

“GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS:” EXAMINING THE ADAPTATION OF FEMALE  
CHARACTERS IN SCREWBALL COMEDY FILMS AND THEIR SOURCE TEXTS

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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August 2020

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the representation of female characters in classical Hollywood screwball comedy films and their often-obscured source material. The examination of both the original comedic literature and the film adaptation results in new perspectives on the agency and characterization of female characters in screwball comedies. Five films – Gregory La Cava’s *My Man Godfrey*, Alfred Santell’s *Breakfast for Two*, Ernst Lubitsch’s *Design for Living*, Howard Hawk’s *His Girl Friday* and W. S. Van Dyke’s *The Thin Man* –and their respective source texts – Eric Hatch’s “Irene, the Stubborn Girl,” David Garth’s *A Love Like That*, Noël Coward’s *Design for Living*, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s *The Front Page*, and Dashiell Hammett’s *The Thin Man* serve as the foundation for the case studies in this research, with each chapter examining modes of female agency through two different class positions. I argue that by renewing the presence of these original texts it is possible to see that through process of adaptation there is a systematic softening of female characters that appears and results in the tempering of the original character’s personality and agency that dramatically affects her role in the film adaptation. I examine two different class positions: upper-class society and professional middle-class society, in order to explore different modes of female agency for both wealthy and working women. I also delve into how the element of casting introduces a new level of affect that is not present in the literary texts and maintain that it becomes a compensatory act to help the filmic female characters regain part of the agency that is lost in the adaptation process.

## DEDICATION

For my mom and dad. Thank you for supporting me, cultivating my interest in film, and always being willing proofreaders and motivators. I will never be able to thank you for your love and encouragement.

Thank you to my sister Courtney, brother-in-law Nick, and nephew Landon for their endless support and love. Court, thank you for always looking out for me, being my biggest champion, and always supporting me for who I am. You are my truly the best sister anyone could ever ask for in life.

Thank you to my Aunt Irene for her unwavering affection throughout the years. You are the true Auntie Mame.

Thank you to Nana, for always praying for me. You are the core of our family and I love you so much.

This is for all the women, real or fictional, who fought to hold onto their agency both on and off the film screen throughout the 1930s. Thank you for being my inspiration and motivation to fight harder, talk faster, and have the smarts to stuff a doorknob in a boxing glove if necessary.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the direction and support of Dr. Anne Morey, who was an unwavering guide and the most steadfast editor as this project developed over the last year. Dr. Morey has inspired me with her knowledge and passion for film studies throughout my undergraduate and graduate years. Thank you so much for all of your patience and enthusiasm.

I would also like to thank Drs. Mary Ann O'Farrell and Daniel Humphrey for serving as committee members for this project, encouraging me throughout the years, and offering their input on this project.

Thank you to Dr. Laura D'Aveta for her assistance in helping me trace and locate numerous scholarly sources for this project.

I would like to thank my colleague Andrew Zalot for his encouragement, kindness, and enthusiasm throughout our graduate careers, and especially over the course of this research.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends - Gena Markantonis - my ride or die, Madison Phillips – the best listener and sounding board, and Alice Corcoran – my English 336 person. You have all supported me throughout the development of this thesis and I will forever appreciate it.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

### **Contributors**

This thesis was supervised by a thesis committee consisting of Anne Morey and Mary Ann O'Farrell of the Department of English and Daniel Humphrey of the Department of Film Studies.

### **Funding Sources**

No funding was required for the development of this thesis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

### “FROM. . . A STORY BY . . .:” THE ORIGIN STORIES OF SCREWBALL COMEDY

Smashing car windows, tackling a man, or stuffing a boxing glove with a doorknob – for the female characters in the screwball comedy films of the 1930s these actions could easily be part of a Tuesday evening out on the town. While these characters often get into trouble with the police or wreak havoc on the lives of other characters, they are continuously lauded in scholarship and history for their stunning wit, sexual allure, and ability to hold their own against their male counterparts. In the 1930s, the film industry dominated the American cultural consciousness, and no film genre more effectively than the comedies. While comedy films were nothing new to the American public by 1930, the advent of sound revolutionized both the way in which slapstick humor was used and the relative proportions of physical to verbal comedy in new films. As Christopher Beach mentions in *Class, Language and American Film Comedy*, “comedy...most obviously benefitted from the arrival of the ‘talkies’” (1). The advent of sound motivated the expansion from intertitles and diversification of plots while providing the ability to afford higher production values and cast prominent stars. These entertaining films are acclaimed for their fast-talking, quick-witted characters and the physical humor that resonates back to the vaudeville shows of the 1910s.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “screwball” originates from the baseball term when a pitch is “thrown with reverse spin in order to make it

