.

This scene ends with Trilby and Elmer in each other's arms as they stagger from the room—tipsy but unified. A later scene on the ship also emphasizes their playful, physical compatibility, but this time ends in disunity. In this scene, Elmer falls into an unfurled sail and struggles to climb from the slippery cloth. In attempting to help him out, Trilby falls in, obligating Elmer, who has just escaped, to dive in again to help her. He carries her out of the sail, but when they reach the deck she lingers in the embrace. Elmer notices this and gently unwinds her arms, evidently still upset. In their final comedic scene together, they fight the bootleggers, who have commandeered the ship, and regain

control. Victorious but exhausted, Elmer collapses in Trilby's arms as she holds him and expresses concern for his wounds. By expressing empathy and unselfish concern, Trilby proves her capable of compassion and selfless concern, allowing the scene to end in reunification. The narrative arc of marriage, separation, and remarriage is echoed in the couple's physical comedy and dynamism.

The scenes utilizing physical humor not only relate to narrative and character in a way that differs from silent film, but they are also shot in ways that signal a significant shift in how visual comedies look. In the aforementioned scene at Café Bohème, part of the humor derives from the reactions of the other characters (Lionel, the blonde, and the waiters). The reaction shots are key to situating the context of the comedy. The physical comedy is not just happening; it is being observed and judged by the world of the film. This stands in contrast to many slapstick scenes, where the absurdity is normal in context but humorous to the audience. Examples include Keaton's struggle against the windstorm in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* In this scene, Keaton, who fell asleep in a hospital bed, awakens among a group of cows after his bed has been blown by the wind into a nearby barn. Had there been another character present, it is safe to say she would not have laughed at Keaton, as she would also be coping with the wind. Though many of the comedic scenes in *Spite Marriage* occur when the two characters are alone, the scene at Café Bohème establishes the characters within the film. This diegetic ridicule unites the two characters as people who belong together due to their eccentricity.





**Figure 3.11** In a long shot, Trilby (Sebastian) fights the villain, as Elmer (Keaton) tries to swim back to the boat.

The cinematography in *Spite Marriage* also differentiates the film from earlier slapstick. Across his body of work, Keaton tended to prefer long shots in order to emphasize the scope and danger of the physical stunts. Reaction and POV shots were less common, as these emphasize minor characters and the effect actions have on character relations. In this way, slapstick lends itself well to the “masterpiece” analysis criticized by Karnick and Jenkins. In his earlier films, Keaton’s vaudeville roots are clear; he is acting less as a character in a narrative and more as a performer for an audience. This dynamic changes with Keaton’s work in romantic comedies for MGM, and thus this mode of analysis becomes less relevant. While there is a significant long shot in *Spite Marriage*, but it still works to unite Trilby and Elmer as a romantic couple. After a lengthy fight, the main villain throws Elmer off the ship’s bow. In the long shot, the viewer sees Elmer in the water as the boat passes and Trilby on the deck as the villain rushes toward her. When Elmer reaches the stern of the boat, he climbs back on board

and manages to overpower the rumrunner. Though this shot does draw attention to the skill and danger of the stunt, the parallel action of Elmer being swept out to sea and Trilby being attacked by the bootlegger also works dynamically to heighten the suspense of the climactic scene. Even in this instance, the comedy is inextricably linked to the romantic narrative.

After Elmer defeats the villain, Trilby notices his injuries and cries out in alarm. He responds with a curious line: “A scratch is nothing to a Southern gentleman!” This references an earlier line spoken in Trilby’s play, when her Southern belle character notes the injuries of her injured Confederate lover played by Lionel. When echoed by Elmer, the line becomes humorous—he saves the day, but it was far from graceful—but it also brings up interesting questions regarding performance, masculinity, and play. Before he meets her, Elmer’s love for Trilby was based on her persona as an actress and her role as the beautiful damsel in distress. Part of their path to remarriage involves him discovering and falling in love with the real Trilby—not the character she performs—but part of his initial attraction comes from the way Trilby embodies the idea of performance. Actors play a character, and as previously discussed, the idea of play is essential to the dynamics of Elmer and Trilby’s relationship. When they actually get the chance to play the hero and damsel in distress, it consummates the performativity that first inspired their relationship—he would perform the part of the millionaire in an attempt to win her, and she would play the part of the newlywed in an attempt to win back her ex. This play of heroism also lets Elmer delineate his own form of masculinity, one that is not based on power or class.

A recurring gag is introduced during the opening scene of *Spite Marriage*: Elmer, in a top hat and suit, waits with Trilby's wealthy fans as she exits the theater. After she leaves, the gentleman say goodbye to each other by shaking hands and tipping hats. Elmer struggles to fall into the rhythm of these gestures, either tipping his hat when someone tries to shake his hand or extending his hand when the other part has already begun to tip his hat. When the audience learns that Elmer is not really a wealthy gentleman, the connotation is clear: Elmer cannot truly fit in with the upper-class, despite his convincing disguise. This sentiment is echoed when Trilby is assured that being with someone so lowly will injure her career. At the end of the film, Elmer returns to the city with Trilby safe and the criminals tied up and awaiting the police. After he drops off Trilby at the hotel, he tells her how nice it was to see her again. She replies, "You're going to see a lot of me from now on!" before taking him by the arm and leading him into the building. As they enter, Elmer attempts to greet the doorman, falling into the same handshaking/hat-tipping trap as before. From this brief and silly gag, we see Elmer is still the same person, but that Trilby loves him anyway. As in many screwball comedies, their romance has solved the ideological conflict of class. Despite his small, pratfall-induced physique, gentle demeanor, and low economic status, Elmer proves himself capable of rescuing Trilby and earning her love. His brand of masculinity—one that includes buying stuffed animals and retrieving lost high heels—contrasts sharply with the two other models provided in the film: Lionel, who leaves Trilby for another woman and abandons her at the first sign of danger, and the head rum-runner, who attempts to force himself on Trilby. In the face of this selfish, masculine excess, Elmer is a gentle, caring man, more

fitting of a new kind of romantic comedy—one that demanded mutual attraction and equal footing.

No longer the pure auteurist slapstick text associated with the classic films of Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd, and not quite screwball, *Spite Marriage* is a difficult film to categorize and has thus received little critical attention. Yet it plays a crucial role in understanding the roots of screwball comedy that would flourish in the 1930s. A humorous new emphasis on romantic duos can be seen in other types comedies of the liminal era. The wild success of early sound musicals *Love Parade* (1929) and *Love Me Tonight* (1932) relied on the comedic romance between Jeanette MacDonald's prim persona and Maurice Chevalier's amorous one. The anarchic comedies of the Marx Brothers almost always included a subplot, wherein money-hungry Groucho attempts to woo Margaret Dumont's wealthy, oblivious widow. Even friends becoming lovers between Joan Blondell and James Cagney in the crime dramedy *Blonde Crazy* (1931) and the Busby Berkeley musical *Footlight Parade* (1933). This cross-genre pattern seems to suggest a greater emphasis in the liminal era on understanding romantic relationships as a dynamic interaction between a couple, rather than simply an end goal of marriage.

Though the other films discussed in this chapter will provide other important elements of screwball comedy, *Spite Marriage* demonstrates what is most key to my feminist analysis of the genre, which is the fact that integral to its comedy is the equal, playful relationship between the central couple and their journey. Under the studio system, slapstick became less auteurist and male-focused. Keaton's other silent film under MGM, *The Cameraman* (1928), also focused more on the romantic interest (Marceline Day) and their relationship, although this relationship was less comedic than

Trilby and Elmer's. As slapstick became more narrative and thus developed its female characters better, another subgenre of romantic comedy was growing in popularity and making even further strides in feminist potential: the flapper comedy.

***“Sweet Santa Claus, give me him!” – Desire and Class in Flapper Comedy***

Perhaps the most iconic aspect of 1920s American culture was the flapper—the young, modern woman with a fashionable bob, short skirt, and carefree attitude to life and love. Unlike her predecessor, the athletic and independent New Woman of the 1910s, the flapper was characterized by consumerism and hedonism. The persona of the flapper was important for many performers, most notably Colleen Moore and Clara Bow, who both enjoyed great popularity in the mid to late 1920s with their comedies. Though not slapstick performers, their physicality was central to their new brand of femininity and sexuality, as they danced, flirted, and played. Whereas the vamp's sexuality was languid and consumptive, the flapper's was active and playful, as seen above in the screenshots comparing Theda Bara and Clara Bow. This playfulness was central to the flapper persona and an important component of their modern femininity. As Lori Landay explains, “there is a ludic embodiment of femininity that transcends the limited subjectivity of self-commodification and encourages the flapper spectator to imagine and emulate a playful subjectivity that is not simply enslaved to commodity culture” (“The Flapper Film” 223). Though the flapper would be long passé by the mid-1930s, she is a clear predecessor to the zany, strong-willed heroines of screwball. In this section, I explore why comedy was so central to flapper femininity and how this figure helped paved the way for screwball comedy. For this exploration, I chose the flapper comedy *Why Be Good?* (1929). Like *Spite Marriage*, the film is a late silent picture, with

synchronized music but no dialogue. While much work has been done on Clara Bow and her film *It* (1927), *Why Be Good?* has been overlooked by critics, even those who study its star, Colleen Moore. Yet this film is much more explicit in both its sexuality and feminist critique while still uniting this critique with its themes of family and class, making it a clear predecessor to the screwball tradition.



**Figure 3.12** The vamp versus the flapper: Theda Bara and Edward Jose in *A Fool There Was* (1914). **Figure 3.13** and Clara Bow and Antonio Moreno in *It* (1927).

Like Clara Bow, Colleen Moore’s stardom was bright and brief. Though she would come to be known for her flapper roles—F. Scott Fitzgerald called her “the torch [of] flaming youth”—she started by playing girlish roles for a variety of studios, such as an abused orphan in *Little Orphant Annie* (1918). Yet Moore soon found her way to comedy, becoming a top-billed actress in two-reel comedies for the Christie Film Co. In the advertisement above, Moore is featured and pictured dressed as a man, from a scene in the film, *Her Bridal Nightmare*. The film begins with a romantic rival (Gene Corey) determined to disrupt the wedding between Mary (Moore) and her fiancé (Earl Rodney). Yet the focus of the story soon centers on Mary, who decides to kill herself, thinking her kidnapped fiancé has deserted her. She fails her suicide attempts in darkly comic gags, including jumping in front of moving cars that swerve at the last minute, in a sequence

that foreshadows a similar set of gags in Buster Keaton's short film *Hard Luck* (1921). Her Christie films were popular and allowed her to practice the physicality of her comedic acting, which "would become one of her hallmarks in later years," (Codori 58-9).



# “Her Bridal Nightmare”

featuring

## Colleen Moore

is the next

# Christie Comedy

As usual it's a comedy in a class by itself.

There's no getting around it —the more we see of Christie Comedies the more we are convinced that they are

## “The Specials that are Specials”

DISTRIBUTED THRU

Mid-West Film Corporation	Toy Building, Milwaukee
Crescent Film Corporation	Kansas City, Missouri
Standard Film Corporation	St. Louis, Missouri
Merit Film Company	Minneapolis, Minn.

And

## Celebrated Players Film Corporation

### Chicago



Figure 3.14 Advertisement for *Her Bridal Nightmare* (1920) in *Exhibitor's Herald*, Vol. 10, Issue 7, February 14, 1920.



Moore eventually settled at First National, where she petitioned for her star-making role as Pat, a precocious adolescent flapper in *Flaming Youth* (1923) (Desjardins 122-3). The film, now mostly lost, shocked audiences with its sexuality, but was popular and cemented Moore's vivacious, youthful star persona. Though she made a few successful sound pictures in the early 1930s, her popularity had waned and she retired in 1934 (Desjardins 135). She continued working creatively by touring her fairy doll house, which has been analyzed by Amelie Hastie as a unique insight into women's film history.

*Why Be Good?* was released at the height of Moore's career. Posters for the film feature her almost exclusively and reference her work in *Flaming Youth*. The film seemed to do fairly well, with *Variety* reporting that "Colleen Moore [is a] local favorite, and flaps went heavy for her" ("Canary Tears" 8). As for the film's sexuality, critical reception seemed to differ by location. *The New York Times* called the film "antedated" ("A Problem Picture") while *Harrison's Reports* said, "Not a single one of the characters awakens any sympathy, and the theme is too raw. [...] If you are in a small town, you will hurt your business if you show it" ("Why Be Good?" 79).<sup>17</sup> Like the poster above, which contrasts Moore's childlike facial expression with her long legs, *Why Be Good?* hovers between naughty and nice with its playful romance and melodramatic family drama about class differences and proper behavior for young men and women.

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<sup>17</sup> This comment also gestures to a rural/urban divide in film reception, particularly around sexuality. It is also important to note that the flapper was a figure of urban modernity: "The New Woman, the working girl, and the female shopper are all types of female presence associated with the city of modernity," (Parsons 43).

**"Why BE Good?"**

"WHY BE GOOD?"  
—When it's so much more thrilling to be bad!

—WHY BE GOOD?"  
—When you meet Prince Charming who is wise, wealthy and wonderful!

Does it PAY to be good or is it BETTER to be bad!

—WHY BE GOOD?"  
—When you want to impress him with your worldly wisdom.

**COLLEEN MOORE**

**"WHY BE GOOD?"**

SHE'S at it again. Making hilarious whoopee! . . . This daring darling is on another intriguing tour into the lands of love and whoopee . . . This time her excursion is personally conducted by Cupid . . . She's a shop girl. Seeking sensations. She finds them. And HOW! . . . Is it BAD to be good? Or GOOD to be bad? Colleen demonstrates in this 1929 version of Flaming Youth. . . See this exponent of inandescendent youth! HEAR the hilarity. Vitaphone adds to the whoopee!

A Vitaphone production by Carey Wilson with Bill Hamilton.

**A First National Vitaphone Picture**

John McCormick presents

First National VITAPHONE  
Every Picture a "Sound Picture"

When you wish to advertise place mention PHOTOPLAY MAGAZINE.

Figure 3.15 An advertisement for *Why Be Good?* (1929), heavily featuring lead actor, Colleen Moore. *Photoplay*, April 1929, pg. 17.

*Why Be Good?* (1929) stars Colleen Moore as Pert Kelly, a working-class flapper and department store employee, who falls in love with a young man she meets out one-night dancing and drinking. Unbeknownst to her, the man, Winthrop (Neil Hamilton), is the wealthy son of her employer. Winthrop loves her, too, but his father doubts Pert's morals, which leads to the climactic scene of *Why Be Good?*, wherein Winthrop decides to test her virtue by taking her to a hotel and showing her to the bedroom. She angrily chastises Winthrop for thinking she would have premarital sex with him. He apologizes profusely and the two end up happily married.

Film scholars largely consider slapstick comedy of the 1910s as reflecting and appealing to a working-class audience with its anarchic, physical humor (Hansen 76), while screwball comedy of the 1930s, usually with upper-class characters and milieus, have been characterized as escapism (Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy*, 5). Though I will critique the idea of screwball as nonpolitical escapism in Chapter III, the genre's frequent focus on wealth is undeniable. Yet so is its frequent use of cross-class romance, as in *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *My Man Godfrey* (1936). I argue the flapper comedy of the 1920s was a crucial mediator between the preceding and coming decades. Flapper comedies frequently utilized a very specific Cinderella-style trope in which a department shop worker falls in love with the owner's son, as seen in *It*, *Why Be Good?*, and *My Best Girl* (1927). This trope recognizes class differences in American culture and the economic duality of the modern woman as both a consumer and a laborer.

Yet youth culture's emphasis on "makin' whoopee" could elide class differences, as seen in the opening scenes of *Why Be Good?*<sup>18</sup>

The film begins with the male love interest, Winthrop Jr. (Hamilton) as he parties with his wealthy friends to celebrate his "last day of freedom" before he begins working in his father's department store. After an establishing shot of a posh, high-rise apartment, the viewer is thrown into a vivacious world, where couples dance, frequently switching partners, a man and woman flirtatiously play-fight with visual emphasis on her bare legs, and partygoers swarm a drink cart. In a display of synchronized sound technology, a flapper excitedly turns up the volume knob on a speaker and the diegetic jazz soundtrack blares louder. Dancing, drinking, and sexuality are so closely aligned as to become synonymous, which will lead to the central conflict of the film. After a scene of Winthrop's father warning him not to "get involved" with any of the shop girls at the department store, the film cuts to a place "less elegant, but equally loud," a dancehall called Jazzland, where Pert Kelly (Moore) wins a dance competition. She stands out from the other young women with her tight plaid dress and whirlwind dancing. A close up of her legs are almost a blur. Though men dance too, it is the women's body that takes the camera's focus, and in this early Vitaphone film, it is her dancing that connects the visual to the audio.

