

Chapter I

Rules and Unruliness

Romantic Comedy

Gender and Genre

We love this movie. We've seen it in a hundred variations and know exactly how it ends. The couple often "meet cute" – airplane (or bus) seating, a stop to ask for directions, a bet made in a bar, a shared telephone party line – and this chance meeting later seems like fate. The woman may be a little crazy, and the guy has no idea how much he needs her. Their quarrels and at least one huge misunderstanding threaten to break them up. But in the last shot they're lip-locked, and we want to believe this is true love, happily ever after.

It Happened One Night has many literary and cinematic precedents, but it's usually considered the foundation of the romantic comedy film genre produced and refined in its classic period, the 1930s and early 1940s. Its imitations and reproductions show no sign of stopping. Following a lull in the 1970s, often attributed to gender anxieties in the wake of the women's movement, the genre picked up again in the 1980s.¹ This chapter focuses on *It Happened One Night* as romantic comedy and considers the critical debates about the film's take on romance, gender, and marriage. Film genres are categories identified by story, style, iconography, recurring stars, and formulas that get repeated – and remain box office draws – because they speak to cultural desires, anxieties, and fantasies. The romantic comedy film is one of our favorite stories about courtship, coupling, and falling in love. It's a sexy topic, and its sexiness yields box office returns but it is also yielding in its flexibility, responding to changing ideas about sexuality

and gender. At first, these films had to end in marriage or the promise of marriage or remarriage, as in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Pillow Talk* (1959). But by the end of the twentieth century the genre included gay romantic comedies – *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) – and soon acknowledged bisexuality and the instability of sexual orientation and desire: *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), *Imagine Me and You* (2005), *Puccini for Beginners* (2006).

The template for all these stories – the obstacles, the romancing of exceptional characters, and the happy ending – is Shakespearean comedy (Evans & Deleyto, 1998: 2–5). *The Taming of the Shrew* was cited by Capra's editor friend during the script revision of *It Happened One Night* (as noted earlier). But the farcical tone and caricatures of that play do not actually match the more interesting tensions and characters of the Capra film or of Hollywood's best comic romances of the 1930s and 1940s. *It Happened One Night* actually shares the same narrative pattern of the more subtle Shakespearean comedy *As You Like It* – the young woman escaping from authority and traveling in disguise, meeting a lover in a place far removed from urban cynicism (Poague, 1977: 347).

However, the Shakespeare play most imitated in romantic comedy films is *Much Ado about Nothing*. Its bickering lovers Beatrice and Benedick are reborn in cinema's witty, fast-talking romantic couples of the 1930s, and the play was itself adapted into a film by Kenneth Branagh in 1993, at the height of the rejuvenation of this genre. Many romantic comedy films, including *It Happened One Night*, also share the incipient darkness of *Much Ado*, the underlying anxiety that men and women can't trust each other, that love may not be enough to fill the horrifying gap between the sexes. In *Much Ado*, an idyllic wedding scene is brutally disrupted with the groom's false charge that his bride is a whore. The falsely accused bride must undergo a symbolic death to be reborn again for the repentant groom in a second wedding. In *It Happened One Night*, the lovers are bitterly isolated from each other in the final third of the film, each certain the other has betrayed the relationship. As in *Much Ado*, a second wedding takes place which reverses the gloom and provides the happy ending, but not until each of the lovers has suffered some dark moments of the soul.

In both *It Happened One Night* and *Much Ado about Nothing*, the new couple symbolizes the beginning of a better society, the replacement of the aging father by the energetic young man who has claimed the daughter as bride. This pattern places romantic comedy, from Shakespeare through Capra, within the older and larger genre of New Comedy, the utopian narrative that celebrates social renewal through the newly formed couple, as described by Northrop Frye in his overview of literary genres (1957: 163). In the Capra film, the union of the middle-class working man Peter Warne and the heiress Ellen Andrews is an especially potent symbol of a utopian future, a leveling of class difference that must have spoken powerfully to Depression-era audiences.

New Comedy also emphasizes the formation of the couple rather than the usurpation of the father, so it “demands a place for women, or more precisely, for a woman, in the narrative itself,” as Rowe points out (1995: 102). For Rowe, the romantic comedy film is the primary site in Hollywood cinema where the unruly woman, one of Western culture’s most transgressive female figures, can thrive. The comedy structure, she argues, is also sympathetic to women because of its anti-authoritarian impulses and the mockery of macho posturing. In *It Happened One Night*, for example, Peter’s swaggering hitchhiking demonstrations lead to the comic deflation of his cocky thumb. This film exemplifies the genre’s playful gender reversals, too. In key scenes, Ellie is wearing Peter’s clothes (coat, pajamas, bathrobe, scarf), and she takes the male prerogative in pushing aside the walls of Jericho to declare her love. Peter does the cooking, irons her clothes, and at one point poses in bed, “hands behind his head, elbows out, like an actress in a glamour pose” (Poague, 1994: 118). Comedy also provides a narrative where female desire – the desire that impels Ellie first to jump overboard and later to bolt from her own wedding – is not punished or regretted, as usually happens in melodrama (Rowe, 1995: 99–102, 112). As this chapter shows, many feminists have embraced romantic comedy, despite its larger conservative agenda of conformity to marriage. It’s the film genre that foregrounds the problem of equality within a heterosexual relationship and emphasizes the woman’s quest for that status. And it remains the preeminent female Hollywood genre. Female freedom and

transgression are key components in the debates around romantic comedy and particularly around *It Happened One Night*, posing perplexing questions of what this unruly woman gains and loses in her story.

