

Something Screwy This Way Comes:  
Screwball Comedy Conventions, Censorship, and Patriarchy  
Case Study: *It Happened One Night* (1934)  
Rebecca Ben-David  
FILM 4250

There is something quite ballsy about literally jumping ship to rebel against one's father. However, the tongue-in-cheek usage of such gendered language demonstrates that, much like for Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night*, escape from patriarchy seems nearly impossible to achieve. Even in her act of defiance, Ellie runs straight from one man to another, and while the escapist overtones of the screwball genre on the surface promote a would-be alternate universe full of gender role flexibility and bursting with banter, no amount of one-liners can cross out the very firmly inked message in the text that fair female representation has never been a priority. In its so-called playful exploration of themes like marriage and male-female power dynamics, the genre's subsequent emphasis on heterosexual relationships creates an ironic and frustrating disparity in its reliance on a female lead in order for the narrative to work compared to that narrative's treatment of said character. While such a film may achieve a height of surface-level humor to win the hearts of the Academy and the "Big Five" awards, to a more discerning audience, there is not as much to laugh about as a more casual viewer might think. A feminist reading of *It Happened One Night* presents an alternative perspective on the genre conventions of the screwball comedy it helps to establish, in that while the timeline of genre development might have seemed to arrive at screwball comedy central nearly overnight with the release of this film in 1934, the discussion of the marginalization of female presence and power within the genre and others sadly remains much less central both during the Production Code period and beyond it. This paper will examine the confluence between censorship, patriarchy, and genre in

the early screwball comedy film *It Happened One Night* in attempts to unravel its historical and cultural significance.

While later screwball pictures featured same-class couples, *It Happened One Night* presents viewers with a cross-class romance. Its placement in American film history helps justify this choice as well as reinforce a slightly different kind of battle of the sexes. A defining feature of the screwball genre lies in its shifting of conflict assignment from external obstacles to the lovers themselves, whereby pride or vanity become the primary impeding force to the lovers' otherwise happy union (Maltby, p.149). In *One Night*, characters Ellie and Peter embody the respective value systems of the upper and middle-to-working classes, rooting comedic moments in the theme of social disparity and, as signified by their union in the final scenes, integration, paralleling the notions of rebellion and conformity as applied to gender performance.

In the original short story upon which the film is based, Peter's character is more genteel and Ellie's is more willful and temperamental (Sklar, p. 45), but the film inverts these characteristics, to a notable extent altering the story being told. As this new narrative dictates, lower-class Peter proves his worth as a romantic partner by overcoming the class obstacles Ellie represents, with humor stemming from her childlike naiveté about the "real world" and Peter's subsequent exasperation, shaping much of the would-be couple's relationship friction. However, the resultant coding of gender roles and behavior causes the film to further reinforce patriarchal traditions, "providing reassurance that women's new freedoms – and particularly the possibility of sexual license great wealth conferred – could be safely controlled within the boundaries of the middle-class male imagination," (Maltby, p. 224). This creates an interesting paradox between how the film was affected by both censorship and the socio-political landscape of the time and

the genre as a platform for establishing a somewhat more equal playing field within the constructs of otherwise traditional heterosexual relationships.

1934 typified the culminating pressures Hollywood faced. On top of the Depression and the resulting drop in box office revenues, incentives for increased self-censorship mounted in the form of the Code's financially-cumbersome reediting requirements, financing problems due to debts accrued during the conversion to sound, antitrust litigation concerns, the establishment of the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act as well as the Catholic Legion of Decency, and negative discourse sparked by the Payne Fund studies that initiated an enduring rhetoric about the movies' "capacity for evil" and its harmful effects on children and impressionable audiences (Witern-Keller, p.59-61). To avoid censorship trouble, Hollywood learned to master a form of moviemaking "that would allow 'sophisticated' viewers to read whatever they liked into a formally 'innocent' movie, so long as the producers could use the machinery of the Production Code to deny that the sophisticated interpretation had been put there in the first place," (Maltby, p. 228). This complicates interpretations of a film like *It Happened One Night* since in order to achieve a more thorough analysis, one must first examine the text and subtext through this simultaneously enabling and repressive mechanism before applying any other lens to either a given narrative or genre.