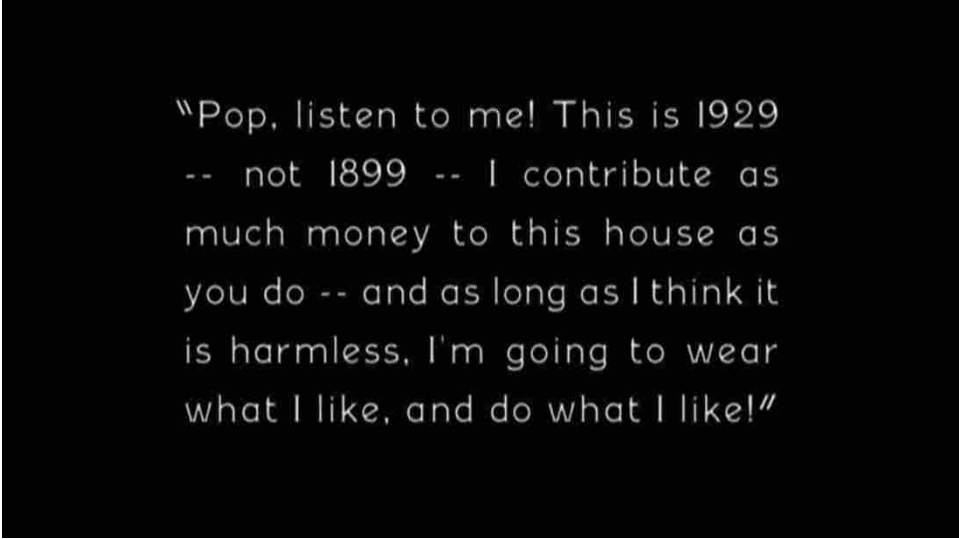
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<sup>18</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "whoopie" meant a good time, but sometimes with amorous or sexual connotations. The hit jazz song "Makin' Whoopie" came out a year before *Why Be Good?*



**Figure 3.16 and Figure 3.17** *Why Be Good?* begins by juxtaposing a wealthy, private party with a public dancehall, collapsing class differences between the two main characters through youth culture.

In her work on early slapstick comediennes, Maggie Hennefeld sees the mutability of women’s bodies as internalizing “the constant potential for rupture and change, [indexing] the violence of the world around them by partially morphing into it and physically incorporating it” (73). But unlike early trick films, flapper films eschew comic violence and disruption. Yet the flapper-comedienne’s frenetic action also reflects her cultural context. Lori Landay describes this as a ludic “kinaesthetic,” reflecting an era of amusement parks and automobiles, dance marathons and modern art (“The Flapper Film” 231-4). Landay argues that this kinaesthetic, as seen in the performances of Colleen Moore, Clara Bow, and Joan Crawford, blurred subject and object, performance and embodiment, allowing spectators to emotionally identify with the flapper-heroine (“The Flapper Film” 243). As a champion Charleston dancer, Pert reflects modern sexuality through its signifiers, dance and jazz, but maintains her own agency as a character, which is made explicit through dialogue. When later chastised in this film by her father for staying out late and wearing a short dress, Pert replies:

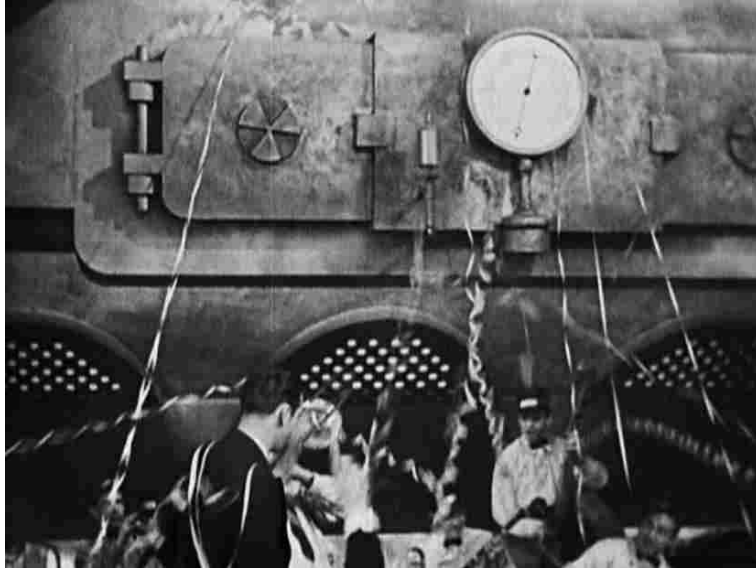


"Pop, listen to me! This is 1929  
-- not 1899 -- I contribute as  
much money to this house as  
you do -- and as long as I think it  
is harmless, I'm going to wear  
what I like, and do what I like!"

**Figure 3.18** In an intertitle, Pert asserts her freedom.

Pert notes the change in social mores since her parents' generation and argues that her ability to earn money also earns her the privilege of indulging in recreation and consumption, literally illustrating larger social changes in how women behaved.

The conflict between Pert and her father reflects not only a generational divide but a cultural one. The characters' surname, Kelly, and Moore's larger persona as an Irish American star reflect themes of Americanization as well as modernization. Diane Negra explains that the onscreen depictions of "the Irish girl" were "engaging performative, yet chaste and unthreateningly white," bringing a Victorian femininity into the 1920s liberalized sexual norms (32). Yet Pert's mother is shown to be sympathetic and reminds her husband of how he courted her when he objects to Pert's new suitor. Again, *Why Be Good?* and its flapper heroine mediate between the old and new, rejecting the propriety of the father while utilizing the sentimentality of the mother and the idea that love is universal.



**Figure 3.19** Even the speakeasy—The Boiler Room—collapses social distinctions as a work environment becomes a play environment.

It is only fitting that Pert and Winthrop first meet at a place that also blurs the line between production and consumption, a speakeasy called “The Boiler” fashioned as an industrial steam room, where beer is served from oil can rather than tankards. Like a proper screwball heroine, Pert is the assertive one, immediately staring at Winthrop as he enters the room. In a tracking shot, Pert dances with her date, but admires Winthrop as he walks by, quickly spinning her head around to look at him, whenever her partner spins her away. In reverse shots, Winthrop smiles back.



**Figure 3.20** Pert admires Winthrop, from over her dance partner's shoulder.

Pert's clear sexual attraction and flirtatious behavior is couched in playful physical acting. Sara Ross notes this as a key aspect of Moore's acting that led to her success as a flapper-comedienne:

Moore's consistently funny face gave the assurance that, no matter how unbridled her flapper roles became, she was always only playacting. By portraying flapperhood as the act of playing at being a flapper, Moore's performances supplied the ideal comic formula for reconciling the expression of sexual sophistication with a more fundamental innocence. Performance style, and particularly physical comedy, thus provided a means of offsetting some of the more controversial aspects of the flapper or modern girl (417).

I agree with Ross, but additionally, it is critical to note the importance of physical humor for women in film. Unlike Chaplin or Keaton, whose gags stemmed from their coping with machines of modernity or structures of authority, Moore updates slapstick to the flapper figure by navigating a social world controlled by men, like the one who spins her



around the Boiler Room in this scene. Rather than simply using humor to undercut frank sexuality, Moore and other flapper comediennes use comic performances to actively pursue their desires.

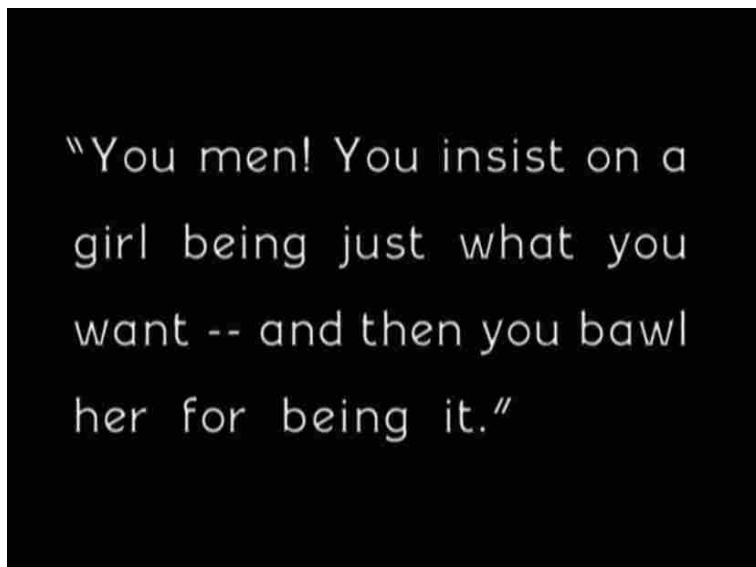


**Figure 3.21** The couple cuddle/play/flirt without intertitles.

This playfulness and demand for personal pleasure transfer to Pert's romance. After her current partner passes out drunk, she meets Winthrop. For over thirty seconds, she and Winthrop talk in a booth, but with no intertitles. Instead, their conversation is communicated visually through their play. Finally, an intertitle provides Pert with the line "I think I'd better close the deal with a cash deposit," and kisses him. The transactional metaphor shows that if modern femininity is built by consumption, then so is modern love.

Still, the flapper's typically lower socio-economic status causes her morals to be in question. As a result, films with a flapper protagonist always must prove the virtue of their heroines (while also celebrating their comic trickery). In *It*, Clara Bow angrily rejects her wealthy suitor's offer to keep her as a mistress and quits her job as a matter of

principle. In *My Best Girl*, Mary Pickford unconvincingly pretends to be a loveless gold-digger after being convinced her love interest would be better off without her. Both moments play well to their performer's personas, Clara Bow's fiery temperament in the former and Mary Pickford's self-parodic melodrama. But it is Colleen Moore's character, Pert, in *Why Be Good?*, who explicitly articulates the double-standard she faces as a working-class, modern woman. This happens in the climactic scene, when Winthrop takes Pert to a hotel to test her purity. First, we see only Pert's horrified reaction shot to the bedroom (leaving modern viewer to imagine a much more risqué scenario) before she turns to leave, chastising her suitor in with an explicit critique of gender norms:



**Figure 3.22** In an intertitle, Pert speaks to the sexual double standard women face in 1920s society.

By calling out a double standard wherein men still expect women to be virgins as well as drinking, smoking, dancing playmates, Pert articulates the paradox of modern femininity. Because this cultural critique is voiced by the heroine in intertitle dialogue, the film portrays the flapper as self-aware, canny, and navigating through a complex sexual and economic landscape, rather than the Mae West-style gold-digger shaped purely by material desire. The romantic comedy, then, is uniquely able to lead its characters to the

ideological goal of heterosexual love and marriage, while simultaneously questioning and destabilizing these ideas through the misunderstandings and playfulness of courtship.



**Figure 3.23** Pert and Winthrop dance in pajamas.

Despite the drama, the central conflict is resolved through gentle humor. Winthrop's father is awakened by the sound of jazz music. He comes downstairs to find Pert and Winthrop wearing pajamas and dancing. The father's shock quickly disappears when Winthrop explains that Pert is a "good girl" and that they recently got married. The film ends with Pert's warm welcome into the family. As with Moore's characters and acting style, this scene combines sexuality frankness with innocence. The pajamas, though less revealing than her dresses, indicate sexual and emotional intimacy between her and Winthrop. But, most importantly, the film ends as it began, with Pert dancing in her modern, flapper style, with joyous, frenetic leg movements. Yet she has transcended the jazz club to join wealth and respectability. The flapper's body may be the site of blurred identities, but it is the ludic joy of her dance with her new husband that

legitimizes the modern woman with American ideology of upward mobility and marital bliss. An ideology that struggles to survive with the start of the Great Depression.

### **Marie Dressler and Polly Moran – Reassuring Chaos**

While slapstick and flapper films have received ample critical attention, the last genre I examine in this chapter, the sentimental comedy of the early 1930s, has not. Tino Balio briefly mentions "sentimental or folksy comedy"<sup>19</sup> as a popular favorite in the early 1930s (258). A *Variety* review of *Reducing* (1931), describes it as a:

“Rough and tumble hoko comedy story addressed to the banana peel sense of humor, with a flavoring of sentiment almost as hokey, and all saved by the genius of Marie Dressler for getting the human quality into everything she does. The Dressler-Moran name on the marquee insures [sic] trade and profit, but the production is no credit to the metro. [...] Second run potentialities are even better probably than the class spots. It’s that kind of picture,” (“Reducing”).

With the emphasis on physical humor, it’s clear this subgenre of the Dressler-Moran sentimental comedy was understood as a permutation of slapstick, with a working-class, “hokum” appeal. The slapstick lineage is no surprise, given both stars experience with this comic style. Before her tenure at MGM, Marie Dressler was most famous for what is often considered the first feature length comedy, *Tillie’s Punctured Romance* (1914), while Polly Moran was a veteran of Mack Sennett comedies. Both actresses found renewed stardom at the dawn of talkies as ideas around femininity and motherhood shifted within the dark early days of the Great Depression.

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<sup>19</sup> No connection to the 18<sup>th</sup> century dramatic genre of sentimental comedy, though there are probably fascinating parallels.

Dressler, who was said to be a bigger box office draw than Greta Garbo at her peak (Martin and Segrave 55), has recently been recovered by film scholars like Victoria Sturtevant. Yet Polly Moran remains in her shadow, both in billing and in scholarly study. Yet their comic dynamic, portraying bickering friends with starkly different personas and values, remains notable as an example of a successful female comedy duo, a barometer of social values in the early 1930s, and precursor to the screwball formula of a zany duo play-fighting to strengthen an important relationship. This section will examine the unique stardom of Dressler and Moran, the surprising success of sentimental comedy at a time when sentimentality was thought to be on the decline, the ideology of family as represented in *Reducing*, one of their nine successful films together, and how this subgenre also sets the stage for the rise of screwball comedy.

***“For I’m the Queen:” Self-Effacement and Strength in the Star Persona of Marie Dressler and Polly Moran***

When the bigger studios finally embraced the transition to sound, they heralded it with lavish productions, like MGM’s *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*, with almost all of their stars, fully synchronized sound, and even technicolor scenes. MGM, particularly adept at promoting its stars, engineered this spectacular two-hour musical to showcase their talents, be it beauty, humor, and/or star persona.<sup>20</sup>

One surprising star was the then 61-year-old actress Marie Dressler. The veteran of stage and screen, her cinematic career height to that point was her starring role in the

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<sup>20</sup> Lon Chaney, perhaps their biggest star, aside from Greta Garbo, did not make an appearance, but there is an entire number, “Lon Chaney’s Gonna Get You If You Don’t Watch Out,” featuring chorines being chased by male dancers in various monster masks. Omitting Chaney maintained the dignity and private nature of his persona, while the song about him campily reminded audiences of his talent for make-up and acting, particularly in horror films.

Mack Sennett comedy, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), with Mabel Normand and Charlie Chaplin. Yet her career plummeted after *Tillie*, for various reasons, until Frances Marion, a friend and major screenwriter at MGM, helped her break back into films.

By typical Hollywood standards, Dressler was heavy-set, unattractive, and old, a stark contrast to MGM's other top female stars, Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford. Yet, in *The Hollywood Review*, Dressler stars in her own number. "For I'm the Queen" has her dressed in a large crown, robe, and excessive costume jewelry, and comically brag about what she can do as a queen. With both her body and voice, her performance creates satire by combining the serious and ridiculous. She stands still with her head held high, but occasionally makes a silly face or gets carried away by the background music, until she forcefully regains her composure. She speaks in a regal, almost English accent, yet makes joke at her own expense: "I'm the queen! / Once as Lady Godiva I was seen / The poor nag died of course / not from shame or deep remorse / 'Twas my weight that killed the horse / Still I'm the queen!" In close up, Dressler recites these lines proudly, lifting her fist in the air with the final line, "Still I'm the queen!" It's an odd, dated scene, in an odd, dated film, but I argue that this performance, with its curious synergy of humility and dignity, is the key to understanding Dressler's stardom within the context of the early Depression-era, in stark contrast to the young, thin, and beautiful flapper-comedians of just a few years ago, who suddenly struggled to find good roles.



**Figure 3.24** The expressive Marie Dressler as “The Queen” in MGM’s *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*.

Dressler was not a complete anomaly, making her stardom even more compelling. Her frequent co-star, Polly Moran, was another older, slapstick film veteran, who found success during the transition to sound. And while Mae West was certainly more glamorous than Dressler and Moran, she too had a much different physicality than the flapper comedians before her. Though much has been written about Mae West and her subversive, even queer, stardom, during the transition to sound, Dressler has only recently been reexamined by film scholars. Her films with MGM seem conventional; Balio describes them as sentimental comedies, for Depression-era audiences (258). Yet even today, older, heavier, and “unattractive” actresses struggle to find roles in films. What made Dressler, not only a success, but one of the most beloved comedians of the early 1930s?