Romantic comedy and its spunky women thrived on stage for centuries after Shakespeare, from Restoration theater through the comedies of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw (DiBattista, 2001: 31). In cinema, the refinement of sound technology of the early 1930s – the “talkies” – enabled movies to deliver the crucial elements of witty conversation and sexually charged banter. The early romantic comedy films, often written by playwrights imported from the New York stage, imitated theatrical drawing-room comedy and focused on the upper classes, as seen in the elegant Ernst Lubitsch comedies and in classics such as *Dinner at Eight* (1933). *It Happened One Night*, with its inclusion of an unemployed reporter and its move out of the yacht and onto the Greyhound bus, broke away from that pattern and inaugurated the conventions now standard in the genre: identifiable characters, everyday settings, and social obstacles – culture, class, politics, race, nationality, or background – that make the romance unlikely. Inevitably, these social conflicts are subsumed by the sexual and romantic ones. The reporter marries the heiress, but the rhetoric of the film convinces us it’s really about sex, not class. Or as Rowe puts it, this genre uses “romantic love to absorb all other needs, desires, and contradictions, to promise the fulfillment not only of sexual desire but of *all* desire” (1995: 129). As a result, the desire most quickly absorbed and repressed is the heroine’s drive for autonomy and independence.

In this way, romantic comedy as modeled in *It Happened One Night* pits the unruliness of its characters against the rules of the genre and, in a larger sense, the social rules. No matter how wildly unconventional these individuals may be, they will move toward the conventional marriage. Peter and Ellie are goofy enough to ask for a toy trumpet for their honeymoon, but before we see the walls of Jericho blanket drop in the final shot, we hear the auto-camp proprietors tell us they’ve seen the marriage certificate. Neither the trumpet nor the certificate actually appears on screen, but these are the props of the genre, symbols of playfulness and legitimacy.

Surveying critical perspectives on film genres, Rick Altman points out two schools of thought. One theory of film genres sees them as social “rituals” with the community goal of validating our cultural practices (i.e., heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy) and resolving their contradictions (individualism, the randomness of desire). Understood this way, romantic comedy celebrates both the American-style rugged individual but also marriage – with all its compromises – as the place for the stubborn individualist: Peter Warne, the reporter who writes in free verse, and Ellie Andrews, the rich daughter who dives from the yacht in her dressing gown. The other stand on film genres is that they do the ideological work of maintaining the status quo. Gay and bisexual romantic comedies may appear as alternatives, but the overwhelming majority of these films tell us to be heterosexual and to marry. Likewise, romantic comedy idealizes monogamy and long-term commitment, but not the qualities that actually sustain them – loyalty, endurance, patience, friendship. Instead, it primes the pump of excitement that begins every relationship but cannot possibly last. The closing shot is the embrace or kiss, not the future colicky babies, aging bodies, and mounting debts. While the “ritual” theorists see genres “offering *imaginative* solutions to a society’s real problems,” the ideology theorists see genres “luring audiences into accepting *deceptive* non-solutions” (Altman, 1999: 27). These gender-genre tensions shape many of the arguments around *It Happened One Night*, particularly around the question of what the film suggests about marriage and about its rebellious heroine.

Screwball Characters Meet Cute

Hollywood’s romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s have been designated “screwball” comedies, a term that emerged from the 1920s slang word “screwy” to describe insanity. When Mr. Andrews asks Peter outright if he loves Ellie, Peter shouts, “Yes, but don’t hold that against me. I’m a little screwy myself!” *It Happened One Night* is often considered the first screwball comedy, even if it lacks the frantic physical antics of some of the later ones.² In the 1930s, “screwball” was a

baseball term to describe a deliberately wild pitch designed to confuse the batter. Screwball comedy most often refers to a film featuring a madcap hero and heroine and their unpredictable behavior, but it also denotes “a sense of confusion about romance and human relations” (Sikov, 1989: 19). In *It Happened One Night*, the opening sequences introducing Peter and Ellen illustrate the key qualities of both screwball comedy and the wider genre of the romantic comedy film: the brash characters, the “meet cute,” the seeds of conflict, and the sense of confusion about love and relationships.³ These two sequences also reveal a hero and heroine who are thoroughly different in significant ways – in social class and background – and alarmingly similar in volatile ways – equally reckless and fiercely resistant to authority.

The film’s establishing shot shows a sleek luxury yacht, followed by a medium shot of Mr. Andrews and the chief steward dressed in nautical uniforms of dark jacket, white trousers, and cap. The casting of stout Walter Connolly as Mr. Andrews and the military-style costume instantly characterize him as someone who throws his weight around and is accustomed to being obeyed, if not saluted. This *mise en scène* also establishes the overall structure of male clout; this ship and family are run by men in uniforms. The curt exchange about the daughter’s refusal of food and the bullying command to “jam it down her throat” set up the gender and generational conflicts before the daughter even appears.