In the case of *It Happened One Night*, the film was well-received by Joseph Breen of the PCA, in part due to Frank Capra's reputation, though the Legion of Decency was somewhat less approving (Maltby, p. 135-6). Textual examples such as the "Walls of Jericho" motif and the very likely phallic and certainly socio-economic symbolism of the carrots Ellie initially refuses demonstrate Hollywood's subversive conformity to the Code, while also serving as smaller moments in which one can employ a gender role-oriented or feminist perspective. In terms of

genre conventions, they, along with the scene where Ellie and Peter pretend to be a married couple in the midst of a hysterical argument to fool the police, illustrate an early version of the “mutual inference gag as a mechanism for denial” (Greene, p. 45) in addition to highlighting the antagonistic nature of their relationship. The banter in the latter scene as during the hayfield and hitchhiking scenes boils down to a witty style of flirtation that marries the characters’ capacities for negotiation with their suppressed yearning for intimacy, in which “true love develops because each comes to admire the spiritedness of the other person’s negotiating technique,” according to Leonard (p. 7). In an overall sense, the above examples help not only to sterilize the film, but loosely categorize it as screwball. Although it does not meet all the characteristics of the genre, *It Happened One Night* demonstrates the genre’s self-contradictory nature as, according to Andrew Sarris, “a sex comedy without sex,” where sex is displaced onto mutual antagonism and slapstick physical comedy which allowed for human contact without directly implying sexual desire. (Maltby, p. 225-6).

Ellie’s boarding of the Night Bus provides a particularly interesting look at the intersections between genre, patriarchy, and censorship in the film. The public space of the station parallels to the public eye and the overlap of private spaces (i.e. physical/emotional attraction, assertion of the self) with public codes of conduct (i.e. inability to act on one’s feelings for fear of rejection/shame); perhaps not so coincidentally, this compares to production constraints under the Code, though Capra still manages to maintain a degree of artistry in the camerawork. The camera travels through the terminal towards Peter, but does so by way of various extras, emphasizing a sense of disorder analogous to the Depression-era mentality, and almost as if negotiating (in a business venture or a fleeting flirtation?) with the audience about whom it (and Ellie) will choose to follow. For a moment, the camera and mise-en-scene make

palpable the basic premise of the screwball comedy: the tension between the “overwhelming atmosphere of calculation and negotiation and the potential intimacy of love,” but more importantly, the process of safely navigating from one to the other (Leonard, p. 9). Because the viewer can anticipate the direction of the narrative from here, one could argue that it renders Ellie’s character subordinate even before the plot does. Thus her decision to board the bus is not her own, and as with nearly every other action she performs, it becomes inextricably linked to Peter’s goals, souring her prospects for adventure with the tang of dramatic irony. As if in imitation of the camera, Ellie enters the bus and arrives whether she likes it or not at Peter’s side, crossing from a place of uncertainty to the promise of order, and subsequently from the cusp of self-ownership to a loss of autonomy and sincere/respectful narrative treatment, though the latter is coded as security provided by the patriarchal male figure. With that, the audience and the characters are on the road to romance, literally and figuratively.

The notion that the movies can make audiences fall in love with a particular character or genre to the point that suspension of belief is either nearly automatic or welcomed is of course not unique to the screwball comedy or the 1930s. However, given that escapism was a key aspect of movie-going for most people in this period (Maltby et al, p. 163), it remains relevant in terms of audience segmentation in distinguishing between “sophisticated” and more “innocent” interpretations of the film, and by extension, relevant to any feminist critical arguments. Ruth Vasey argues that by the time of *One Night’s* release, audiences had already become practiced in consuming narratives “arbitrarily contained within the strictures of the Code, able to exercise considerable freedom in interpreting the condensed images on the screen” such that they became active interpreters of the contradictions the genre presented, rather than simply passive consumers (p. 127-8). Entertainment value, however, remained a priority as well, for general