Dressler's stardom stems from a significant historical moment, combining the collaborative effort of women within the film industry and the importance of working-class audiences at the start of the Great Depression. Dressler's popularity in theater led to her casting in *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, and though the film was a success, contract disputes and changing tastes led to a steep decline in her film career (Lee 100). Press-pieces cited Dressler's hard-work and humility to her eventual reentry in the film industry, after a period of few acting opportunities in the 1920s (Baldwin 55). Crucial to this comeback was her friendship with MGM screenwriter Frances Marion, who wrote a vehicle for her and Wallace Beery titled *Min and Bill* (1930). The melodrama starred Dressler as a coarse but compassionate landlady of a fishing village inn, who sacrifices her happiness for her adopted daughter's. The working-class *Stella Dallas* was a hit, as was Dressler's performance as an alcoholic loose woman in Garbo's first talkie, *Anna Christie* (1930). A reportedly improvised line in this film, in which a well-timed hiccup in place of the expletive, allowed her character to say the line to Garbo's, "Well, kid, it's a hell of a life at best," showcases Dressler's talent at blending pathos and humor verbally, as well as physically, which doubtlessly contributed to her career's resurgence at the beginning of synchronized sound technology (Lee 176). Dressler continued to star in both dramas and comedies for MGM until her death in 1934. Many of these films were written by women, like Marion and Zelda Sears, presumably to appeal to women who were seen fans of both sentiment and farce. This compelling combination is best seen in these Dressler-Moran comedies where the mother and the family is simultaneously mocked and celebrated, and in Dressler's dignified yet self-effacing comedy style, as seen in the "For I'm the Queen" segment described above.





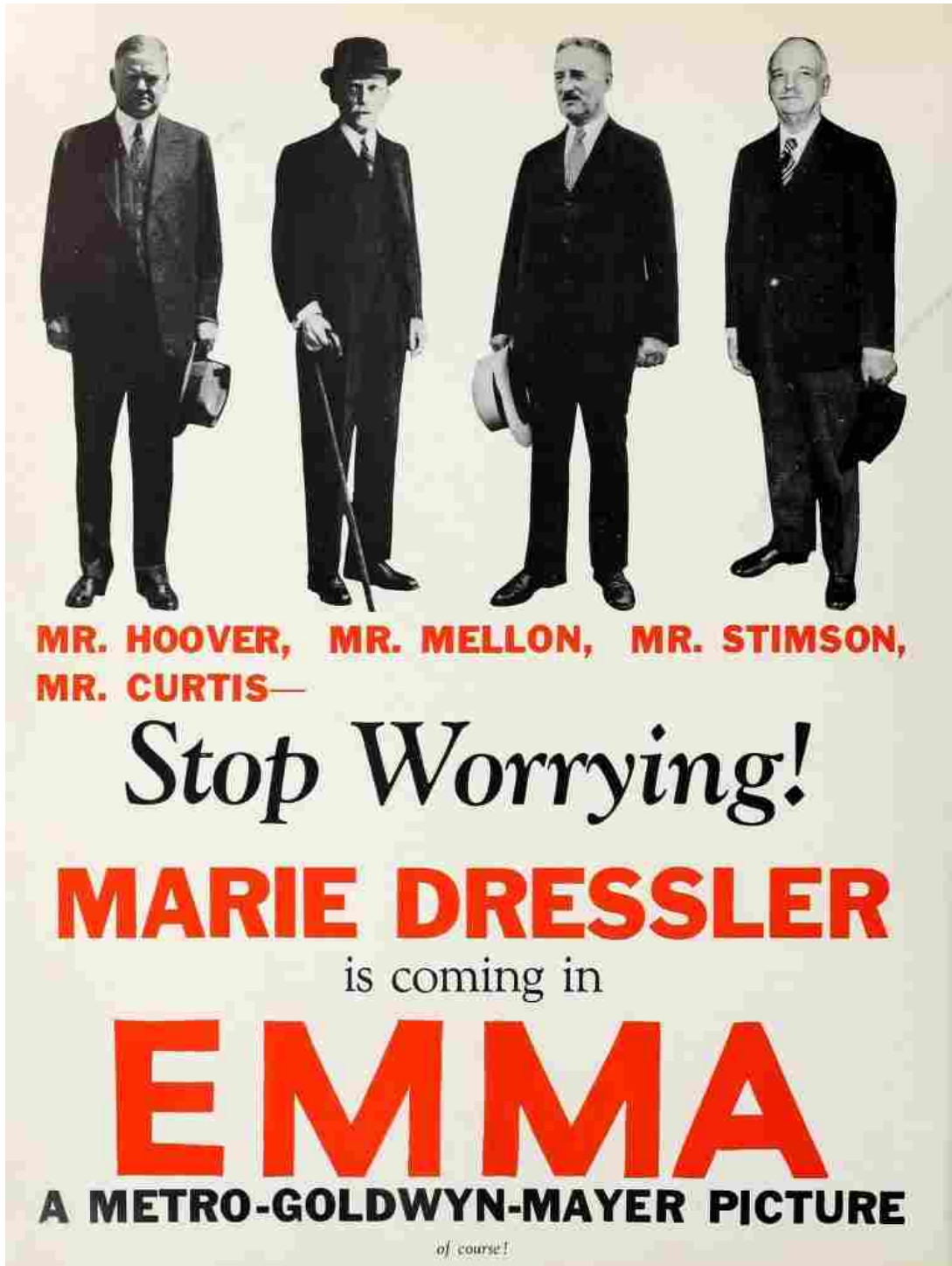
**Figure 3.25** Polly Moran as Sheriff Nell in *Sheriff Nell's Tussle* (1918)

Less has been written about Polly Moran, though she was also a talented comedian with a lengthy career in slapstick. She began working in the 1910s for Mack Sennett appearing as a character “Sheriff Nell,” the fearless lawwoman of a western town in a series of shorts from 1917-1920 (Walker 89). Though these films are difficult to see today, contemporary reviews describe her character as confident and capable, often in contrast to a bumbling Ben Turpin (Bourstein 524). This comic persona continues in her later, sentimental comedies but with an ironic twist. Moran’s characters are usually more assertive, wealthy, and opinionated than Dressler’s, yet it is only the humble but determined Dressler character who is able to remedy the film’s conflict and reunite the family. In this way, these sentimental comedies can critique class and propriety, while upholding the virtues of family and friendship.

### ***“Stop Worrying!:)” The Family Under the Great Depression***

The narratives of the Dressler-Moran comedies rely so deeply on themes of class, gender, and family. In *Reducing* (1931), Moran is a wealthy New Yorker who invites her impoverished country sister (Dressler) and her family to join her in the city. Trouble ensues when their respective daughters compete for the affections of a young millionaire. In *Politics* (1931), Moran urges Dressler to run for mayor as the men have been unable to root out corruption and crime. Both of their daughters are caught up in the crime, when they date bootleggers. In *Prosperity* (1932), Moran accidentally causes a run on a bank that Dressler owns. Matters are further complicated by the fact that their respective children are married to each other. All three films intertwine issues of family with larger political or economic concerns, so that protecting and reuniting the family is directly connected to saving the economy, democracy, or class relations.

The marketing of these films also emphasized these themes in connection to the larger issue of the Great Depression. In a fascinating advertisement (Figure 3.26), MGM explicitly connects Dressler to current economic woes. Instead of photos of the film or any description of its plot, the advertisement shows President Hoover and other politicians, urging them not to worry because Marie Dressler is coming soon in the new film *Emma* (1931). The ad emphasizes the president whose perceived ineptitude famously led to shantytowns being named “Hooverilles” in his honor and claims that Dressler can somehow help, reifying her comic persona as a maternal figure who saves the day.



**Figure 3.26** An advertisement for *Emma* (1931), referencing current political/economic troubles.

But why do these films emphasize this connection between the smallest unit of society (the family) to the largest (the country)? To answer this, I analyze *Reducing*, one of the nine films Dressler and Moran made together. *Reducing* follows the antics of Marie Truffle (Dressler), her husband, teenage daughter, and young son, as they travel from the country to the city to live with her wealthy sister, Polly Rochay (Moran) and her teenage daughter. Polly's success comes from her beauty parlor where she helps women reduce, leading to a scene rife with physical comedy as she attempts to teach her sister how to operate various exercise machines, inevitably leading to slapstick disaster. While Polly and Marie negotiate class differences and sibling rivalry, their teenage daughters, Joyce (Sally Eilers) and Vivian (Anita Page) respectively, fall into a love triangle. Joyce's wealthy boyfriend, Johnnie (William Collier, Jr.) falls in love with Vivian, but Joyce is pregnant. Marie saves the day by talking to Johnnie into marrying Joyce in a comic-dramatic scene.



**Figure 3.27** In an unruly bit of physical comedy, Marie attempts to recover money hidden in her bra for safe keeping.

As in her other films, Marie Dressler is the feminine unruly, regularly disrupting or destroying physical or social barriers, with only a mild embarrassment or chagrin. For example, in the opening scene Marie buys train tickets for her family, but not before she expresses outrage about the prices, tries to decide what kind of seats she wants, struggles to recover her money from her bra, and snaps at people who are angry at her for taking too long. She asserts her right to be in the line and get fair treatment, while also playing up her large body for comedic effect. Yet Dressler's unruliness is not altogether transgressive. She is a good mother, shown to be more than capable of caring for mischievous boys, a naïve teenager, and an ineffectual husband, despite their economic hardship. Thus, the film implies that in the chaotic world of the Great Depression, chaotic behavior can be the best solution. In this way, Dressler opens the door for a style of comedy that could take the "low-brow" elements of physical humor, but place these elements in more prosocial, sentimental narratives.

Though not quite anarchic, *Reducing* does contain many physical and verbal critiques of gender and class. In the most destructive scene, Polly gives Marie a tour of her posh beauty salon,<sup>21</sup> the source of her wealth and success. In a few minutes, Marie manages to destroy an expensive pane of glass with a chair and a treadmill, electrocute Polly with a weight-loss device, and knock a fully clothed Polly into a mud bath. Marie unwittingly transfers the unpleasant aspects of the environment onto the one who reaps the economic benefits of telling women they should look a certain way. The art deco set design of the salon and Polly's apartment are particularly telling of her bourgeois values. The film also uses verbal humor as critique. For example, when Polly brags about her

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<sup>21</sup> "Reducing" was the contemporary word for what we would now call dieting.

daughter dating “a prominent young millionaire,” Marie retorts: “The only millionaire I know back home is a bootlegger.” With this quip, Marie argues that wealth has no connection to a person’s quality or ethics.



**Figure 3.28 and Figure 3.29** The destructive physical humor in a beauty salon critiques gendered and classed expectations of appearances and values.

Marie’s comic attack on the art deco beauty salon can also be read as a rebuke on the cultural values of only a few years ago—the cult of youth, beauty, and luxury seen in flapper films, like *Why Be Good?* The best piece of evidence for this reading of *Reducing* is its casting of Anita Page as Dressler’s daughter. Beautiful, young, and blonde, Anita Page often played a tragic victim of love in MGM films, including the Joan Crawford flapper trilogy: *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), *Our Modern Maidens* (1929), and *Our Blushing Brides* (1930), in which her characters respectively die after drunkenly falling down a staircase, gets pregnant from an affair, and commits suicide after being spurned by a lover. In *Reducing*, her Page plays a Dressler’s good-natured but naïve daughter, who is swept off her feet by her cousin’s millionaire, playboy fiancé. When Dressler learns that her niece is pregnant, she comically but capably sets the situation right, convincing the playboy to go back to his fiancé, and her daughter to return to her humble but loving boyfriend. Thus, *Reducing* reconfigures the flapper and her representation of

love and sexuality, by turning the young characters and their romantic drama become a mere problem for mothers to solve.



**Figure 3.30** Marie Truffle (Dressler) offers wisdom to her daughter, Vivian (Anita Page).

Still, the most powerful moment of class critique comes when Marie confronts this prominent young millionaire about impregnating and abandoning her niece, Joyce. She pushes her way past his butler and into his mansion, where she stands above him, her frumpy coat and silly hat contrasting with his sleek dressing robe and elegant bow tie. He offers money. She replies: “Money? No. No, it’s not money. That’s what wrong with you, son. You think all you got do is break and destroy everything and then you can pay for it with money. You’re all wrong. All wrong.” In a film released less than two years after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, viewers easily could’ve seen this as a larger rebuke of the upper-class. Yet Johnnie does the right thing and marries Joyce, leading to the

ultimate reconciliation of the family, after an explosive argument between Marie and Polly. As with screwball comedies, marriage resolves class conflict, but that conflict is still a vital part of the narrative.



**Figure 3.31** Working-class Marie (Marie Dressler) confronts millionaire Johnnie (William Collier, Jr.)

In the end, though, *Reducing* is not a screwball comedy. The plot veers too closely to melodrama for zaniness, and Marie Truffle is, despite her clumsy, blunt ways, extremely competent. Based on this continued persona in both melodrama and comedy, this maternal trope must have been comforting in the first dark days of the Depression, which MGM even explicitly used in their marketing. The ideological import is curiously progressive and conservative. The authority of the patriarchal figure (and the capitalism it represents) is rejected, seen here in the frail, luckless character of Mr. Truffle, while the traditional mother rises to the challenge of protecting the family. In later screwball comedies, both father and mother (or uncle and aunt, grandfather and grandmother) would prove inept, though usually benevolent, creating a societal microcosm that allows for the zany unpredictability and freedom of screwball comedy.



Still, *Reducing* (1931) is an important film to consider in the history of screwball because it foreshadows the eccentric family trope of screwball, seen in films like *Three Cornered Moon* (1933), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), and *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), and disrupts the flapper romantic comedy-drama genre. In a film where the patriarchal figure is inept, Dressler's unconventional but reliable way of setting things right, reassures a nation in the depths of the Depression, seemingly caused by inept men and making the world screwy. Screwball comedy continues of making normal aspects of life screwy. For example, we all accept the educational importance of dinosaur fossils, but when we watch Cary Grant feverishly follow a dog around the house and yard in the hopes of recovering a missing bone, the whole concept suddenly seems ridiculous. Still, it is a shocking moment, at the end of *Bringing Up Baby*, when Katherine Hepburn knocks down the entire Brontosaurus display. The act must simultaneously matter (in order for it to be humorous) and not matter (in order for the possibility of their relationship to be real). It is the same illogical logic behind the advice Dressler gives her daughter in *Reducing*: "I tell you there isn't a man in the world worth worrying about. I've got to go up now. Your papa's in bed again with his stomach. I'm worried to death about him." Sentimental comedy both mocks and upholds the values of family. Screwball does the same thing with romantic love.

### ***Conclusion: Laughter and Love***

"Their simple laughter and love of life thrill us with the fact that they are human beings after all," wrote Alma Au to *Photoplay* in 1932, on observing the movie stars that visited Hawaii ("What the Audience Thinks" 11). Like their stars, the films of the liminal era were complex. Liminal films paradoxically balanced glamour and grime, praise and

criticism for a rapidly changing world. A synergistic combination of slapstick and wit, sentiment and farce, modernity and tradition changed the face of cinematic comedy. From the tumbling acrobatics of Elmer and Trilby on sailboat, to the assertive desire of Pert Kelly in a speakeasy, to the chaotic wreckage of Marie in a health spa, we see the shadows of screwball to come in these zany characters.

## CHAPTER IV

### LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP: THE UTOPIC POSSIBILITIES OF SCREWBALL, 1935-

1943



**Figure 4.1** Photos of comediennes from a 1927 *Picture Play*.

**Figure 4.2** A collage of Carole Lombard from a 1938 *Life* article titled "A Loud Cheer for the Screwball Girl."

As I have argued in the previous two chapters, the evolution of screwball is unsurprising in retrospect. In the early sound era, many female comedians excelled in the nascent genre of romantic comedy, as the verbal wit and convoluted plots of sophisticated comedy combined with the playful physicality and anarchic force of slapstick to humorously explore pressing social changes in gender, sex, love, and marriage.

Still, there was a specific affective shift that came with the screwball cycle which shaped filmic comedy of the period. In the 1927 *Photoplay* feature above, the comedians

are shown “making faces,” temporarily distorting their beauty to *perform* humor. In the *Life* collage above, about ten years later, a multitude of Carole Lombards fill the page, with expressions ranging from confusion, fear, delight, and... dog. On the accompanying page, the article proclaims that Lombard’s “personal behavior is certainly as kaleidoscopic as that of the characters she impersonates” and that her “[s]alient quality is superfluity of nervous energy,” (Busch 48). The implication is clear: the “screwball girl” does not *perform* but *inhabits* the ridiculous.

This comic mode—the zany, daffy, or screwy—is not only the screwball’s cycle defining characteristic but also seemed to reflect its time. In the Lombard feature, the author begins:

“A nation’s state of mind is reflected in its entertainments. According to the best available statistics, there are currently 500,000 patients in U.S. asylums of one sort or another and the number is growing by 3% a year. Movies have reflected the current trend toward national nuttiness by a wave of what Hollywood calls ‘screwball comedies.’ Screwball comedies last year made more money than any other single type of picture except possibly Westerns, which have always been somewhat screwy anyway,” (Busch 48).