In fact, we hear her before we see her. The first scene ends with a shot of Mr. Andrews’ portly figure striding purposefully toward the camera, on his way to Ellie’s cabin. In the next shot, the crew hovers at the closed cabin door to eavesdrop on the conversation, and we too overhear her obstinate proclamation: “I’m not going to eat a thing until you let me off this boat.” Maria DiBattista has characterized the romantic comedy film heroine of the 1930s and 1940s as, most of all, the woman who talks back, the fast-talking dame. Her power of speech, her sassiness, her argumentative voice, DiBattista claims, “paved a way for a new class or sort of woman who finally would answer to no one but herself” (2001: 11). Significantly, Ellie’s first line in this romantic comedy is the declaration of her autonomy over her

own body. Historically, the hunger strike draws on the one power, the choice to eat or starve, that even the powerless retain. The use of this politically charged tactic on a luxury yacht is not without irony, but it makes the point about the power structure in this family. The fact that the strike is protesting the father's interference in an unconsummated marriage amplifies the theme of bodies and the conflict of desires.

When we first see her, Ellie is facing away from the camera, her father behind her with his hands on her shoulders. In sharp contrast to his earlier bullying rant, Mr. Andrews is using a wheedling, coaxing tone we sense he has used before, telling her she knows he'll eventually have his way. She quickly shrugs out of his embrace. "This time you won't," she assures him coldly and stalks across the room to make a speech about how she and King Westley are already legally married. In contrast to Mr. Andrews' dark military-style jacket, Ellie is wearing a white satin dressing gown, suggesting femininity and vulnerability, but buttoned chastely high at the neck. The sexiness is in her voice. Ellie makes her clincher argument about her elopement – "I'm over 21 and so is he" – in "a pouting, honeyed voice," says Kendall, that turns it "into a slightly risqué song" (1990: 40). Ellie is also smoking a cigarette, which in 1934 was still cutting-edge behavior for women and associated with female independence.⁴

As Ellie's anger escalates from frustration to fury, the shot compositions emphasize the terms of the duel: Mr. Andrews' dark, bulky figure contrasted with Ellie's light, slim one. She does most of the moving in this scene – pacing, practically bouncing against the walls – and her lightness and mobility will prove to be her advantage. Exasperated with her father's interference, she turns to face the camera so we can see emotion animate her face as she takes a drag of her cigarette and, with contempt, exhales the smoke at Mr. Andrews, who threatens that she and Westley will "never live under the same roof." By the time the steward arrives with trays of food, Ellie's voice and posture are simmering with rage, and he is cowering in fear at her rebuke.

The meal is Mr. Andrews' ploy to make Ellie hungry by eating in front of her. "So subtle," she says sarcastically, rolling her eyes. Here we learn of Mr. Andrews' other heavy-handed tactics in sending his "gorillas," as Ellie puts it, to drag her away from the justice of the peace just



Ellie reacts with cold fury when her father has a tray of food delivered to break her hunger strike. Courtesy of Photofest.

after the wedding ceremony. He does this kind of thing, he tells her, because she's "a stubborn idiot," provoking her reply that she "comes from a long line of stubborn idiots," all of this information being crucial in the larger power dynamics of daughter, father, and lover in the film. The other important plot information imparted during their argument is that Ellie may have married Westley purely to spite her father, who loathes Westley as "a fake." So the question of her desire is immediately complicated. Does she want this man and marriage or does she simply want whatever her father opposes? Is this the story of Ellie learning what she really desires – something a man needs to teach her – or the story of female rebellion against paternal authority? The narrative goes both ways, but the question is whether we read romantic comedy as empowering for women or as a more conservative story about women learning to want the right man.

Continuing to treat her as a child who can be swayed with a bribe, Mr. Andrews makes the mistake of pushing the food toward her just as Ellie is proclaiming that she will shout if she wants to, and in fact scream if she wants to. It has a boomerang effect. His paternal behavior provokes her inner brat. When he waves a forkful of “nice, juicy steak” in her face, the camera catches a close-up of Ellie, now seething with fury, a little smile at the corner of her mouth to indicate how much she is enjoying her tantrum. She slaps away the fork and then upsets the entire food tray. In a rapid shot/countershot, Mr. Andrews slaps her across the face, and we see first her shock and then his own shock and regret. The implication is that this physical violence has never happened before and has created a serious breach in the relationship of two “stubborn idiots” who nevertheless love each other.

A hallmark of the screwball comedy is physical action – clowning tumbles, car chases, the race to a departing train or plane. The slap galvanizes Ellie into action. She bolts out the door, pushing aside the eavesdropping stewards, and begins her climb over the rail of the yacht. A shot of Mr. Andrews running toward the camera is followed by a quick shot of Ellie pausing just for a moment on the rail, narrowing her eyes at her father in triumphant revenge. The next shot is her athletic dive into the water, unimpeded by the long dressing gown, a glorious gesture of quickness, youth, and spontaneity that the portly Mr. Andrews, encumbered in his uniform, cannot possibly match. In an intriguing detail, Mr. Andrews then gives an order to telephone the detective agency that “Ellen Andrews has escaped again.” Again? Was the first escape the elopement, or is there a longer history of escapes from and retrievals by Daddy? The entire yacht sequence takes less than three minutes, wittily and economically summing up the romantic heroine as an argumentative young woman, headstrong enough to jump into a bay in her dressing gown, who has “escaped” at least once before.