audiences and pro-censorship leaders. One 1930s screenwriter argued that above all else, the public wanted to be “sent home happy” having basked in a vibrant story approaching the ideal (p. 222). Along with this, the Legion of Decency believed commercial films should only serve to provide the highest caliber of entertainment, lest dissatisfied audiences seek out other sources (Maltby, p. 131). Despite being an early form of screwball, *It Happened One Night* satisfies both these perspectives, operating on Vasey’s “principle of deniability” (p. 107). While some thought was given to the reactions of women, the push for a happy ending outside the comedy genre was reinforced by the same patriarchal ideology that dominated portrayals of women in the very same films. Tina Lent suggests that female viewers were content with their representation in that a film like *One Night* allowed them to share the heroine’s objective of finding “an emotionally satisfying, sexually exciting, physically compatible, fun-filled love-companionship,” (Maltby, p. 223). This perspective appears to imply that female audiences were “sophisticated,” that they understood and appreciated the subtext of such a film, but missed, disregarded, or were forced to ignore its repressive and denigrating context. In effect, *It Happened One Night* set the precedent for the screwball films that followed, reinforcing the notion that such pseudo or quasi-equal representations of women were socially acceptable and preferred by male and female audiences, or perhaps merely seen as negligible in favor of what was seen as stronger comedy.

*It Happened One Night* represents a transition in the construction and presentation of American humor, from capable “crackerbarrel” characters to comic, apolitical anti-heroes based in frustration (Gehring, p. 6-7), where Clark Gable’s performance blends these features in a “brilliant mixture of suavity and brutality,” (Maltby, p. 146) according to one 1930s critic, that may in turn frustrate postmodern audiences. While grounding the film and the screwball genre as examples of escapism may explain away potential qualms 1930s viewers might have found given

the opportunity for closer scrutiny, it does not excuse the consciously, though perhaps grudgingly, crafted overall message of male dominance/female subservience and skewed sense of morality the film promotes. The film as a whole seems to represent “a story of masculine victory which patriarchy writes as a comedy,” wherein female rebellion is tolerated, even encouraged, because its ultimate function serves the male character’s interests (Maltby, p. 224). The mocking of female agency coupled with a utopian-like, happy ending associate the wrong kind of laughter with femininity, justifying and encouraging future negative textual portrayals and any subsequent interpretations, and rendering the female character superfluous and essentially worthless, not to be taken seriously by either the narrative or the audience. Ironically, this same model is structurally significant in the emasculation of male characters in later films of the genre, again coding male incompetence and feminine presentation as a source of comedy.

Within the different levels of analysis of this film, a pattern of various corresponding forms of frustration becomes apparent: 1) frustration as a facet in the screwball comedy genre, 2) frustration of filmmakers working under the Production Code, having to resort to subversive and convoluted tactics in order to explore otherwise unacceptable/offensive content, and 3) postmodern frustration at the ironic displacement of censorship focus on supposed “morality” rather than inaccurate and unfair representations of the female characters upon which half of every screwball narrative relied in order to be coherent in line with heterosexual romance. Contextualized this way, it appears that the historical and cultural significance of *It Happened One Night* stems from 1) its contribution of the feature of antagonistic relationships to the developing screwball genre, 2) the timing of its release in comparison to surrounding changes within and beyond the film industry, and 3) that it represents the intersecting concepts of progressive and traditional ideals in the gradual transformation in perspective regarding gender

and gender roles in American society. It demonstrates the reasons behind screwball comedies' later successes given the socio-political climate as well as why, from a feminist viewpoint, the "battle of the sexes" trope it helps establish is too weak an argument to prove that the genre promotes gender equality. From a less stringent mindset, one could reasonably claim that any depictions of female freedom the genre does offer help mitigate the effects of patriarchy on the basis of inclusion alone, echoing a "some over none" attitude in regards to representation, but as this paper goes to show, without context, everything gets a little screwy.



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