Like a screwball comedy itself, this opening paragraph establishes an increasingly destabilized world, only to for the author to defuse any anxiety by dismissing the Western, another film genre but with much clearer lines of good and bad, right and wrong, as also very screwy. Similarly, screwball films seemed to revel in fantastical worlds of benign eccentricity but constructed these worlds from and within the logic of everyday life, through comic exaggeration. Furthermore, this comic deconstruction of

social norms leads to a questioning of larger ideology, as the reviewer above begins to view Westerns. Some screwball comedies, like *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Easy Living* (1937), created absurdist plots by clashing the practicality of a working-class protagonist with the machinations and whims of the wealthy. Others, like *Twentieth Century* (1934) or *The Awful Truth* (1937) played with the lines of intimacy and animosity in romantic relationships. While others simply explored the comic clash between work and love, from paleontology in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) to journalism in *His Girl Friday* (1940). All these conflicts pointed to larger negotiations of love, courtship, and marriage in a modernized world, and zaniness was designed as the key to narrative, and perhaps socio-cultural, resolution.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjective ‘zany’ as “[c]omically idiotic, crazily ridiculous,” with this meaning dating back to the 1600s from a figure in Italian theater: “a comic performer attending on a clown, acrobat, or mountebank, who imitates his master's acts in a ludicrously awkward way.” From its etymology, it is clear that ‘zaniness’ is about parody in a performer’s absurd imitation of another, but in a such a way that can be dismissed as “crazily ridiculous.” Despite its centrality to a historical range of comedy subgenres, few scholars have analyzed ‘zaniness,’ aside from affect theorist Sianne Ngai, who describes the ‘zany’ as “an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor” (1). Though Ngai’s argument, which maps zaniness onto post-Fordist labor and the way in which it blurs work life and personal life (9), is useful, it spans from the 1950s (with *I Love Lucy*) to today. As I explain in my previous chapter, I find the zany much earlier, as a comic mediation between the decline of sentimentality and the rise of “hokum.” Zaniness, which I find synonymous with the

screwy or screwball, is best defined here as a sort of harmless or charming lunacy, that shapes not only how characters behave, but what kind of world they inhabit. Like a funhouse mirror of the real world, a screwball world exaggerates some aspects of the real world while minimizing others. In this way, issues of class and gender can be playfully interrogated without seeming threatening or depressing to Depression-era audiences. Yet rather than using humor as escapism, as some have claimed (Gehring *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy* 5), I argue that screwball comedies used zaniness to parody and critique society in a way that seems accessible and banal, much like we use memes today to comment on current political and social issues.

But first we must return to a working definition of such a diverse and unique genre. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, screwball comedies are characterized by frantic pacing, quick dialogue, eccentric characters, and physical humor (McDonald 18-20). Scholars have explained the uniquely egalitarian relationship between the main couple as a manifestation of new social ideas of companionate love in reaction to the “new woman” and rising divorce rates during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Higashi 174). The genre is also seen as negotiating differences in class and gender, both important identity structures in flux in the 1930s, through humor and love. “The screwball comedies were, above all, stories of courtship, where friendship developed along with love” (Lent 321). In other words, screwball comedies were the representation of the modern ideals of companionate love.

The ideological import of these aspects of screwball comedy have been debated by a range of scholars. In her seminal work, *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell delineates a line from idealized representations of women in the 1910s to misogynistic

depictions in the 1970s (when the book was written). Of screwball comedies, Haskell notes:

“Despite the conformist impulse underlying the [ideology of courtship], some of the great comedies, movies like *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday*, celebrate difficult and anarchic love rather than security and the suburban dream, a preference that is wedded into the very conventions of the thirties, favoring movement over stasis, and speech and argument over silent compliance,” (126).

Robert Sklar disagrees:

“Screwball comedies were the last refuge of the satire, self-mockery and sexual candor of early 1930s filmmaking, but their iconoclasm was used, overtly at least to support the status quo. They belonged firmly to the tradition of romantic comedies whose purpose was to show how imagination, curiosity, and cleverness—those dangerous levers of social change—could be channeled into support of things as they are. The screwball comedies by and large celebrated the sanctity of marriage, class distinction and the domination of women by men,” (187-8).

Other scholars who followed Haskell and Sklar also find the genre regressive for various reasons. Diane Carson argues that screwball comedies contain women through belittlement and violence (McDonald 3). David Shumway refutes Cavell’s idea of a genre of remarriage that rehabilitates love in the modern era of high divorce-rates. Instead, Shumway argues screwball comedies continue to support patriarchy by idealizing and

mystifying marriage, depicting as the “natural end to which love must inevitably trend,” ultimately supporting patriarchy (17).

Though these critiques are certainly valid, I argue that screwball comedies were ultimately progressive within their historic context. Though these films undeniably portray a heteronormative view of love ending in marriage, they also narratively level the playing field between the sexes, while comically critiquing dominant ideologies of gender, class, and love. Feminist scholars have critiqued (heterosexual) marriage as a patriarchal institution that reinforced gender inequality, particularly around domestic labor, sexual autonomy, and parenting (hooks 78). Yet many feminists do marry, presumably without giving up their goals of gender equality. In her accessible theory book, *Feminism is for Everyone*, bell hooks argues:

“in future feminist movement we will spend less time critiquing patriarchal marriage bonds and expend more effort showing alternatives, showing the value of peer relationships which are founded on principles of equality, respect, and the belief that mutual satisfaction and growth are needed for partnerships to be fulfilling and lasting,” (86).

By creating a zany, fantasy world, screwball comedies create spaces and characters that, at least briefly escape societal modes of oppression, portraying a romantic relationship that can fulfill both idealized views love as irrational and modern ideas of a romantic relationship as mutually fulfilling and beneficial. For what screwball lacked in radical political critique, it made up for in accessibility. These films relied on zany, unrealistic characters and humor, but touched on very real topics, including stock market crashes, homelessness, divorce, and sexuality. While other interesting genres arose in the 1930s,



often due to sound technology, such as musicals and horror (Crafton 214), what draws me to the screwball cycle of romantic comedy is the centrality of a comic heroine who drives the plot of the film with her zany antics. If, as it has been argued, that the romantic comedy genre negotiates mores of gender and sexuality (Grindon 1), why were women so centrally empowered in this negotiation at this time?

I argue that part of this empowerment is the comedic style of screwball: that the lead woman and man, who form the central couple, are portrayed as equals, both as characters, with roughly the same amount of characterization and agency, and as performers, with screen time, dialogue, gags, and billing. My argument in this chapter is twofold, first that screwball comedies as a historical genre were collectively more progressive than regressive and that screwball comedies used zany humor to both critique society, particularly issues of gender and class, and to imagine an idealized world where gender equality, personal fulfillment, and economic stability could exist. My underlying philosophy that guides both the overall dissertation generally and this chapter specifically runs against the grain of a teleological view of history in which the goals of feminism are always moving forward. Rather, it seems gender equality ebbs and flows with different cultural contexts. My hope is that this project will cause readers to look back to look forward.

The first screwball film I analyze is *The Good Fairy* (1935), starring Margaret Sullavan and Herbert Marshall. Following the misadventures of an idealistic young woman of limited means who wants to help others, the film combines elements of earlier flapper/gold-digger comedies and sophisticated comedies. The significance of this film and its comedy, I argue, is the way in which the zany scenarios stem from the heroine's

well-meaning machinations, giving her agency and a degree of control. Unlike the heroines from the first chapter—Sue, Rischka, and Violet—who ultimately reject or fail to fit into an idealized world, and the heroines of the second chapter—Trilby, Pert, and Marie—who readjust to their happy endings of marriage or family, screwball heroines reshape their filmic worlds through chaos and nonsense, to create a place where relative gender equality, true love, personal fulfillment, and economic stability are all possible. This transformative aspect of screwball comedies is what genders zaniness. Though the male characters in screwball are also eccentric and idealistic, it is usually the heroine who drives the convoluted plot and comic misadventures. Whether she is portrayed as childish, such as Carole Lombard in *My Man Godfrey* (1936), or jaded, as Lombard in *Hands Across the Table* (1935), she is comedic. If zaniness is being eccentric to survive a nonsensical world, female characters are perfect for this style of comedy because a sexist society already positions women as other. Lacking the social power of men, even if they have money, screwball heroines rely on performance, mistruths, and other trickery, but with a benevolent, prosocial aim, which allows the comedy of the genre, derived from misunderstanding, to safely play with social norms .

Whereas the first two chapters looked at the historical factors and gender roles of romantic comedy subgenres of the 1920s and 30s that eventually led to screwball comedy, this chapter examines the ideological import of screwball through three films. With *The Good Fairy*, I examine how zany comedy allowed its film to move beyond critiquing society to imagining a better one. I argue this is why fantastical narrative and *mise-en-scène* elements are so prevalent in screwball comedies, because the genre already is a fantasy in that it imagines a better world. Specifically, in this example, the

economic inequality between men and women which is questioned in *Why Be Good?*, is actively rejected in *The Good Fairy*, where the heroine becomes a gold-digger for the larger good, redistributing money given to her by a wealthy man in exchange for romance to a poor, good-hearted stranger. Flapper characters like Pert Kelly advocated for material desires and consumption, but did not sacrifice morality, leading to an early feminist argument for autonomy that depended on a modern capitalist society. The heroine of *The Good Fairy*, Luisa, instead uses zany misunderstandings to transcend her position as an object of commodity and reshape her world and relationships with men to one not defined by gender and class.

The second film I analyze is *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), starring Irene Dunne and Melvin Douglas, both of whom appear in many other screwball films. Dunne's most famous screwball comedy was probably *The Awful Truth* (1937), a very popular comedy of remarriage, costarring Cary Grant. Dunne was a versatile actress, gifted at comedy and drama, and unlike Lombard, her screwball characters were usually more grounded, their zaniness clearly a plot-driven performance rather than reflective of the character's inherent eccentricity (Gehring *Irene Dunne* 1-2). Douglas, meanwhile, could give a charming but self-effacing performance, much like Cary Grant, making him a good foil and love interest for a screwball heroine. He usually played an upper-class man who wasn't quite as suave as he thought he was. For example, in Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939), he plays a frivolous French aristocrat who falls in love with Greta Garbo's stoic Soviet government worker.

While my first example demonstrates the feminist potential of zany comedy, this second film better showcases the gender equality often seen in this genre. The main

conflict of the film has impulsive Michael (Douglas) trying to convince prim Theodora (Dunne) to reject social convention in pursuit of happiness. This conflict switches halfway through, as Theodora “goes wild,” but discovers Michael is also in need of liberation. In this way, the narrative emphasizes mutual character growth as central to the success and freedom of the relationship. This same pattern can be seen in other notable screwball comedies, such as *It Happened One Night* and *The Awful Truth*, but is notably absent in earlier romantic comedies, where obstacles to love are either external or limited to one side of the couple.<sup>22</sup>

Like *The Good Fairy*, *Theodora*, also shows a heroine creating a better world in which she can find freedom and personal fulfilment, but here I focus on the interplay between the female and male leads in screwball comedies, and how they collectively work as a romantic couple. Though their relationship may be characterized by playful fighting, ultimately, they are friends, not rivals as seen in later “battle of the sexes” comedies. *Theodora* is an excellent example, as both sides of the romance help each other grow and find happiness, despite societal restraints, allowing me to analyze the larger gender dynamics of screwball comedies and why screwball is always romantic.

Finally, I leap forward some seven to eight years—a period in which there has been ample scholarship on canonical films like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940), etc.—to the end of the screwball cycle. The final film I analyze is *The More the Merrier* (1943), a “late” screwball comedy starring Jean Arthur, Joel McCrea, and Charles Coburn as three strangers who share an apartment during the wartime

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<sup>22</sup> A notable exception to this is *Spite Marriage*, as I argue in the previous chapter, where both Trilby and Elmer grow to make their spite marriage work.

housing shortage in Washington D.C. Though zaniness would continue beyond the 1940s, screwball comedy, as the dominant cycle of romantic comedy, would not. I argue that the beginning of WWII resulted in another shift in comic style, in which individual characters may be zany, but their filmic worlds became more serious and reflective of the real world. Rather than the both halves of the main couple behaving eccentrically as a sort of courtship-play, this later shift often presents a serious woman whose views are challenged by a fun-loving man.

With all three films, I examine the mode of zany comedy—why people behaving oddly was such a popular form of humor in this time—and how this humor critiqued society, particularly issues of gender and class.

***“You Flew into My Life and Changed Everything:” Idealism and Gold-Digging  
in The Good Fairy (1935)***

Like earlier romantic comedies with female leads, the question of sexuality and morality narratively continued as major elements of the screwball cycle. With *Exit Smiling*, I argued that the heroine’s playful performance of the vamp, within a convoluted plot to save her love interest, radically rehabilitated the idea of female sexuality as a predatory and unhealthy to something empowering and conducive to a more idealistic, selfless view of love. *Why Be Good?* took it a step further with its flapper heroine, whose materialistic desire and flirtatious behavior didn’t disrupt an ideal of female sexual purity. Both films successfully mediated old ideals of feminine virtue with new modes of acceptable female behavior. Yet the issue of the heroine’s lower class, central to the flapper archetype, was easily resolved by marriage to a wealthy man, once she proved herself worthy.

This changed with the Pre-Code era, as female gold-diggers became sympathetic and even heroic in the face of economic cataclysm. Mae West's successful comedy, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), made no pretense of the heroine's sexual or moral purity: she describes herself as "the finest woman who ever walked the streets," murders a romantic rival, and repeatedly propositions Cary Grant's character. The ending, in which she marries the law-enforcing Grant, feels more like she has flaunted the system rather than succumbed to it. Though narratively extreme, West's films weren't actually far outliers. Jean Harlow and Barbara Stanwyck played anti-heroines who used their sexuality for their own self-interest in *Red-Headed Woman* (1932) and *Baby Face* (1933) respectively. This pattern of equating love or marriage to an economic transaction even could extend to men in this era of comedy. A running gag in most Marx Brothers' films involves Groucho attempting to woo a wealthy widow (Margaret Dumas) for her money. It's easy to overstate the power of the zeitgeist when doing a historical analysis of a set of specific films, but the critique is visible in explicitly self-reflective films, like *The Gold-Diggers of 1933* (1933), which laments the Depression and celebrates its titular heroines, the connection is evident. The cultural changes in gender norms for women in the 1920s combined with the disillusionment and struggles of the Great Depression led to a new celebration of women who took advantage of an unfair gender dynamic where men had more money. The gold-digging female trickster was certainly empowering and hilarious, but she did not offer a model of gender equality or love based on mutual respect and affection. To examine this theme and how it differed from previous eras of romantic comedies, I turn to an early screwball comedy with the unique premise of a selfless gold-digger: *The Good Fairy* (1935).

Originally a Hungarian play by Ferenc Molnár and adapted into film by Preston Sturges for Universal (though directed by William Wyler), *The Good Fairy* stars Margaret Sullavan as a Luisa Ginglebuscher, a poor young woman in a Budapest orphanage, who is introduced entertaining the younger orphans with a fantastical story about a good fairy who helps a prince. Old enough to leave the orphanage, Luisa goes to work as an usherette at a picture palace, where she befriends a regular, Detlaff (Reginald Owen) who works as a waiter a luxury hotel. When he sneaks her into an elegant party at the hotel, a wealthy meat-industry baron, Konrad (Frank Morgan), takes a liking to Luisa and propositions her with offers of jewels, furs, and money. Luisa has no interest in Konrad or luxury, but stumbles upon the idea that she could anonymously redistribute this wealth to someone who might truly need it, making her a real-life good fairy. She picks a random name from a phone book, a Dr. Max Sporum (Herbert Marshall), and presents him as her husband, whom Konrad offers to make rich in exchange for Luisa's affections. The rest of the film comically unfolds as Konrad tries to hire Max as an attorney in order to give him money without revealing he is in love with his "wife," while Luisa goes to see the effect of her good deed first-hand without revealing her connection to Max's sudden good fortune. Luisa and Max fall in love, of course, further complicating matters.

I chose *The Good Fairy*, a film known to and appreciated by cinephiles but largely left out of the romantic comedy canon, for several reasons. First, with its European setting and love-triangle plot, the film illustrates the influence of sophisticated comedy, while still being a true screwball, with zany humor, a convoluted plot, and a whimsical heroine and befuddled men. *The Good Fairy* in its initial moment of reception

was both successful and discursively marked as part of this new genre of screwball comedy. *Harrison's Reports* in 1935 deemed *The Good Fairy* a “delightful romantic comedy” and discussed its success at the box office.<sup>23</sup> *The New York Times* praised the film on its initial release, describing it as a “fantastic comedy” that is “as nutty as a fruit cake,” though the reviewer felt the film would’ve been much better directed by Rene Clair than William Wyler, (Sennwald 18).<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 4.3** In the bottom right corner of this advertisement for *The Good Fairy*, the film is explicitly compared to the popular screwball comedies, *It Happened One Night* and *The Thin Man*.

<sup>23</sup> “The material was cleansed of its sex implications, and the picture turned out a good high comedy suitable mostly for sophisticated patrons and good has been its success at the box office,” (79). See: “An Analysis of the 1934-35 Season’s Forecasts.” *Harrison's Reports*. Vol. 16. No. 19. 11 May 1935. Pp.77-79.

<sup>24</sup> Like Lubitsch, Rene Clair was a European director celebrated and eventually brought over by Americans for his gifted direction of early sound film. The *New York Times*’ film critic, Andre Sennwald praised Clair in a 1935 film review for *The Last Millionaire* (1934) as a “civilized and witty political satire which applies the barbed slapstick to royalty and to the modern Fascist State with equal irreverence” (16). Perhaps Sennwald felt that Clair would’ve made *The Good Fairy* more satirical and less fairy tale-esque than Wyler did.