The following sequence, the “meet cute,” links Ellie to Peter through repeated shots and narrative details. A wipe – the scene or sequence transition Capra uses most often in this film – takes us to Ellie at a Greyhound bus station (filmed, like the other bus station scenes, at the Greyhound station in Los Angeles). We learn later that she’s



The “meet cute” places Ellie and Peter within the narrow confines of a shared seat on an overnight bus. Courtesy of Photofest.

pawned her jewelry for money to buy traveling clothes, and she’s talked a grandmotherly woman into purchasing a bus ticket for her so she can avoid her father’s detectives. In short, despite the impulsive dive, Ellie has proven herself an adept and clever fugitive. Nevertheless, this character later becomes helpless and impractical once she starts traveling with Peter.

The sequence in which they meet begins with a tracking shot connecting the two main characters through other Greyhound passengers, prefiguring the film’s use of bus riders and working-class travelers as the everyday context for the unfolding romance. The shot follows Ellie’s gaze to the old woman walking across the lobby to deliver the ticket. Ticket in hand, Ellie walks offscreen left while the camera tracks in the opposite direction, following an anonymous male passenger across the lobby to a rowdy crowd of men in front of

a telephone booth. In drunken voices, the men tell him history is being made, and in a subtle comic touch, they push him offscreen so they can better lean in to hear one side of the phone conversation. The shot composition parallels the earlier one of the yacht crew leaning toward the cabin door to hear the argument between Ellie and her father. As a result, long before the two main characters actually meet, they have been visually and dramatically linked as people whose arguments draw an audience.

We are introduced to Peter Warne in a tight close-up inside the booth, looking far more like a gangster than a lover. His face is wedged to the right of the frame and three-quarters encased in shadow, the raucous crowd of men slightly out of focus behind him. Given Clark Gable's previous film persona, the 1930s audience would have expected another tough gangster from him. But the effect is comedy, not menace, because his voice is slurred and his hat sits too far back on his head. Also, unlike Ellie's passionate argument with her father about marriage and autonomy, this argument is about words, language, and writing style. It's both more pompous and a great deal sillier. Peter drunkenly calls his editor a "monkey face" and a "gas house palooka" for not recognizing him as a good newspaper reporter and not appreciating the story he wrote "in free verse." Peter's childish name-calling positions him as the bratty child who is old enough to drink too much and who likes to show off to a crowd. Like Ellie, he represents the younger generation making a grand romantic gesture that the older generation doesn't understand – not a secret marriage but newspaper stories written in an imaginative poetic style.

During the argument, the reverse shots reveal Joe, the editor, as a father figure much like Mr. Andrews, middle-aged, portly, and laden with the props of authority – in this case, desk, papers, telephones, cigar. After their brief, angry exchange, he fires Peter, telling him he wouldn't know a good newspaper story if it "kicked [him] in the pants," and hangs up in disgust. But Peter pretends the argument is still going on and that Joe is begging him to stay on the job. This is the first of several moments of improvisation and self-conscious play-acting for others seen in this film.

A much more serious issue lies just beneath the humor of the name-calling and the quarrel about writing style. Peter is a man who has just lost his job. When Joe cuts short the argument by angrily telling him that he is absolutely finished at the newspaper, the close-up shows Peter taken aback. Shaken, he loses his aplomb for a moment before recovering his pluck and pretending that Joe is still on the phone begging him to come back. The tipsy eavesdropper's comment, "This is history in the making," reminds us of a grim history. The 1934 audience had seen almost five years of lost jobs and low employment. A man talking back to his boss, calling him names, taunting his authority, refusing to go back to the job, is a great deal bolder than Ellie's dive into the bay. Ellie can always change her mind, get off the bus, and resume a pampered life. As Thomas Schatz puts it, Ellie is "simply swimming from one yacht to another," whereas Peter is on the road with a few bucks in his pocket and no paycheck in sight (1981: 153).

Though Peter has lost more, this brief introductory scene suggests that he and Ellie are equals in their need for direction and prudence. After all, does Peter want a job as a poet or a reporter? In a comical reversal of meanings, this scene also links them by identifying Peter as the other "king" in the narrative, as he is hailed by his drunken friends outside the phone booth. Up to this point, we have seen him only in shadowy noir-style close-ups, but the first medium shot of Peter is humbly demystifying. Surrounded by men in suit jackets, Peter alone wears a natty scarf and a baggy, wrinkled topcoat, which will become an important prop later in the story. Overall, Peter is one shade seedier than his companions, and his shabby attire contributes to the comic effect of his assumption of haughty stateliness. Straightening his back and pulling himself up, Peter lifts his chin with the dignity of royalty, wraps his coat and scarf around himself like an ermine cape, and asks if his "chariot" is ready, his face carefully composed with the gravity of a sovereign who has just made a sad but wise decision. This is the topsy-turvy world of carnival – the unemployed drunk crowned king – building up to the meeting with the other character in reversed circumstances, the rich young woman disguised as a traveler on the Greyhound bus. This is also the performance of an unemployed man

with great imagination, instantly transforming himself into royalty, preening himself with an inward eye despite the external scruffiness.