An advertisement (Figure 4.3) positively links the film to *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *The Thin Man* (1934), both hits the year before, and now considered to have started the cycle of screwball comedy: Unlike *The Thin Man*, however, which was given a “B” grade by the Catholic Legion of Decency, meaning it was suitable for adults but not children, *The Good Fairy* was given an “A” (suitable for all audiences) (“Complete Official List”). Despite its risqué plot centering on explicitly exchanging affection for monetary gain, the heroine’s innocent nature and the plot’s fairy tale allusions made the film seem less transgressive than it was. I argue that this is essential to the zany humor of screwball and its social critique which developed after the Hays Code. The exaggerated, almost surreal nature of screwball is evidenced by how easily the genre can tip toward outright fantasy, with films like *Topper* (1937) and *Married a Witch* (1942). Yet screwball films also reconciled very real conflicts in gender and class. In this way, a screwball film could be both simultaneously escapist and politically topical. In *The Good Fairy*, conflict comes from Lu’s lack of power as a young, working-class woman clashing with her good-hearted ideals of helping others, or to put it more broadly, the conflict between individual desire and social hegemony.

*The Good Fairy* begins with a shot of young girls playing a game with a teacher. The camera pulls back to reveal these children are behind bars, then tilts up to a sign which reads “Municipal Orphanage for Girls.” Immediately, the film sets up an overt visual dichotomy between innocence and hardship. After a montage of girls, from toddlers to young adults, working and cleaning, Luisa “Lu” Ginglebuscher (Margaret Sullavan) is introduced telling a story to a group of children as she puts away dishes in the kitchen. The story is about a good fairy who helps a prince on a quest. Meanwhile, the

wealthy owner of a picture palace comes to the orphanage to speak to the director. After some initial confusion about the director being a woman, the theatre-owner asks to hire a respectable young woman to work as an usher. The theatre-owner chooses Lu after rejecting one young woman for being too flirtatious and another for being overweight. As he leaves, the overweight girl sticks her tongue out at him in a childish gesture of defiance which he returns in kind. Though the whims of wealthy men drive the plot of this film, comic gags, like this one, undercut any sense of wisdom or authority underlying these men's power.



**Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5** A pull back shot reveals a group of children at happily play are actually behind bars.

Before Lu leaves, the director tells her to be polite and useful to society to repay its cost of raising orphans like her. This along with dialogue throughout the film, in which Lu explicitly compares herself to “the good fairy” of her story is the plot motivation for Lu’s actions. This is in contrast to the theatrical play, in which the character of Lu isn’t an orphan and her self-comparison to “a good fairy” is made while drunk, rather than telling a story to children. While this plot change was probably largely in service to the Hays Code, it also shifts the overall tone of the text. In the play, Lu struggles to fit in with a patriarchal society’s double standard that she be both submissive

and pleasing as well as virtuous and chaste. In one scene, she explains: “Well, I’m very poor, so I have decided to lead an immoral life,” (Molnar 75). She knows she will seem more virtuous if she pretends to be a married middle-class woman than an unmarried working-class woman, and stumbles upon the idea of simultaneously benefiting a random stranger’s life.

This more cynical tone, along with the European setting and themes of adultery and deception, generically make the play more of a sophisticated comedy. In the film, Lu’s knowledge of sex is left deliberately unclear to the audience. Her childish idea of being “a good fairy” is zany and charming, while her selfless desire to help others connects her to larger Depression-era themes of how people should behave in a society in shared turmoil. As in other screwball films, a character’s idealism and eccentricity are conflated, thus questioning society’s narrow definition of these two traits. Unlike sophisticated comedies which reevaluate marriage within the social context of rising divorce rates and changing views of individual and marital happiness, screwball comedies question social constructs and values that can suppress individual fulfillment. Romantic love itself is not the problem, according to the screwball, rather the social conventions that obstruct it. Instead, the relationship between the main couple in screwball films ends up narratively resolving the tension between individual happiness and social expectations, while still commenting on issues of class and sexuality through the other main characters.

The first important character is Detlaff (played with an expressive face and pronounced accent by Reginald Owen), who Lu meets at the theater when she attempts to usher him in the proper direction with an electric glowing wand in the shape of an arrow.

Detlaff argues with her, explaining that he takes orders all day as a waiter, and wants to be “free as the birds” in the evening. Still, he ultimately obeys the point of Lu’s arrow. The gag introduces Detlaff’s character and his zaniness; He is both servile and resentful, kind-hearted and grumpy.

Lu soon runs into Detlaff again inside the theater where they watch a melodramatic scene in which an unfaithful wife begs her husband for forgiveness. The wife cries beautifully and speaks eloquently, but the husband only says “Go,” and points to the door, comically parodying romantic melodramas as well as gender roles, where men are unemotional and women are overdramatic. Reverse shots to Lu show that she is deeply affected by the film and begins to cry.



**Figure 4.6 and Figure 4.7** Lu reacts to a sad scene in a film. Unlike melodrama, romantic comedy acknowledges the ridiculous nature of love, while still reaffirming it.

Detlaff, at first, whispers “Go!” to the unfaithful wife, until he is hushed by Lu. Soon, he also cries, though much more comically, emphasizing his compassion, rejecting the idea that men are unemotional.

This film within a film reflexively presents another fantasy, similar to Lu’s fairy tales. For Lu, the idea of the “good fairy” offers personal fulfillment and happiness.

Being a good fairy means having power (even over princes) to shape the world around

her for better. The unfaithful wife, however, shows how female desire threatens the status quo and leads to punishment, while also showing the woman as an object of desire, with beautiful close-ups. Later, Lu mimics this scene while playing in front of a department store mirror, comically contorting her face and speaking in breathy voice:



**Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9** Lu mimics the scene she saw earlier in front of a department store mirror.

This film within a film is referenced again at the narrative's climax, when Lu, who has fallen in love with Max Sporum, explains that he wasn't given wealth because of his honesty and hard work, but because she picked him out of a phone book. She sadly starts to leave, when Max calls to her and says, "Don't go." While the melodramatic film is parodied, it is also shown to offer an influential, and ultimately positive model for Lu to learn about romantic relationships. This plot moment reflects sociological thought at the time of what young people learned from film. In the 1933 book, *Movies and Conduct*, several teenagers interviewed described both fantasizing about the films they saw as well as learning from them, indicating that at least 50% of those interviewed got their idea of love and sex from movies (Blumer 153). Learning morality from fairy tales seems no less silly that learning about love from films in the film.

After her shift, Lu tries to leave the theater but is harassed by a young man asking for a date. When he refuses to take no for answer and grabs her arm, Lu hastily explains

that she is married, using patriarchy to her advantage, i.e. if she is another man's "property," this other man will leave her alone. To sell the lie, she runs over to Detlaff who has just left the theater. After some confusion, Detlaff goes along with the ruse, then takes Lu to a restaurant where he learns she grew up in an orphanage. He offers to sneak her into the upper-class restaurant at the hotel he works at, so she can see a "real" party.

At the hotel, Lu arrives clearly nervous and fumbling through etiquette. When a coat-check clerk says, "Your coat?", Lu misunderstands and replies, "It certainly is!" She greets Detlaff who tells her not to talk to the waiters. We then meet a second important character, Konrad (Frank Morgan), a wealthy executive at the party who is immediately smitten with Lu. He tries to flirt with her, but Lu mistakes him, first for a waiter, and then for a butcher, not understanding that being president of a meatpacking corporation is not the same thing. The comedy here repeatedly mocks the pretensions of the upper-class, through Lu's naivete. When Konrad offers to buy her a coat, she asks for a "regular old sable," not knowing that the only fur she's heard of is also the most expensive. This situation also characterizes Konrad and critiques the wealthy. Though Konrad should have all the power, he is instead baffled and frustrated, unable to get what he wants, Lu. Much like his most famous character, the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Morgan plays Konrad with comic false bravado. When Konrad takes Lu to a private dining suite, Detlaff attempts and fails to extricate her, while still being a good waiter. Lu finally lies about being married again to stave off Konrad's advances. However, he offers to make her "husband" rich with a job in his company so she will receive this good fortune second-hand (and the husband can be stationed abroad). Lu realizes that through Konrad

she has the power to “magically” help a stranger, leading her to pick a poor lawyer, Max Sporum (Herbert Marshall), from the phone book.

The British and dignified Herbert Marshall often played suave roles, like a gentleman thief in an early pre-Code screwball *Trouble in Paradise* (1932). As Max, however, the dignified becomes ridiculous. In *The Good Fairy*, he is first introduced to the viewers wearing an apron and absurd goatee, as he cleans in his office/apartment. When Konrad comes calling to offer him a job, Max first mistakes him for a bill-collector then a salesman. After comic misunderstanding, Konrad hires Max, pays him his first wages, then leaves. Lu, meanwhile, has come, disguised as a client, to see how her lie has helped Max. As deliverymen bring in new furniture, one hands a Lu a small package which she brings to Max and they have the following exchange:

Max: “There it is! I was afraid they had forgotten to send it. Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me. Have you ever wanted something all your life and then suddenly it arrived? This was my great ambition. It’s beautiful. Are you sure it’s a good one?”

Lu: “No.”

Max: “Then why did you bring it? Supposing this instrument doesn’t perform the way its intended to? What then?”

Lu: “Well, you could sharpen them with a kitchen knife.”

Max: “And waste my time which happens to be very valuable?”

This scene playfully undercuts male authority, as Max declares his time is valuable but uses it to sharpen pencils for fun. Yet this childish characteristic also endears him to Lu, as she sees firsthand the happiness she has brought Max through her machinations



**Figure 4.10** Max (Herbert Marshall) giddily sharpens a pencil with Lu (Margaret Sullavan).

Lu's unique deception in this film allows her a unique power, in a society where she is otherwise typically powerless due to her gender, age, and class. This makes her more equal to Max, despite an age and gender difference. The romance also succeeds because the two become friends, as she helps him shop for a car and other items with his new-found wealth. At a department store, she convinces him to shave his goatee and he buys her a "genuine foxine" fur wrap she admires. Like *Why Be Good?*, department stores and material goods are an important part of the milieu, but not for the same reasons. Unlike the expensive gifts Winthrop gives Pert, the genuine foxine is cheap and ridiculous, but here the sentiment is clearly more important than the consumption as reflected in the mise-en-scène. In Figure 4.11, Lu and Max sit on a garden swing on artificial grass with a dog statue in the foreground. The scene mimics an intimate stereotypical romantic scene of a couple sitting in a park together, but it is fabricated, merely a department store display. This scene playfully undercuts the idea of happiness through consumption while still embracing those ideals of happiness through love and friendship. This trope is often seen in screwball comedies, where luxury items are



mocked through exaggerated significance like the fur coat of *Easy Living* or the pet leopard of *Bringing Up Baby*. Still, like the flawed but endearing characters of screwball, this zany world both defies societal rules and creates a space beyond where happiness can exist.



**Figure 4.11** Lu and Max find real happiness in an artificial department store display.

Though it is ultimately Lu's zaniness that shapes the narrative, all three of the male characters—Detlaff, Konrad, and Max—are also presented as eccentric. Detlaff is introduced when he refuses to follow Lu's direction at the theater, explaining that he takes orders all day as a waiter, and refuses to do so during his leisure time. The zaniness is less in his reaction than in how emphatic it is. The men in the film tend behave belligerently in stark contrast to Lu who at one point smiles politely while two different men pull her arms in an argument over who gets to dance with her. In this way, zany characteristics simultaneously illustrate and belie power structures—the passiveness of femininity is just as counterproductive as the aggressiveness of masculinity. Yet just as Lu's good intentions redeem her lies, the three male characters' foolishness undercut

their flawed behavior. Detlaff's desire to protect Lu gives motivation to his pugnacious nature. Konrad's ineptitude neutralizes any villainy in his wealth and womanizing. Max's seriousness is undercut by his ridiculous facial hair and delight in owning a pencil sharpener, which endears him to Lu.

The genuine foxglove and new pencil sharpener represent a changed attitude toward material objects from that of the earlier flapper films. Here gifts are still valued, but luxury is rejected. Giving each other these presents is central to Lu and Max's relationship, but for the joy it brings the other, and not for the expectation of sexual or emotional payback, as Konrad expects. As seen in the previous chapter, the flapper/gold-digger's materialism allowed her the economic agency to take advantage of unequal gender roles, but ideas around women and consumption became more complex during the Great Depression. In *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*, Susan Currell explains that despite economic problems, "leisure was increasingly tied to consumption" and women were seen to be the ones consuming (101). Though women's economic power through consumption caused anxiety it also caused hope. By analyzing cultural critics of the time, Currell explains:

"[Novelist Sherwood] Anderson, like many other observers in the 1930s, saw consumer culture as a new form of matriarchy--one in which women held the purse strings and the key to ending the Depression. Thus it was women, through their leisure, rather than men, through their labor, who appeared to have the power to reshape the future," (103).

This is directly reflected in screwball comedies like *The Good Fairy* in which a woman's desire and play reshapes the world of the film. In this case, Lu's "consumption" of Konrad's material money redistributed wealth and leads to happiness for everyone.

While not offering a radical solution, screwball comedies like *The Good Fairy* prove powerful by offering utopic possibilities, filmic worlds reshaped by women, restoring happiness and creating equality. In spite of its fanciful tone and naïve heroine, *The Good Fairy* playfully parodies romantic ideology while acknowledging that the ideal of love might be the only solution to a bleak reality which often limits women's sexual and economic autonomy.

Looking as far back as Greek and Roman comedic plays, Northup Frye argues that "a new society crystallizes on the stage around the hero and his bride" with a romantic comedy's resolution. (44). Cavell modernizes this genre analysis by viewing screwball comedies as "comedies of remarriage" which resolve a real-life change in definitions of love and marriage with modernity. Specifically, he argues that the screwball couple rejects societal or legal views of marriage and create a new world for themselves based on reaffirmation of love (142). However, his analysis depends on the couple rejecting the world and creating their own. I argue, instead, that the screwball couple reshapes, rather than escapes, the world. This is seen in the final scenes of *The Good Fairy*, where the main characters meet in Max's office to untangle Lu's lies. Max's compassion and patience allows him to extract the truth from Lu, but she has already reshaped their world: Max and Lu are still in love, and Konrad retains Max as a lawyer for his company. Max tells Lu, "You are the good fairy. You flew into my life and changed everything." Lu replies, "No, you're the good fairy who changed my life."

Detlaff and Konrad interrupt, each arguing that he is the good fairy. The concept of the good fairy represents a zany logic of idealism that reconciles the working class (Detlaff & Lu), the middle class (Max), and upper class (Konrad). The next scene shows Lu and Max's wedding but focuses on the girls of the orphanage in attendance, who stare at Lu in her gown like she is real fairy. By returning to the girls, who were first seen "imprisoned" behind bars, Wyler emphasizes the power of imagination and ideals to overcome barriers.



**Figure 4.12 and Figure 4.13** The girls of the orphanage look on in awe at Lu.

It is important to note that naivete and idealism were not necessarily gendered in screwball comedy. Usually both the male and female leads are immature or quirky in different ways. In the Frank Capra films *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) & *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939),<sup>25</sup> the male protagonists shown to be immature or struggling to adapt with the modern world due to their ideals, while the female lead (played by Jean Arthur in both) is very savvy and practical. The two characters succeed by blending their idealism and practicality to offer a direct critique of Depression-era America. Yet all

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<sup>25</sup> As with any genre, boundaries are blurry, particularly in the case of auteurs. Capra's screwball films are more like sentimental comedies, while Lubitsch's are more like sophisticated comedies. Rather than excluding them from my conception of the screwball genre, I want to emphasize that these subgenres blur in important ways, as noted in the previous chapters.

these films have zany humor to which advances the themes of individual fulfillment and social cohesion.

With its four main characters, *The Good Fairy* explores many different social dynamics. The next film I analyze, *Theodora Goes Wild*, also comments on class and social mores, but focuses more on the central couple as they take turns “liberating” each other from their stifled lives, which will allow for an examination of why romance is so central to screwball comedy and why it matters for the idea of companionate marriage and love.

### ***“Wild but Never Silly:” Strategic Zaniness and Individual Desire***

Like Carole Lombard and Jean Arthur, Irene Dunne is remembered today for her screwball films, but before *Theodora Goes Wild*, she had only acted in dramas, and was supposedly nervous to attempt comedy (Gehring *Irene Dunne* 71). Born in 1898, she starred in screwball comedies in her late thirties and early forties, bringing a middle-aged maturity to her madcap roles, in stark contrast to the cult of youthfulness celebrated in many of the films of the previous eras, including the girlish slapstick heroine and the ingénue style of flappers. In her most successful screwball films, *The Awful Truth* (1937) and *My Favorite Wife* (1940), Dunne starred alongside Cary Grant as a married couple who separated and came back together, exploring themes of fidelity, freedom, and friendship.

Though *The Awful Truth* remains her most successful screwball comedy, *Theodora* was also popular. An exhibitor explained, “The humor of the piece is spontaneous. The surprise twists build expectations for something spicy; instead the story veers to farcical nonsense,” (“Showmen’s Reviews” 58). As with most screwball

comedies, themes of sexuality were couched in zany humor, but this was in itself a critique. Acting, writing, and costuming position the heroine's "wild persona" as an unrealistic and ridiculous fear of female sexuality. Yet there is also a joy and freedom in watching the unruly woman who bends the rules of a patriarchal world in her favor.