Peter's meeting with Ellie involves one more encounter with authority, a comic one that reinforces their equal arrogance. On the crowded bus, Peter discovers that the only unoccupied seat is piled with bundled newspapers. His question about this to the scowling bus driver is polite enough, but when he gets no reply he shows no hesitation in throwing the bundles out of the bus window to the sidewalk below, a simple but gutsy gesture of the little guy versus the system, symbolically replaying the fight with the editor. His ensuing squabble with the driver is light in tone, but the inarticulate driver is no match for witty Peter, who claims victory by drawing approving laughter from the crowd on the bus – again, a show-off performance for an audience.

The initial intersection of Peter and Ellie is set up as a visual joke. A medium shot shows Peter and the bus driver in their dispute, which has developed into Peter's tall tale about what happened once when he sat on a newspaper and the front page got imprinted on the seat of his pants. Neither of them pays attention when Ellie enters the shot and crosses in front of them, pushing against the driver and edging past Peter, heading for what the audience knows is the last remaining seat on the bus, the topic of the ongoing squabble. When Peter realizes what has happened – the seat for which he fought has been appropriated by a stranger – he utters the quaintly phrased line which is famous as one of screwball's most clever double entendres: "Excuse me, lady, but that upon which you sit is mine."

Peter has just told a comic story about his own backside being read like a newspaper, but the oblique reference to Ellie's backside is sexual as well as comic, positioning Peter as the aggressive claimant of Ellie's body. Ellie's cool response, a question to the driver confirming that the seats are not reserved, is to claim her space. But Peter then asks the driver if it's a double seat, not a single one, invoking romantic comedy's iconic doubleness (two singles becoming a pair) as well as double sexual meaning. Peter wedges himself in next to Ellie, the first of many small spaces they will share with more or less comfort. The scene ends with one more visual joke about seats, backsides, and physical space. Doggedly ignoring Peter's offer to stow her bag on the top rack,

Ellie chooses to stand up and hoist up her bag at the moment the bus lurches forward. Caught off balance, she lurches onto Peter's lap, giving him not only sudden intimacy with her backside but also the opportunity to have the last word: "Next time you drop in, bring your folks."⁵ As she settles in beside him, a medium two-shot lingers on their faces, his relaxed and smug, hers at first prim and taut but slowly breaking into a small smile. So both the dialogue and the visual comedy of the meeting scene shrewdly set up the issues that shape the narrative: the reluctant sharing of space, sexual tension, the development of intimacy, and Ellie's "folks" hovering in the background.

Intimacy, Violence, and Marriage

In addition to introducing these key themes, this first bus scene contains a trite line of dialogue with implications that ripple throughout the narrative and signal the film's larger concerns with gender and romance. During Peter's argument with the bus driver, the driver makes a cranky threat: "What you need's a good sock on the nose." This launches Peter into a theatrical riff about how much he likes his nose the way it is. But the larger point is that Peter himself uses a variation of this line at the end of the film when Mr. Andrews asks him if he loves Ellie. Peter's reply is oddly elliptical: "What she needs is a guy that will take a sock at her once a day whether it's coming to her or not." These rhetorical threats bookending the narrative serve as ironic commentaries on what these characters "need" – ironic because the rhetoric of romantic comedy suggests that what they really need, of course, is each other. However, the overtones of the threats and the question of "need" are at once more complex and more disturbing than that.

The concept of "need" is complicated throughout the film, beginning with Ellie's rich-girl hunger strike, in which food is a bargaining chip for someone who has never actually been hungry. As the road trip goes on, Ellie meets some truly needy people – the woman who faints from hunger and the little boy who says they haven't eaten anything for a day. Shortly thereafter, when their money is gone, Ellie and

Peter are themselves genuinely hungry. Even then, Ellie refuses the “horrid” raw carrots Peter finds for her. Stanley Cavell points out that this refusal of the carrots indicates her spoiled “sense of exemption from the human condition” (1981: 93). Her refusal of food, first from her father and then from Peter, is also a refusal of love, so that when she finally does eat the raw carrots, it signals not only her acceptance of Peter’s love, but “her acceptance of her humanity, of true need.” Peter’s neediness is more sketchily developed. Gruff and self-sufficient, at first he seems to need only a job and thus Ellie as the scoop that will get him back on the newspaper. But on the third night of the journey, he uses the hunger metaphor in his wishful soliloquy about his dreams of authenticity and spontaneity, saying, “Boy, if I could ever find a girl who’s hungry for those things ...,” triggering a turning point of the story (Cavell 1981: 91–5).

So the wisecracks about needing “a sock” mock the structure of romantic comedy but also touch on these more serious questions about what exactly we need in order to be human. The threats of physical violence also hint at a darker machismo which haunts *It Happened One Night* and undermines its reading as liberating for women. The film opens with Mr. Andrews’ brutish rant about jamming food down Ellie’s throat. The rant is a bluff because, in the next scene, his tone with her is cajoling, not threatening. Nevertheless, he does use physical violence by the end of the scene. In fact, the prompt for all the narrative action is his slap of her face. The second “sock” in the film, far more playful, is Peter’s slap of Ellie’s behind as he carries her across the stream in the second half of the film, so the trajectory is a move from punishment to erotic play. Yet Peter’s man-to-man talk with Mr. Andrews at the end of the film suggests a pact about controlling willful women. Physical force – “a sock at her once a day” – could encompass the coercive as well as the erotic. The overall suggestion is that women need – and/or want – to be hit.