**Figure 4.14** In *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), fears of female sexuality are satirized through costuming, while the heroine still retains power.

*Theodora Goes Wild* follows the self-discovery of its heroine, Theodora Lynn (Dunne), who lives in a small, conservative town with her two maiden aunts and secretly published a racy novel under a pseudonym, Caroline Adams. When she goes to New York to see her editor, she meets her novel's illustrator, Michael Grant (Melvyn Douglas), who is fascinated by the prim author of a wild novel. He follows her back home, pretending to be an itinerate worker and blackmailing her into letting him work as a gardener for her aunts, all in attempt to "free" her from confined lifestyle. He succeeds, but when she confesses her love, he flees back to New York. It turns out he is not as free

as he seems and is trapped in a loveless marriage, because a divorce would cause a scandal for his politician father. Theodora follows him to the city, embracing her persona as a scandalous writer, determined to free Michael from his own confined lifestyle.

This plot structure, in which the male and female love interests very clearly switch roles between tormentor and tormented, makes *Theodora* a clear example of the gender dynamics of screwball comedy. The playful teasing between the couple is less a battle of the sexes and more of a liminal space in which individual desires can be explored within the confines of social constraints. Perhaps this is because love, particularly courtship, can be seen as an irrational state in American culture, as seen in the phrase “head over heels in love,” which implies physical disorientation, not dissimilar to the pratfalls of screwball comedy. Though there are certainly problematic elements of screwball comedy, as critics have pointed out, the genre was uniquely suited to show active heroines reshaping their world and achieving their goals. This cycle of romantic comedy used zaniness, meaning comic behavior that walks a fine line of what is socially acceptable, to create a playful space where a couple could negotiate their differences. Often, the lovers came from different classes, leading to a larger reconciliation between the wealthy and the working class, which was hugely significant during the Great Depression.

The film begins in the local newspaper office of the small town of Lynnfield. The editor is excited to announce publication of the next chapter of *The Sinner* by Caroline Adams, “America’s Best-Selling Novel,” but he receives a call from Theodora, relaying her aunts concern about the book’s lack of propriety. Already the film sets up a paradoxical conflict wherein the book is loudly protested but still a best seller. The

conflict is heightened by the soon to be revealed irony that Theodora is the writer of the novel as well as one of its loudest critics. The editor disregards the complaints of the women of Lynnfield, assuring them that enough copies will be available, thus accusing them of hypocrisy.

In the next scene, Theodora visits her publisher in New York, to express her concerns about her identity being revealed and her regrets about publishing the novel, saying “I must have been out of my mind.” The publisher, thrilled with the novel’s success, brushes away her concerns and offers her an aspirin. The scene is mirrored later in the film when Theodora barges in the office demanding that her identity be revealed with much publicity in order to promote her book. When the publisher rubs his head, she patronizingly offers him an aspirin. In this way, the heroine asserts control over her own identity and her capitol. Dunne’s acting emphasizes this change. In the first meeting, she wears a conservative dress, speaks quietly, and is shot from a high angle. In the second meeting, she wears an expensive, ostentatious dress, speaks loudly, and is shot with a low angle.



**Figure 4.15 and Figure 4.16** The heroine transforms in order to assert control, as shown by costume, acting, and cinematography.

That these scenes take place at the publisher’s office is crucial. *The Sinner* represents Theodora’s dreams and insecurities and her financial and social independence.

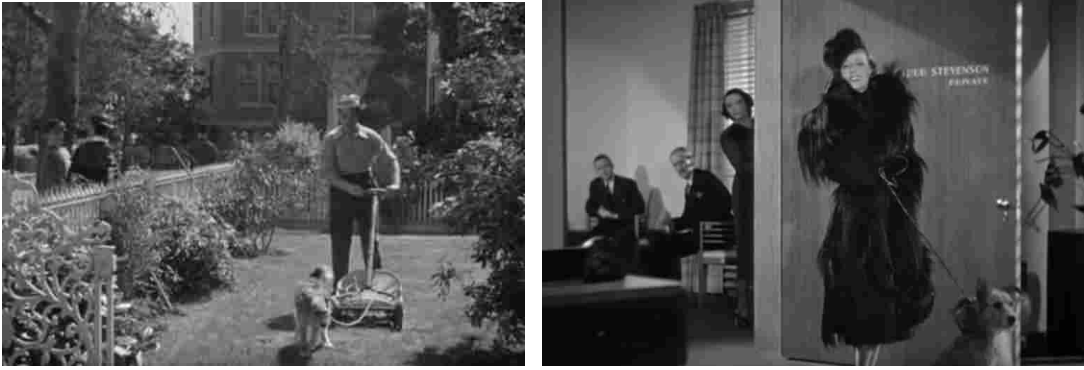


Michael is also introduced in this first scene at the publisher's office. In stark contrast to the worried Theodora, he leans on a chair, ignoring the publisher's command that he leave, and eats cookies Theodora had brought for someone else. This childish characterization is liberating, however, given the publisher's controlling behavior, foreshadowing Michael's later role in the film.



**Figure 4.17** Michael, seen here eating cookies, is also characterized by whim.

Michael's childish, whimsical nature is reinforced by his appearance in Lynnfield with a stray dog he picked up along the way. It is often argued that dogs are surrogate children in sexless screwball comedies (Rapf 36). Though the presence of dogs and absence of children are crucial tropes in screwball comedy, it's not so simple to equate the two. First, dogs were anthropomorphized differently than they are today. A feature on dog actors in a 1937 issue of *Hollywood* playfully describes Corky as a professional actor, calling him "One-Take Corky" for his ability to learn and perform tricks so well. It also jokes about him being mixed breed, saying "Corky's father was probably a traveling man and his mother one of those girls who couldn't say no" ("Putting on the Dog!" 80). giving the dog class markers as well. In *Theodora*, Jake transforms as much as his humans do, going from a scruffy hobo to a pampered lapdog.



**Figure 4.18 and 4.19** The dog as a flexible marker of class, but always a sign of zaniness.

In screwball films, dogs are acceptably disruptive creatures who help facilitate the desires of their humans. For example, *The Thin Man* begins with a dog (performer and character both named Asta) dragging Myrna Loy by his leash into a hotel bar where her husband William Powell is drinking. A server begins to demand that Loy and Asta leave until Powell explains that they're his family, allowing Loy to join him for a drink and establish their playful, unconventional relationship. In this way, Asta facilitates their desires to be and play together. In *Easy Living*, Jean Arthur's English Sheepdogs help create a distraction so she can rush into her love interest's office, where they can reconcile and resolve the issues raised by the plot. In *Bringing Up Baby*, the dog serves an important plot point, burying fossilized dinosaur bone David (Grant) needs, thus keeping him and Susan (Hepburn) together longer. The dog is also the key to the resolution, as he eventually leads Susan to the bone and thus her reconciliation with David. In *Theodora*, Jake also reflects the main characters' desires and helps bring them together. In the scene where Michael leaves behind a note, the camera shows both Jake and Theodora, mirroring each other with their heads sadly leaning on the windowsill. In this way, the dog emphasizes the human's feelings, in a way that is funny but still emotionally evocative.. Theodora soon returns Jake to Michael, as an excuse to see him,

which leads to his confession of love, and her scheme to liberate him. At the end of the film, Michael waits with Jake in Lynnfield, practicing his apology to Theodora on the dog until she returns. Dogs are a fitting symbol of screwball for they once symbolize harmless chaos and disruption as well as prosocial values of nurturing, compassion, and family, but with less emotional stakes than children.



**Figure 4.20 and Figure 4.21** Jake and Theodora mirror each other’s sadness when Michael leaves.

*Theodora* provides perhaps the most egalitarian of structure of the screwball comedies of this era, but what is most significant about the film is how clearly it articulates zaniness as a performative strategy. Though both Theodora and Michael are shown to be impulsive and fun-loving, their “wild” personas are clearly acts, designed to liberate the other. Their performances are signaled by both costume and acting. As Caroline Adams, Dunne speaks in higher pitch, laughs more, and wears ostentatious clothes, versus the conservative dresses she wears in Lynnfield. As a gardener, Douglas uses slang, whistles, and wears light, loose-fitting clothes, versus the dark suits he wears in the city. Furthermore, their personas fit in with assumptions people make about them—Michael becomes a lazy drifter and Theodora becomes a scandalous authoress—which in turn points out the hypocrisy of their critics. The governor is more than happy to

dance with a scandalous authoress if reporters aren't around, and Theodora's aunts struggle with their ideals of Christian charity when it might cause gossip.

The idea of strategic silliness is central to the genre which “paired a conventionally repressed person with an unconventional opposite, apparently flea-brained but in fact instinctually shrewd, who altogether overturns various plans and thereby makes possible a future together laced with impulsive vitality, sportive fun,” (Gollin 127). By switching these two characters halfway through the film, the film reinforces the underlying saneness of zaniness.

Karlyn does not delineate screwball as a distinct cycle of romantic comedy in her analysis of these films from the 1930s and 40s. She argues “Like film noir, romantic comedy often subjects a weak male to a predatory woman, but within comedic frame that mutes the threat of male chastisement. The genre can thus be seen as a benign male fantasy in which men surrender rational control only to have their social and sexual power restored” (Karlyn 118). *Theodora* serves as a good example against this analysis. In this film, Michael is the strong, irrational character and Theodora the “weak” one in the first half of the film, then this switches in the second half. In fact, Michael exhibits a certain unruliness driven by an impulsive, personal desire as he steals cookies, shows up uninvited to dinner, and whistles loudly. Of course, his gender negates the progressive potential of the trope. Yet the fact that this film, and other screwball comedies, put the male and female leads on equal footing is significant. Karlyn explains that “For [male/female] conflict [in screwball comedies] to be dramatic, the sides must be well matched, at least temporarily,” and that this “gender inversion can also set in motion a destabilization of the binary categories of gender, opening the way to more fluid forms of

sexuality before the hero and heroine are reinscribed into the norms of a more conventionally figured heterosexuality” (118). Yet the end of *Theodora* is when gender norms are most destabilized, as the heroine successfully challenges the social repression of both small town (as represented by a celebratory Lynnfield) and the big city (as represented by the apologetic Michael).

At the end of the film, Theodora returns to Lynnfield and is greeted by a marching band and cheering townspeople. As the culmination of a minor subplot involving a friend from Lynnfield who secretly wed and had a baby, Theodora smiles as she carries her friend’s baby in her arms (as the real parents sneak off the back of the train). There is a stunned silence, but the crowd soon cheers again. Not only has Theodora gone wild, but she has made Lynnfield wild enough to accept the societal taboo of having a child out of wedlock (which the filmmakers "cover up" with a convoluted subplot, presumably in deference to the Hays Code). She returns home to find Michael (and Jake) who is waiting to thank her for freeing him. When he sees the baby, he runs away, assuming that she had gone too wild. Theodora chases him and tells him it’s not her baby (in front of the crowd that has followed her home) and calls him an idiot before they embrace.



**Figure 4.22** Theodora and Michael reunite in a moment that at once reaffirms and rejects heteronormative ideals of reproduction.

By using this scene as the set up for the couple's reconciliation, the carnivalesque nature of the unruly woman is shown to be essential to society, as represented by the town of Lynnfield, rather than a temporarily accepted aberration. Theodora's rejection of the baby can be read as a conservative moment, an affirmation that she couldn't really go too wild, or, as a progressive one, a rejection of motherhood and reproduction as an essential aspect of female happiness and heterosexual coupling. What is clear is common to screwball endings: the central couple find a way to make the fantastical world of their romance mesh with reality. Despite the normative coupling, the chaotic element remains, whether it's Katherine Hepburn destroying a dinosaur skeleton in *Bringing Up Baby*, Carole Lombard continuing to follow her whims despite all logic in *My Man Godfrey*, or a cycles of misunderstandings restarting as a fur coat falls on a different woman at the end of *Easy Living*. This one last joke always undercuts the resolution of the ending and thus the normativity of the heterosexual romance, but also shows that the disruptive

element of zaniness (pursuing one's desire, despite social codes) is not incompatible, but rather essential to a successful relationship and society. We see this in *Theodora Goes Wild*, as Theodora and Michael continue to behave zantly (chasing each other around the house), but now have the freedom to stop performing other identities and be themselves. *Theodora* is a classic example of the screwball subgenre and its utopic possibilities, but these possibilities would become more complicated in the shadow of a world at war.

***“Damn the Torpedoes, Full Steam Ahead:” World War Two and the Death of  
Screwball Comedy***

The screwball cycle is generally delineated as the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, but by the early 1940s, with the United States' entry into World War II, a significant shift occurred in the genre, specifically in how women were portrayed. I offer two comparisons with two notable screwball comediennes. As we saw with *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), Dunne's strategically screwy performance, emphasized her character's agency and ability to align her professional and romantic desires. In *Together Again* (1944), Dunne plays a very different role, an uptight and exasperated town mayor who struggles to balance work, family, and love. She eventually loses her office, but gains the love of a free-spirited artist, Charles Boyer. The shift also visible in *His Girl Friday* (1940), Rosalind Russell plays a journalist planning to give up her career and be a wife, when her editor (and ex-husband) tempts her with one last scoop leading to screwball antics and a reevaluation of her desires. In *She Wouldn't Say Yes* (1945), Russell plays a psychiatrist treating veterans, who falls in love with a soldier and a cartoonist who rejects her scientific thought with a love of whimsy and impulsiveness. In these later films, a dichotomy is set up between career and love, whereas in the earlier films the heroine's

fundamental desires don't change, but instead find a way to be satisfied through her zany reconstruction. Yet, by the mid-1940s, screwball heroines had become straight characters to zany men in their roads to romance, thus removing any transgressive quality to the humor. The friendly play-fighting between a couple in the films of the 1930s evolved into antagonistic battle of the sexes. In this way, the conflict and romantic resolution of a screwball comedy came to reify societal divisions rather than explore the unique dynamic between two characters, as seen in *The Good Fairy* and *Theodora Goes Wild*, and the ability of screwball to create a separate world of potential freedom, joy, and equality.

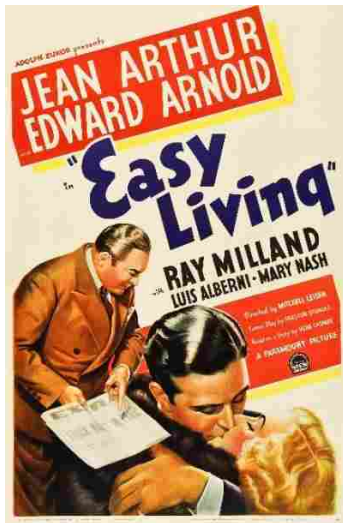


**Figure 4.23** In *She Wouldn't Say Yes* (1945), the intelligent brunette (Rosalind Russell) competes with the voluptuous, vapid blonde (Adele Jergens) for a man's affections, illustrating a transitional moment in the romantic comedy genre, as romantic comedy shifts from the 1930s screwball cycle to the 1950s sex-comedy cycles.

What caused this relatively sudden and significant shift is complex, especially when our historiographic understanding of gender in this time period is discursively enmeshed within the iconic imagery of "Rosie the Riveter" alongside real women



working traditionally male roles to support the war effort. While these new opportunities “loosened traditional means of control over [women’s] lives” (McEuen 1), this freedom also made women’s sexuality a double-edge sword of danger (as seen in propaganda posters about “venereal disease”) and support (as seen in the pin-up girl) (Hegarty 10). The female trickster who had been sympathetically portrayed in the figure of the gold-digger of the pre-code films or the strategically screwy heroine of the later 1930s, no longer represented larger cultural ideals, whether anti- or pro-social. Instead, she existed in relation to men, as either a threat or a prize.



**Figures 4.24** A 1937 poster for *Easy Living*. **Figure 4.25** A 1943 poster for *The More the Merrier*. **Figure 4.26** A famous pin-up photo of actress/model Betty Grable.