In contrast, Peter needing “a sock,” as threatened by the bus driver, has a very different effect, not only in relation to gender but by way of Gable’s iconic status as a tough guy. Tough guys in movies always “need” to be hit so they can hit back more forcefully, proving their masculinity. The blustering conversation with the bus driver, even

while it is comic, reinforces the film's narrative world as structured by male power, physical and social. For Maltby, Peter is desirable to both Ellie and her father because he understands "the necessary use of violence in the operation of patriarchal authority" (1998: 152).

The underlying violence is a genre issue too. Screwball comedies are known for their emphasis on "fast-flung insults and violence, either threatened or carried out" to signal the struggles of an equitable relationship (McDonald, 2007: 20). Ed Sikov's theory is that the "madcap" elements of screwball allow for the expression of hostilities otherwise suppressed in representations of romance. He argues that the violence is a release of sexual anxiety and "irrefutable evidence of intimacy," given how much tension is repressed in the "happy home," and points out that in this regard women "get a raw deal throughout the genre": they are the ones whose independence is physically punished by "resentful heroes" (Sikov, 1989: 28–9). Diane Carson claims that the physical abuse of women in these films has the effect of countering and silencing the fast-talking dame. The blows, bumps, and slaps, playful or otherwise, "disrupt and usurp the power of her voice. The message is clear: stay in your place" (1994: 216).

Yet, like other feminist readers of romantic comedy, Carson nonetheless emphasizes the female-empowering pleasures of these films. She finds the heroines' subversive energy a significant disruption of the status quo, despite the conventional narrative endings (1994: 223–4). Rowe, whose "unruly woman" argument develops this claim, maintains that in *It Happened One Night*, Ellie draws from the specific power of the virgin, the woman whose strength lies in her position outside of marriage, as reflected by the mythical figures of Athena, Artemis, and warrior Amazons. The hymen can be considered "a barrier that preserves a kind of independence in the romantic heroine." Ellie's power is her liminal position: she is married but still a virgin; she has escaped from her father but is not yet in the household of another man, neither child nor wife. She uses this position to *extend* the narrative, first by delaying her arrival in New York, and then by delaying the consummation of her marriage to Westley by demanding a formal wedding (Rowe, 1995: 133–5). Reinforcing this reading of the film, Kendall points out that it is



Two thumbs up or down? Critics are divided as to whether the road adventures of Peter and Ellie develop into a relationship of equals. Courtesy of Photofest.

“the woman who controls the action. She is the one who had set the plot in motion at the beginning and the one who saves the romance at the end” (1990: 49).

The argument against this reading – the interpretation of *It Happened One Night* as an essentially conservative, even reactionary, film in terms of its gender politics – emphasizes not only the latent violence but also the moments when Ellie is punished when she asserts herself. After all, even after she transgresses the walls of Jericho, the shocked Peter simply sends her back to her bed to cry. Maltby (1998) points out other instances: when she leaves Peter’s seat on the bus, she is besieged by the sleazy salesman Shapeley, and when she argues with Peter the first night at the auto camp, he wins the argument by taking off his shirt, an overt sexual threat. Even more troubling is the extent to which Ellie is infantilized by Peter, and eventually takes pleasure in submitting to him like a child. He makes the rules about how to dunk a doughnut,

how to spend money, and how to ride piggyback. By the time they spend the night in the hayfield, he “has reduced Ellie to a condition of complete childish dependence,” wailing when she thinks she is abandoned, crying first for food and then for comfort. Maltby reads the film as “an exercise in the expression of control over Ellie’s sexuality” by the father and then by the suitable husband. Peter reveals that he knows how to deal with money, expecting no more or less than his \$36.90, and is thus “a suitable recipient for the other form of property, Ellie” (Maltby, 1998: 151–5).

Ellie’s status – as unruly woman, as child, as property, as desiring heroine, as powerful virgin – is central to the film’s larger theme of marriage. It is not simply that some readers want to claim Ellie as a heroine and others want to expose the film as patriarchal and sexist. Instead, the fascination and significance of *It Happened One Night* lies in its cultural work of figuring out what marriage entails. Many film scholars agree that romantic comedies emerged in the 1930s as a response to the decline of marriage and the spiking of divorce rates in the previous 10 years. This occurred as more women began to have choices about making a living and as the Victorian paradigm of domestic womanhood gave way to the liberated New Woman or flapper of the 1920s (as will be discussed in chapter 2). In response, a new “companionate” model of marriage emerged in the 1920s, promulgated in advice books and popular fiction, promoting equality, companionship, and romance as marital ideals. Screwball comedies showcased this modern egalitarian marriage, which in turn required an independent heroine who, by implication, was the cause of the new mode of relationship (Shumway, 2003: 67–9). The romantic comedy heroine, though not as overtly sexy as the flapper, shared her pluck, vivacious sense of fun, and willingness to treat men as partners and pals (Lent, 1995: 316–20).

Cavell, reading *It Happened One Night* as a film about marriage and the human condition, begins with this premise, too, arguing that the post-suffragist generation of women began to incorporate feminist ideas into personal issues of autonomy. He sees *It Happened One Night* as part of a cycle of films struggling with “the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man” (1981: 17). Far from

seeing Ellie as a feminist heroine, however, Cavell characterizes her as a woman in need of an education and a teacher, a man who will show her how to acknowledge her own desire and how to become an autonomous person. She needs to be “created.” Cavell claims that when Peter teaches Ellie the right way to dunk a doughnut, her reply, “Thanks, professor,” acknowledges this teacher–student, creator–creature relationship (1981: 84).

However, Sikov, writing about the same scene, argues that Peter’s lecture about dunking is an “irritating” revelation of his insecurities: “He’s threatened by this attractive woman,” and “Ellie isn’t the kind of woman who will put up with too many of Peter’s lessons” (1989: 88–90). Certainly Peter himself has a great deal to learn. As Rowe points out, Peter is blinded by his stubbornness about class boundaries and his alienation from his own emotional life. As a result, on the third night of the journey, he rhapsodizes about his island dream scenario without realizing it is exactly what he had experienced the night before, under the stars with Ellie. Rowe’s interpretation is that only Ellie, with her virginal power, can transform and “create” the new Peter (1995: 131–2).

What both characters most need to learn is the meaning of marriage itself, in that the narrative offers two sham marriages – the one with Westley and the fictional one that Peter and Ellie maintain during their travels – before the “true” marriage that ends the film. But at what point in Peter and Ellie’s journey do they move into the intimacy of a marriage? Cavell reminds us of the quarrel between Mr. Andrews and Ellie about her marriage to King Westley. Her primary argument is that she and Westley are “legally, actually married.” Mr. Andrews’ retort is that she’s “never going to live under the same roof with him.” It’s a euphemism for the consummation of the marriage, but it raises the interesting question of what being “actually married” entails, because Ellie and Peter begin to “live under the same roof” on the first night of their journey. For Cavell, their relationship develops so that by the third night they indeed act like a married couple quietly preparing for bed, undressing and even putting up the blanket wall as a matter-of-fact domestic detail (1981: 84–6).

Further complicating the question of “real” marriage and intimacy is the meaning of their charade as a quarreling couple for the detectives in the first auto-camp sequence. When Mr. Andrews’ detectives appear at the door of the cabin, Ellie wants to jump out the window, but Peter quickly decides that their best escape is to impersonate a married couple. This is significant because Ellie’s previous escape jump, from the yacht, had been successful, but now she and Peter must act together as a couple to escape authority. The shot composition reinforces this. The divider blanket, acting as the walls of Jericho the previous night, had isolated Peter and Ellie into separate spaces in the frame. But now the hanging blanket divides the space between the couple on the left and the detectives on the right. The detectives and the auto-park owner are also now the audience, paralleling the eavesdroppers for whom Ellie and Peter had individually “made a scene” in the opening sequences. Now they make a scene together and, as Cavell points out, Peter immediately steps into the role of director, rearranging Ellie’s hair and unbuttoning her top buttons (1981: 107). He himself unbuttons his vest and trousers to give the impression of domestic intimacy, a couple getting dressed together and gossiping about Aunt Bella.

The charade is a psychodrama, too, as Gottlieb suggests, with Peter ranting over Ellie’s likeness to her stupid father and venting jealousy over a “big Swede” who is an obvious stand-in for King Westley. Ellie in turn gets an opportunity to scream at Peter and to cry about how badly he is treating her (Gottlieb, 1988: 133). Cavell believes they fool the detectives because the proof that they are a married couple is their squabbling, which for him suggests that “a willingness for marriage entails a certain willingness for bickering,” a precept central to romantic comedy (1981: 86). The critic Ray Carney likewise links the charade scene to the issue of intimacy, claiming that an argument is “a close second to making love for the depth of involvement and emotional self-exposure it demands” (1996: 239). More troubling is that this charade of a quarrel implies physical violence as well. When Ellie wails at Peter’s yelling, he raises his hand as if to strike her, a gesture that complements his threat to “take a sock” at the detectives for intruding into their privacy and approaching his wife. This fits

the well-documented profile of the abusive spouse; the man who is willing to beat up someone to protect his woman is likely to beat up the woman as well.

This psychodrama also performs class. Ellie and Peter take on a catalog of stereotyped behavior. Both talk loudly: Ellie speaks in a broad Southern accent; Peter refers to family in Wilkes-Barre (a small town in Pennsylvania), and a dance at the Elks where, Ellie adds, he was drunk. But their charade exceeds the clichés. In the previous scene, Ellie had explained to Peter that being wealthy was no fun and that she'd "trade places with a plumber's daughter any day." In the faux quarrel, Peter uses her own words to belittle her: "Once a plumber's daughter, always a plumber's daughter." The accusation reverses their class standing. This working-class husband, whatever he does, is at least not as low in status as a plumber.