To explore this subtle but undeniable transformation in how women were culturally situated and how this affected romantic comedy films, I examine a wartime screwball comedy, *The More the Merrier* (1943), starring Jean Arthur, a comedian who starred in important Depression-era screwball films, particularly in Frank Capra’s popular films *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *You Can’t Take It with You* (1937), and *Mr. Smith*

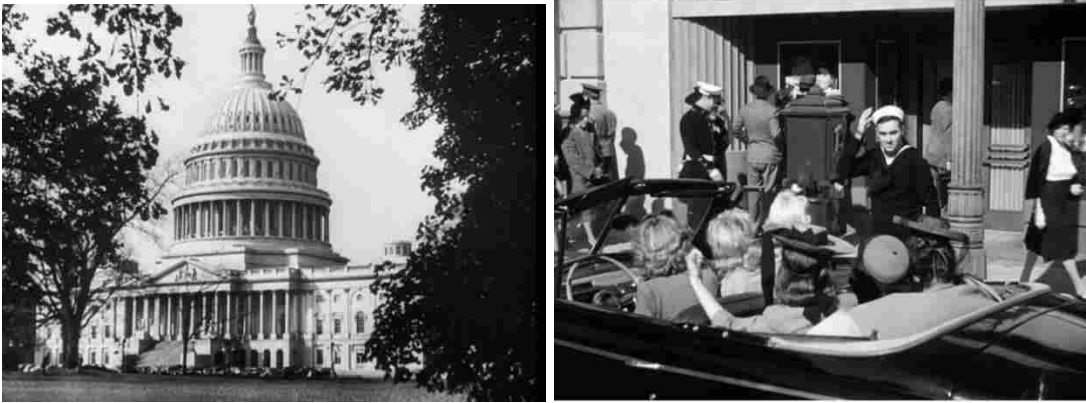
*Goes to Washington* (1939).<sup>26</sup> She usually played “the working girl whose cynicism is an encrustation surprisingly easy to slough off” (DiBattista 147), her comedy usually stemming from wide-eyed confusion or exasperation, making her a good foil for Capra’s idealistic male leads. The posters for her 1937 screwball comedy *Easy Living* (Figure 4.24) and *The More the Merrier* (Figure 4.25) illustrate the rapid change in depiction of women. In both, there is an older man, a younger man, and a younger woman (Arthur), but in the first, the older man is a threatening figure to the kissing young couple. He points to a newspaper as if reality is also part of the threat to romance. In the later poster, Arthur is much more sexualized, with a pose, hairstyle, and swimsuit strikingly reminiscent to pin-up photos of the era. The older and younger man both hang from a coat rack in the background, while her speech bubble says, “Home is where you hang your guests!” Though playful in tone, the poster portrays the heroine as the threatening figure, dividing characters by gender rather than age. Like its poster, *The More the Merrier* reconfigures the tropes and tensions of the screwball genre toward a new romantic comedy cycle wherein society shapes a woman’s desires, rather than the other way around.

Directed by George Stevens, *The More the Merrier* centers on the real-life housing shortage in Washington, D.C. during World War II. A meticulous government worker, Connie Milligan (Jean Arthur), rents out a room in her apartment out of sense of patriotic duty. A “retired, well-to-do millionaire,” Benjamin Dingle (Charles Coburn) rents the room while visiting D.C. as a government consultant. Dingle takes it upon

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<sup>26</sup> There has been some debate about whether Capra’s comedies (after *It Happened One Night*) are truly screwball comedies (see Leach 82-83). I include these films for my definition of the genre, wherein the humor is based on eccentricity and the romance allows the lovers to recreate a more idealized world.

himself to set up Connie up with a nice, “clean-cut” young man, so he rents half of his room to a soldier named Joe Carter (Joel McCrea), without Connie’s consent and despite her engagement to another man. Comedy ensues as the three struggle to live in the same small apartment and as Dingle plays matchmaker with Connie and Joe.



**Figure 4.27 and Figure 4.28** In the opening scenes of *The More the Merrier*, order and formality is contrasted with chaos and playfulness.

*The More the Merrier* was a critical and commercial success, earning Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Actress, Supporting Actor, Director, Screenplay, and Original Story, though ultimately only winning for Best Supporting Actor for Charles Coburn (Vermilye 52). Contemporary reviewers noted that the film paralleled and parodied the country's real-life housing crisis (Crowther 17). The plot’s grounding in reality, though farcical, makes it tonally quite different from the more surreal or fantastical films of the 1930s, despite a similar emphasis on exaggerated physical humor and quirky characters. This sense of realism is reinforced by the film’s opening scene which mimics the style of a documentary or educational film. A male voice-over narrator announces: “Our vagabond camera takes us to beautiful Washington D.C., the national capital of our United States...” over generic shots of the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument. Yet when the narrator describes the city as “pleasant and

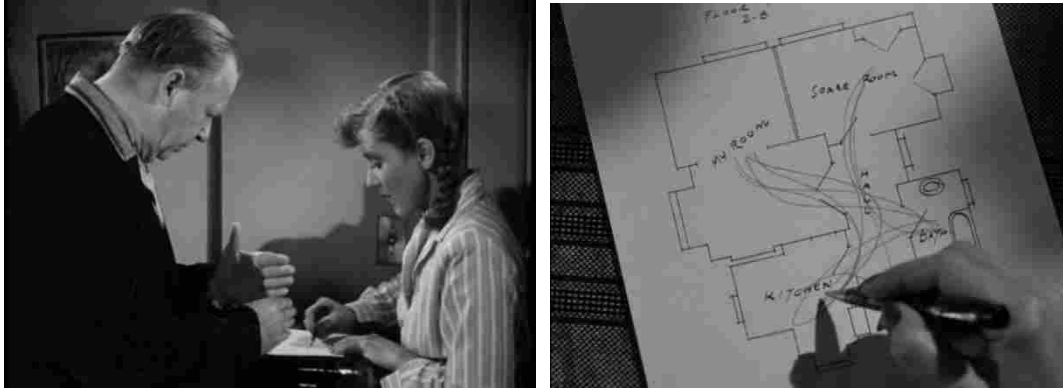
leisurely,” there is a cut to a shot of many people running toward the camera. When the narrator discusses the “formality and custom” of the city, we see a car full of women picking up a male sailor, clearly reversing “formal and custom” gender roles. In screwball style, this use of irony playfully comments on society’s ideals and reality, yet there is a crucial difference from earlier films in the genre. Instead of the heroine driving the zaniness of the film, the characters in *The More the Merrier* react to zany setting (an overcrowded, gender-reversed city). Though the circumstance was real, the reversed gender dynamics are playfully exaggerated, such as in a scene where a line of women clocking into work, aggressively wolf-whistle at a passing man, who begins to walk more quickly as the whistles grow louder. What makes this zany is the comedy derives from someone following their desire (to flirt) with cultural norms (women aren’t supposed to pursue men).

In a film like *Theodora Goes Wild* or *My Man Godfrey*, a zany character can challenge real-life power dynamics between men and women, rich and poor, parents and children. The situations Cary Grant finds himself in *Bringing Up Baby*, are certainly surreal, but his underlying motivation, to schmooze money from rich people for his museum, is sadly familiar. A zany character is eccentric but nonthreatening. Similarly, the zany setting of the war-time capital in *The More the Merrier*, is unfamiliar but temporary. Women may be in control here, but this is couched within a larger, traditional understanding of gender roles, because the men are away fighting.

Contrast this opening to *The Good Fairy’s*, which opens with a visual connection between the orphan’s asylum and a prison. Here Lu tells a fairy tale to distract the children (and herself) from their poverty. The fairy tale becomes the driving force of

chaos in the film, as Lu tries to become a good fairy. In this way, the screwball heroine uses fantasy to reshape reality. By contrast, the heroine of *The More the Merrier*, attempts to instill order on a chaotic situation, while the paternal figure, Dingle, plays the screwball hero. Yet his character's position as wealthy, older, white man who is crucial to the war effort, undercuts any transgressive potential within his zany humor.

Instead of restricting the romance, Dingle facilitates it, while Connie (Arthur), motivated by patriotism, decorum, and practicality, obstructs the romance. Rather than following her heart, she sticks to her engagement to a boring but sensible coworker, whom she still refers to formally: Mr. Pendergast. Unlike a typical screwball heroine, whose whimsy creates chaos, the most physically comedic scene is set up by her character's desire for order. After agreeing to take Dingle on as a tenant, she shows him a complex time schedule and map for when she and Dingle will be in different rooms as they get ready in the morning in her small apartment. This fails, of course, the following morning as the two continually bump into and otherwise impede each other, even accidentally locking each other out of the apartment. In one gag, Dingle begins making coffee but realizes he is supposed to be showering, according to the schedule. He runs to the bathroom and tries to take off his robe, unaware he is still holding the coffee pot which spills everywhere. When he later goes to serve Connie coffee, the pot is empty. He answers her questioning look with "Well, there's a war going on, Miss Milligan," thus equating the slapstick, physical comedy to the serious reality of wartime rationing.



**Figure 4.29** Connie (Jean Arthur) attempts to instill order on chaotic situation, through timetables and diagrams, as Dingle (Charles Coburn) listens in confusion.

Dingle struggles to adapt to Connie's plan, though he has already been established as savvy character who outwitted other potential renters and overcame Connie's reluctance to share an apartment with a man. In this way, the fatherly figure is the agent of chaos, rather than the screwball heroine, but this "chaos" is really a road to proper order. With his mantra, "Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead!" the film connects the desire to follow one's heart with a masculine, martial approach, marking impulsiveness as decisiveness rather than whim. I argue that the romance of the film becomes a regressive patriarchal force, as a fatherly figure attempts to foster love between a young couple, rather than earlier comedies where young couple's relationship often challenges societal expectations and forces a revaluation.



**Figure 4.30** In *The More the Merrier*, the “meet-cute” is between the father figure and the love interest, rather than the heroine.

Likewise, the film’s love interest, Joe Carter (Joel McCrea), differed from the typical screwball hero. McCrea was no stranger to the genre with his turns in *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) and *The Palm Beach Story* (1942). Yet his character in *The More the Merrier* shows a new type of masculinity in the screwball genre. Unlike Herbert Marshall in *The Good Fairy*, Melvyn Douglas in *Theodora Goes Wild*, McCrea’s performance shows no childlike foibles. He is introduced carrying a plane propeller as he seeks housing. The prop is unique but not out of place given the wartime context. Carter’s dialogue with Dingle, with a dry delivery and lack of playful romantic tension, feels more akin to the wit of noir rather than screwball:

Carter: “What do you do?”

Dingle: “I’m a well-to-do retired millionaire. How about you?”

Carter: “Same.”

Dingle: “Say, what’s that? A part of an airplane?”

Carter: “New type of garden bench.”

Dingle: “Looks like a propeller.”

Carter: “It does?”

The exchange is quick and humorous, but, in this context, it is clear that Carter is being deliberately secretive about his job due to security concerns, not eccentricity. Dialogue like this shows a transition and connection between screwball and noir, which has not gone unnoticed by scholars.<sup>27</sup> Carter also demonstrates a different sort of masculinity than usually seen in screwball. He speaks calmly and is usually in control of the situation, in contrast to the comic exasperation or confusion of the characters played by screwball staple, Cary Grant. Instead, Connie is the exasperated one, but by more mundane things. In one scene, she tells both men to leave, after she catches Dingle reading her diary. Though Dingle apologizes, Carter successfully assuages her by giving her a gift, a nice travel case. Though the aesthetics of the scene—a tight close up, with McCrea leaning over Arthur, and only the sound of their low voices—make it clear that it is the intimacy of the gesture rather than the gift itself that pleases Connie. This scene builds the romantic tension between Connie and Carter, but also illustrates more traditional courtship, built on gift-giving and seduction, rather than play and companionship.

This more serious focus on romance continues in a later scene, which *Life* magazine called the “best thing in the movie” and an “exquisitely subtle love scene” (“Movie of the Week” 47). After Dingle distracts Connie’s fiancé with business talk, Carter walks Connie back to their apartment. As they walk back on the dark sidewalks, they pass other couples canoodling. With the dim lighting, long takes, and close ups, the scene is much more in line with drama than comedy, and the costuming, with many men

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<sup>27</sup> “One might even call screwball comedy an upbeat flipside of noir--in both cases it is a frequently irrational world with women hunting vulnerable men (though one merely desires a husband while the other desires his money)” (Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy*, 49). See also Thomas C. Renzi’s *Screwball Comedy and Film Noir: Unexpected Connections*.



in uniform, reinforce the historical context, that couples are eager to connect while men are on leave from the war.



**Figures 4.31, 4.32, and 4.33** The cinematography and lighting of this scene signal a clear shift in genre aesthetics, from comedy to romance.

Sex is quite central to screwball beginning with the “walls of Jericho” in *It Happened One Night* and including this chapter’s examples, where Luisa and Theodora navigate the social implications of their perceived sexuality (or lack thereof). As Jane Greene argues, filmmakers quickly found loopholes in the Production Code that allowed them to make implicit sex jokes (46). The significant shift we see in *The More the Merrier* is that sexuality is more aligned with the dramatic rather than comedic elements of the narrative. Carter and Connie’s dialogue belies their physical interaction. At one point, Carter kisses Connie’s neck while she talks about her marriage plans to Mr. Pendergast. She stops during the kiss, closing her eyes and clearly pleased, but continues mid-sentence as soon as he stops.

Connie: “Why, when my cousin had a stamp collection, he used to save all his foreign stamps from his office, forwarded and gave them to me, for her, my cousin.”

Carter: “Is that so?”

Connie: “Don’t you think that’s wonderful? A man in his position to do a thing like that?”

Carter: “You bet.”

Connie: “Well, you see that’s the way with those older men like Mr. Pendergast. A girl gets to appreciate their more mature—”

[He kisses her. Nondiegetic dramatic violin music begins.]

“—viewpoint.”

[She kisses him.]

There is some comedy here, but the focus is on the physical attraction between the two, undercutting Connie’s carefully laid marriage plans and logical defense of Mr. Pendergast. Passion eclipses reason, which Stevens signals by cutting closer and closer to the couple throughout their conversation on the porch, from a long shot to a medium shot to a close up, demonstrating a growing intimacy. Arthur’s strapless dress and pinned-up

hair expose her neck and shoulders. The low-lighting and soft focus clearly signal a classical romantic aesthetic, rather than a comic one.



**Figure 4.34** Connie and Joe seem to share a bed in this shot, though they are separated by a wall.

When they finally retire to their apartment and their separate beds on either side of a shared wall, the split shot creates the illusion that they are in the same bed, cleverly circumventing the Code. They confess their love for each other, and Joe asks Connie to marry him. She replies:

Connie: “Thank you. I’d love to. How? Whe-? You said you’d be gone in a couple of days.”

Carter: “Yeah.”

Connie: “Well, then you’d go away and we might never see each other again.”

Carter: “Yeah, but...”

Connie: “Well, don’t you see?”

Carter: “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Connie: “Oh, it’s an awful problem, isn’t it, darling?”

Carter: “It sure is, dear.”

Though the narrative and character motivations seem to stem from Connie's stubborn sense of propriety leading her to marry Mr. Pendergast, the true obstacle is the war and inevitable sorrow that comes with separation.

Mr. Dingle eventually brings the couple together through convoluted plot contrivance. When Joe is mistaken for a spy and taken in for questioning, Connie must prove his innocence by explaining that he is living with her, but this brings her "honor" in question. Dingle convinces the couple to elope to clear their names. Despite her love for Joe, Connie cries after the wedding when they get breakfast of catfish and boiled rice at an airport diner. She sobs again, when she and Joe return home to discover that Dingle has torn down the wall separating her bedroom from Joe's. The incongruity of Arthur's excessive reaction is certainly there, but what makes it funny? As mentioned earlier, screwball comedies often end with a small subversion within the couple's happy reconciliation, but this comic subversion usually affirms the characters' zaniness and its connection to their romantic fulfillment. In *The More the Merrier*, it is Dingle's zaniness that enables the romance, not the couple's. The affect of Arthur's weeping and McCrea's resigned expression is markedly different. To explain the affect of sorrow in a genre of joy, I look back at a similar scene in an earlier screwball film also starring Jean Arthur: *Easy Living* (1937).



**Figure 4.35 and Figure 4.36** Jean Arthur weeping in *Easy Living* (1937) and *The More the Merrier* (1943)

*Easy Living* stars Arthur as a poor young woman whose life is turned upside down when an expensive fur coat falls on her, leading people to assume she is a wealthy executive's mistress. In one scene, she receives a call telling her she has unintentionally earned \$18,000 in the stock market. Though surrounded by luxuries in a penthouse hotel suite, when she learns of her fortune, she immediately runs to her love interest and tells him, between her tears and his interruptions of worry:

“Johnny. I'm going to buy a dog! You know, one of those great, big woolly ones, Johnny, with the bangs all over its eyes! I know they have fleas but I don't care. I've wanted one all my life. Johnny! Oh, Johnny, we've just made \$18,000. 9,000 for you and 9,000 for me! One of those great, big woolly ones, Johnny.”

The humor here stems not only from Arthur's zany acting (crying when she is happy), but the incongruity of the situation. Though she is poor, when she almost magically receives a large sum of money, is not for any sort of luxury, but to fulfill a childhood desire for a dog. This gag is similar to Lu's joy at having a “genuine foxine” and Max's delight in his new pencil sharpener in *The Good Fairy*. In both films though, it is clear that the

characters' desires are probably normal in a ridiculous world. In *Easy Living*, for example, the scene of Arthur crying dissolves into a shot of a busy stock exchange floor with one trader still wearing an apron and shaving cream, having rushed straight from the barbershop.

In first crying scene in *The More the Merrier* (1943), a concerned waiter asks Joe why Connie is crying. Joe says that it's because she so happy. After a moment of confusion, the waiter smiles and says, "Oh for goodness's sake. Newlyweds!" This joke makes Connie's reaction no longer incongruous in the world of the film. Happiness and sadness are the same for newlyweds during the war. Here the crying gag makes light of a real-life problem but doesn't question society as the crying gag in *Easy Living*. As screwball transitioned to the 1940s, the genre stopped creating a world in which marriage could equal happiness and fulfillment, and took this tenet as a given, despite evidence to the contrary.