The class drama is also a sexual and material one in that the domain of plumbers is the lower body, culturally coded as the sphere of pleasure, dirt, looseness, and transgression (Bakhtin, 1984: 309–28). So their lower status is also a sexual status. This is further suggested by Peter's rearrangement of Ellie's clothes and body. He gives her a lower neckline and – not once, but three times – pushes apart her legs under her skirt to make sure she sits with her legs open – something "a lady" would never do, not even under a skirt, even though there is no frontal shot revealing the effect. The quarrel itself is about sex and gender expectation – his temper, her "butting in" to arguments, his protectiveness and jealousy, which are not at all repressed (as they are in "higher" culture) but are topics for a screaming argument. Following Carney's (1996) logic about the argument as intimate behavior, we can see how intimacy is coded as class, with sex located not in the luxury yachts of the Andrewses, but in the gritty world of couples at the auto camp.

The charade is also fun. Cavell emphasizes the importance of play for Ellie and Peter, "the pleasure of their own company," in the development of the relationship of marriage in this film (1981: 88). The performance for the detectives is the first occasion for Ellie and Peter to laugh together, giddy with the success of their little theatrical scene, which Peter wants to take to small-town auditoriums with the

title “The Great Deception.” Ellie wants to call it “Cinderella,” or “A Hot Love Story,” titles which Peter finds “too mushy.” This conversation ensues as Peter kneels before her and rebuttons her blouse, an intimate gesture during which, for the first time, we see the sparks of attraction in their locked eyes. Their different titles for the charade show that Ellie, sooner than Peter, is willing to acknowledge an erotic or romantic element in their relationship. “She recognizes the nature of their relationship before he does,” as Rowe points out (1995: 132). Even with their different interpretations of the play-acting, their ability to work and play together turns them into the kind of couple idealized by the romantic comedy – in this case, two people equally capable of improvisation and the bamboozling of authority.⁶

But is this what marriage is about? David Shumway takes the position that the relationship that develops between Peter and Ellie is far more like adultery than marriage. Though the early screwball comedies are often cited as representations of the modern, egalitarian marriage, Shumway argues that these films never show the marriage itself, focusing instead on escapades that pull the lovers away from ordinary, everyday life. For Shumway, the structure that is most important in *It Happened One Night* is the adulterous triad made up of Ellie, her husband King Westley, and Peter: the “adventure” of the film is essentially the adventure of adultery, even if they are technically chaste. Shumway’s larger point is that the screwball comedy “mystifies” marriage by locating it offscreen, as the desire of the narrative but magically outside of it. Its “illusion,” he argues, “is that one can have both complete desire and complete satisfaction and that the name for this state of affairs is marriage” (Shumway, 2003: 88–95). If these films tell us anything about marriage, they tell us that it’s a patriarchal institution in which daughters are objects of exchange – father to husband – and in which “married women must become little girls,” as is seen in Ellie’s need for protection and her status as “brat” (97).

While Shumway characterizes *It Happened One Night* as an “illusion” about marriage and Maltby sees it as an exercise in patriarchal control, critics such as Rowe (1995) and Kendall (1990) characterize it as a fantasy about women making the dive or escape that allows them to reimagine their lives. In a genre characterized as “the battle of

the sexes,” this film inevitably participates in the gendered rereading of culture that has been influenced by feminist scholarship. Leland Poague argues that Capra himself needs to be reconsidered in this light, given a pattern of female identification in his films, an inclination to assign authorial values and perspective to women characters. Capra’s films, he claims, show a protofeminist “interest in the human female as embodying the human as such” (Poague, 1994: 232). Again, the question often comes back to how we read Ellie, which is perhaps the question of who is doing the reading and how we identify our own desires as spectators.

The debate about gender and romance in *It Happened One Night* also participates in the wider culture of romance, which constantly promises “complete desire and complete satisfaction” in its portrayal of attractive, vivacious couples. They appear in advertisements for liquor and clothing, in celebrity culture, in reality dating shows, and in wedding magazines – all celebrating the extraordinary excitement of romance and glossing over the ordinary habits, duties, aches, and routines of long-term commitment.

Yet there is a moment in *It Happened One Night* when the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary, triumphs as a moment of intimacy. One of the most famous shots in the film, the one reproduced in the 1934 advertisements, is the moonlit close-up during the night in the hayfield, when Peter leans down to Ellie and they nearly kiss, both of them backlit, their profiles in soft focus. The next scene shows them on the road again, Ellie limping in her high heels and guiding them to pause for rest on a fence. This introduces the widely cited hitchhiking episode, in which Peter’s arrogance is comically deflated by Ellie’s use of her attractive legs to stop a car. However, the opening exchange in this scene is also remarkable. Wholly unselfconscious, Ellie whisks her finger around her front teeth and asks Peter for a toothpick because she has a piece of hay stuck in her teeth, which she exhibits to him by baring her gums as if she were at the dentist. Similarly unselfconscious, Peter pulls out a penknife, and a close-up shot shows them together, Peter holding the top of her head to keep her still, Ellie grimacing with her mouth wide open while he digs between her front teeth. The shot is nearly a graphic match for the moonlit shot in the previous scene,

when Peter had likewise leaned toward her face. The clever link between the two shots is the hay, which on the previous night was material for a mattress and now is material for impromptu dentistry. Here, without moonlight, backlight, or flattering profiles, Peter similarly leans in from screen left, this time not to consider a kiss but to pick her teeth. This is the everyday intimacy of marriage, not always pretty to look at, attentive to ordinary needs, prone to the bodily mishaps that lend themselves to comedy.