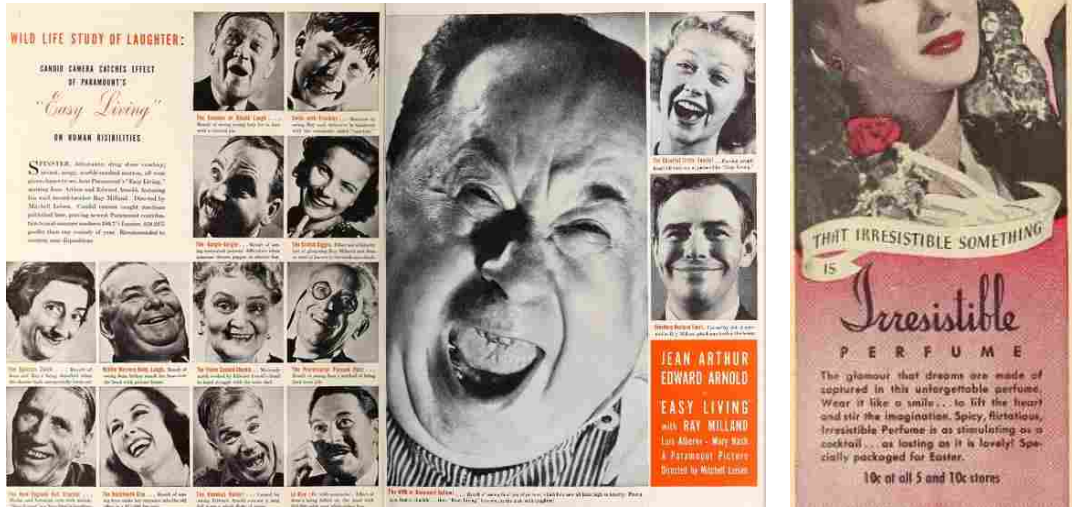


Figure 4.37 and 4.38 A 1937 advertisement for *Easy Living* from next to a 1943 advertisement for perfume and lipstick from *Modern Screen*.

Still, the question remains as to how a transformation within the screwball genre could happen so quickly, from the mid- to late-1930s to the early to mid-1940s. I have already gestured to broader historical context, which primary sources seem to support. In a curious advertisement for *Easy Living* from *Motion Picture Daily* (pictured above), photos of audience members laughing or smiling are correlated to various moments from the film, which is purported to be “346.7% funnier, 259.33% goofier than any comedy of year.” While advertisements and reviews of *The More the Merrier* also emphasize the humor to the film, its affective context was quite different. Next to a review of the film in *Modern Screen* is an advertisement for perfume and lipstick pictured below. The ad reads “Irresistible as you want him to remember you,” over a photo of a woman looking at the



camera while a man in uniform looks at her. Neither are smiling. With many men gone and facing death in the war, love had become a source of anxiety rather than solace, as it had during the Depression.

Other film critics agree that World War II was a turning point, but for different reasons. Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale explain:

The 'battle of the sexes' was overwhelmed by a more tangible and other-directed warfare and, in the early wartime years in particular, there are indications across a range of Hollywood films of a reluctance to validate romance as an all-important issue when there were 'graver matters' at stake (70).

However, as I argue in this chapter, the central romances in screwball comedies are characterized by a playful friendship, challenged more by social constraints than a significant other. As we seen with *The More the Merrier*, this romance is supported rather than opposed by hegemony, as represented by Dingle, and thus supports the larger wartime ideology of (re)production and unity.

Audiences of 1943 seemed to agree. The film was a successful comedy, yet its relevance to serious matters of war also went noticed. *Showmen's Trade Review* described the film as

".... a very merry answer to those who have been crying for escapist entertainment--robust, easy-come-laugh type of amusement to keep the patron giggling, chuckling, and guffawing loudly by turns throughout the showing. With all its straight-shouldered drive straight for the laughs of the crowd, the picture doesn't overlook the fact that we are at war, and conveys a necessary

propagandistic message subtly and with an insinuating manner that puts it across without offense.” (“The Box Office Slant” 22).

Though audiences desired escapism, the connection to war worked well in this movie. As the quote above shows, *The More the Merrier* was seen to support rather than subvert the clear ideology of WWII-era U.S.A. The social changes that came with the war certainly ended the screwball genre, but not because romance was no longer seen as important. Rather, I argue that the key shift in the genre happens along the fault line of zaniness and its meaning. In a 1930s screwball comedy, irrationality is aligned with personal happiness. In a 1940s screwball comedy, irrationality (marrying someone you may never see again) becomes aligned with sadness. In the Depression, a return to the status quo was something to be questioned, particularly the logic of capitalism and class. During the war, a return to the status quo was longed for.

### ***Conclusion***

As shown in the previous chapter, the screwball genre evolved from a combination of comedic film genres from the slapstick to the sophisticated, the anarchic to the populist. That this happened in the 1920s and 30s is no coincidence, as the film industry solidified into a vital mass medium and reflected social concerns. Beyond answering the seeming crisis of rising divorce rates, which has been noted by several scholars, screwball comedies negotiated the desires of an individual with the restrictions and power dynamics of modern life. Romance, as a plot device, was well-suited to this. Falling in love is at once seen as absurd and practical, special and mundane; it is a euphoric, irrational, endorphin-fueled process, but one that has proved evolutionary advantageous.

Scholars argue that film genres go through cycles, or subgenres tied to specific time periods as tropes wax and wane in popularity (Grindon 25). After World War II, romantic comedy entered the sex comedy cycle which leaned more heavily into the “battle of the sexes” plot, with the idea that men want sex and women want love, relying on gender stereotypes and making the romantic interests antagonistic toward each other. The cultural factors that fostered this shift included a weakening of the film industry’s Production Code and more open discussion of sexuality in both scientific (Alfred Kinsey’s studies) and popular realms (*Playboy*) (McDonald 40-4). The sex comedy cycle kept some tropes from screwball, such as masquerade/roleplaying/mistaken identity, but it was typically the male character who did this an attempt to trick the heroine. A famous example is Tony Curtis pretending to be a millionaire to seduce Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Overall, female characters became victims rather than agents and the romantic relationships became less friendly and playful.

Sex comedies of the 1950s and 60s still included the zany humor of outlandish scenarios, the characters’ behavior became more logical, even if exaggerated. For example, in *Lover Come Back* (1961), Doris Day and Rock Hudson play competing advertising executives who trick and sabotage each other until he puts aside his womanizing ways and marries her. In a sex comedy, the final union of the couple stops the zaniness of the film and returns the characters to a hegemonic reality (represented by marriage). In screwball comedies, however, the final union of the couple reinforced the characters’ eccentricities and validated their desires, synthesizing the zany world and the “real” world. Through romantic comedies would become less sexist in subsequent cycles,

the genre, overall, would continue to portray the final happy union of the couple as a return to dominant ideology rather than a fusion of personal desire and social cohesion.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: “SOMETHING WHICH HAS NEVER OCCURRED SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL...”

The oldest recorded joke we have is from Ancient Sumer, circa 1900 BCE, and reads: “Something which has never occurred since time immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband’s lap,” (Joseph). The joke still exists today, with the cognitive dissonance that women, idealized objects of desire, can’t possibly do something bad-smelling, unladylike, and decidedly human. The romantic connotation, a wife sitting in her husband’s lap, adds extra commentary to the joke. As a society, we idealize the love as a concept, and, as individuals, we idealize our loved ones. Yet people are flawed. This central incongruity is perhaps the key to the romantic comedy genre and its longevity.

Four thousand years later, and there’s something fundamentally funny about the complex psychological and physical phenomenon we call “love.” Love is universal, yet its cultural and historical manifestations are extremely varied. This dissertation has examined one small exploration of this phenomenon in the filmic genre of romantic comedy in 1920s, 30s, and 40s Hollywood cinema. Despite this specificity, and the very limited representation within this genre, I have attempted to prove that the comic exploration of romance exposes crucial questions about the value and nature of individual happiness and social cohesion during a wildly transitional moment of modernization, as women worked, young lovers dated, and one’s spouse could become one’s best friend.

#### ***The Problem of Female Desire***

In the 1920s, romantic comedies dealt with the “problem” of female desire. As seen in *The Extra Girl* (1923), there was public concern about the desire reflected and

shaped by mass media, leading to “movie-struck girls.” Meanwhile, social practices of finding a partner were shifting from family parlor-centered courtship to public-spaces dating. Rising divorce rates also caused societal alarm. *The Extra Girl* supports companionate marriage, so long as it does lead to traditional division of labor: Sue marries her best friend but has to give up on her dreams of acting in order to be a mother. *Her Sister from Paris* (1925), though it gives power back to the wife, ultimately has the same message. However, films like *The Wildcat* (1921) and *Exit Smiling* (1926) end without the main couple partnering, and the heroines pursuing their own passions (in this case banditry and acting).

The flapper romantic comedy cycle, as exemplified by *Why Be Good?* (1929), answered the problem of conflicting desires for female characters struggling between personal fulfillment and marital happiness. This answer was to conflate the two, so that the flapper’s love interest represented companionate love as well as economic mobility. Even more male-centered comedies, like *Spite Marriage* (1929), adopted a more egalitarian representation of men and women, by using slapstick humor to navigate modernity together instead of alone. With the *Great Depression*, the focus on the individual switched to the family. The popularity of Marie Dressler and Polly Moran sentimental comedies for MGM, like *Reducing* (1931), shows the redemptive power of family and friendship in the face of economic and personal hardships, which foreshadows screwball comedy. Though the subgenre is often thought to focus solely on the main couple, the central relationship is usually instrumental in solving a larger societal problem, caused by class conflict.

Finally, the screwball genre emerges in the 1930s and is able to reconcile personal fulfillment, companionate marriage, and social unity. In *The Good Fairy* (1936) the gold-digger trope is turned on its head, as the heroine's ideals give her the power to redistribute wealth without self-commodification. The zany screwball heroine redesigns systems of power, rather than exploiting them like the flapper or gold-digger. In *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936) we see the "battle of the sexes" as a battle against stifling cultural norms, that cause division and unhappiness. The main couple are actually allies in this battle, though somewhat reluctantly, and, by going wild, Theodora brings her small town together in celebratory parade. However, by World War II, the idea of individual happiness challenging social norms fell apart as self-sacrifice became necessary for social well-being, as seen in *The More the Merrier* (1943). A division of labor by gender identity overtook the unity found in class identity during the Depression.

### ***Romantic Comedy After Screwball***

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that screwball is the most utopic cycle of romantic comedy, in that it not only critiques socially prescribed roles (usually gender and class), but also envisions a world of equality through zany humor. But why did screwball or a romantic comedy subgenre that could similarly provide equality between its love interest fail to return after WWII? Even after a sexual revolution, *Roe v. Wade*, and two waves of feminism, modern romantic comedies often fail to offer equality between the male and female lead. Compare *Bringing Up Baby*, in which an unconventional woman convinces a serious man to have more fun, to the more recent *Trainwreck* (2015), in which a serious man convinces an unconventional woman to have less fun.



**Figure 5.1** In the final scene of *Bringing Up Baby*, Susan (Katherine Hepburn, left) and paleontologist David (Cary Grant, right) reconcile when she apologizes for past conflict. In the process, she destroys his fossil, illustrating that she hasn't changed, but he forgives her anyway, proving he has.



**Figure 5.2** In the final scene of *Trainwreck*, Amy (Amy Schumer, center) and Aaron (Bill Hader, not pictured) reconcile when she apologizes for past conflict and performs as a cheerleader (a profession she previously denigrated) to prove she's changed.



Though *Trainwreck* was praised by many for its feminism (Petersen), *Trainwreck* challenges gender roles by placing Amy Schumer in a role usually filled by a male “Brat Pack” character in a Judd Apatow film—that of the hedonistic 20-something whose path to love is paved with a growth in maturity. Showing that women can also enjoy casual sex and marijuana in a media landscape where women are still often presented as killjoys or nagging wives,<sup>28</sup> is certainly potentially progressive, but the film ends by containing this unruliness. Screwball comedies, by contrast, not only feature unruly women as a key element of the genre, but also uses their unruliness to fuel the jokes, the narratives, and the romantic relationships of these films. Though never entirely radical (happiness still must equal a heterosexual relationship), screwball creates a world driven by female desire and agency, safely couched but undeniably present in its zany humor.

All this leads to a curious contrast between screwball and modern romantic comedies: Screwball focuses on society, but allows individual freedom, whereas modern romantic comedies focus on the individuals, but cave to normative societal strictures. In *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Tamar Jeffers McDonald traces the evolution of the genre alongside historical changes in cultural ideals of love and sexuality. She explains: “While the radical movies of the 1970s gained energy from the fluidity of erotic emotions and the transience of affection, the current neotraditional romantic comedies take only anxiety from these ideas,” (106). The increasing sexual freedom found in the second half of the twentieth century, ironically brought more discursive anxiety to sexuality. This angst counteracts the purpose of a romantic comedy, under Northrop Frye’s theory, of creating a new society with a happy ending representing

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<sup>28</sup> See *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).

things “as they should be” (167). In order to return to screwball’s sensibilities and its underlying social critique, modern romantic comedies will need to learn how to reject anxiety and embrace joy.

### *Adulting vs. Fun: A Case Study*

To briefly consider whether a return to screwball’s celebration of joy, friendship, and love is possible, I will briefly examine our current romantic comedy subgenre/cycle, or what I call “adulting comedies.” Influenced, and often directed or produced by Judd Apatow, this subgenre includes the films *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Superbad* (2007), *Stepbrothers* (2008), *Knocked Up* (2007), *Trainwreck* (2015), *Bridesmaids* (2011), and *The Big Sick* (2017). In adulting comedies, the main character (female or male) struggles with some aspect of culturally defined maturity. They are stoners or slackers or virgins or nerds or otherwise alienated from society by some marker of immaturity. I take the term “adulting” from a colloquial use of “adult” as a verb, meaning “is to behave like an adult, specifically to do the things—often mundane—that an adult is expected to do,” which first appeared online around 2008 (“Words We’re Watching”). It is likely little coincidence that this word appeared around the time of the start of the Great Recession when high unemployment rates hindered people in their twenties, often recent college graduates, from beginning stable, lucrative, and meaningful careers.

In neo-liberalized popular culture, from memes to romcoms, blame turned inward. People lamented their inability to adult. In the example of the tweet below (Figure 5.3), the author regrets not being able to go to bed on time to get enough sleep to work their 9 to 5 job. Rather than noticing that whatever is keeping them up is more fulfilling than their job, super-seceding even their need for sleep, the author attributes this to

immaturity, a failure to adult. In the atomization of a neoliberal society, this self-blame makes sense, but is markedly different from screwball humor which validated the needs of the individual to be happy while criticizing structures of power in society (usually represented by the wealthy). A screwball comedy ending not only affirms the desires of the individual (as represented by love) but also posits this as a solution to social ills. Adulting comedies, however, force their protagonists to change in order to fit into society (as represented by love).



**Figure 5.3** A tweet cited in “Words We’re Watching: Adulting” shows the connection between the idea of “adulting” and labor.

Yet, a shift/return may still be coming, aided by growing cultural and industry push for more female filmmakers. A noteworthy example is the film *Booksmart* (2019), directed by Olivia Wilde. Though this film seems narratively very similar to *Superbad*, as a raunchy teenage buddy comedy, the characters are, however, not the typically adulting comedy characters. The main characters, Molly (Beanie Feinstein) and Amy (Kaitlyn Dever), two intelligent, confident, and driven teenage girls are about to graduate high

school. In order to counteract their reputation as studious good girls, they decide to attend a wild party. In this way, the focus of the comedy is friendship and the pursuit of fun, much like a screwball comedy. The key generic difference though is that their romantic relationships are with other characters, not each other.

At the end of the film, Molly drops her best friend Amy off at the airport, signaling the end of their childhood and beginning of adulthood, which will separate them. They tearfully say goodbye. The scene is reminiscent of the end of *Superbad*, where the friends (Michael Cera and, Feinstein's brother, Jonah Hill) separate at the mall, going off with their respective love interests, but sadly looking back at each other as escalators slowly move them apart. This is the crucial moment that ends most adulting comedies, where a romantic relationship signals the emotional growth of the character but also the end of their pursuit of individual desire and happiness (which makes up the fun and comedy of the rest of the film). At first it seems, the final scene of *Booksmart* will be indistinguishable. There are several shallow focus close ups on Molly and Amy's sad faces as they say farewell. However, as they initially part, Amy unexpectedly returns, jumping in front of the car, explaining she has a little time before her flight leaves, and asking Molly if she wants to get pancakes.

This may be the closest moment to screwball seen in recent romantic comedies. Rather than agonizing over adulthood and maturity, the heroines briefly reject it to follow their own desires and fulfillment with...pancakes.

“Fuck yeah, I do. Fuck yeah!” answers Molly in the jubilant final shot of the film.



**Figure 5.4** Molly (Beanie Feinstein) happily asserts her desire for pancakes in the final scene of *Booksmart* (2019).

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