curve towards the side from which it was thrown” (OED). This term is applicable since the films in this genre often went against the expectation of a film with romance in it. At their core, screwball comedies are love stories that satirize marriage and often champion the subversion of societal norms. Usually, the romance plot involves a confident and eccentric female character whose presence dominates over a more mild-manner male character, or a battle between the couple who appear to be on a more equal footing. These narratives usually revolve around the coupling of a pair into marriage or the remarriage of a divorced couple. Elements such as fast-paced dialogue, upper-class or professional middle-class characters, physical slapstick humor, economic or social class concerns, mistaken identity, and frantic marriages served to make this madcap genre relevant and progressive during the 1930s. The formula for screwballs usually begins with two characters who do not want to be together and ends with them solidifying their relationship. Though these films often mock the rich lifestyle, the upper-class characters are deeply human in their flaws and idiosyncrasies which provide audiences with a way to connect to even the most outlandish of characters. While the term screwball comedy is applied only to films, most of screwballs have a deep-seated history in comedic literature. While some scholars such as Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller place the beginnings of the genre in 1934, with *It Happened One Night* and the official installation of the Motion Picture Production Code as its cornerstones, it is clear that the genre’s origins do not begin halfway through the decade but instead were already established both in other films and literature.



Currently, much of the scholarly discussion about screwball comedies is divorced from the genre's roots in preexisting comic literature. This literature is rarely mentioned in scholarship except occasionally in regard to more prominent films, which limits scholarly research to only the filmic portrayals of the text. It is clear that in the scholarship on screwball comedies, there is an obvious canon of familiar films, such as those by Frank Capra and Ernest Lubitsch, that receives far heavier coverage than other works of the same genre. A film such as Alfred Santell's 1937 *Breakfast for Two*, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Herbert Marshall, has its origins in a novel by David Garth called *A Love Like That*, which provides more fully formed characters than those in the sixty-seven-minute film. Therefore, this project explores five films and the original texts from which they were adapted, that, barring Howard Hawks's *His Girl Friday*, are not as prominently featured in scholarship and contribute to questioning the adaptation and representation of women during the 1930s.

This thesis broadens the examination of female characters in screwball comedies to consider the fictional characters from which these characters are adapted, in order to argue that throughout the process of adaptation, there is a systematic softening of the female character's agency, personality, and traits that drastically affects her role in the film. Through the alterations to their physical appearance, language, economic capital, and opinions on marriage, these characters are often reduced to a caricature of female independence. In the films, these characters have beauty and quick-witted humor, but it is their ultimate goal of marriage that drives the plots. Ultimately, these adaptations

reveal only a glimpse of the agency that the female characters have in their original texts.

By tracing these character types back to their sources, we discover the uncensored and unapologetic female characters in these comedic books, short stories, and plays who have otherwise been completely overshadowed by their film counterparts. By unveiling these original texts, this thesis also considers the possibility that even though these filmic women arguably have less agency than their fictional counterparts, the element of casting nonetheless introduces a new type of affect that is not present in the literary texts. Women like Katharine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell make for vivacious yet tricky casting decisions as the issues of femininity and power in their star personae are major influences on the rethinking of the fictional characters they portray. Similarly, Carole Lombard's and Barbara Stanwyck's casting is both a testament to their versatility in different genres and a compensatory act to help their characters regain part of the agency that is lost in the adaptation process. With female agency being reconfigured in the films that were consumed by the mass public in the 1930s, naturally these women, whether they be heiresses or working women, were revered for giving as good as they got against their male costars, verbally and physically.

While the study of popular screwball comedies is pertinent to film scholarship, when the scope of research is widened to include films and texts that are not in the core canon of the genre, an explicit pattern emerges that demonstrates a concerning change in the representation of female characters resulting from the process of adaptation. The alteration of female characters is not limited to their physical appearance or their

dialogue but arises even more saliently from the change to their personalities and status in society as women with money. While the process of adapting what Richard Maltby called “pre-tested” material – novels, short stories, and plays - for big-budget films produced some of the greatest hits, there is a clear and problematic tendency to make female characters in romantic films less powerful, less adventurous, and less aggressive in their desires, sexual or otherwise, that appears after the introduction of the Production Code (559). Often these films place female characters in control of their lives and their fortunes until they fulfill the necessary plot points that end in their domestication. Even actions such as riding a horse into a library might appear as a form of the female character’s independence, but moment like that are not the manifestation of agency that this thesis will focus on. When the discussion about screwball comedy is broadened to include the preexisting literature behind these films, we can see the lack of development for a female character’s personal life. This includes the diminishment of her abilities once she is married which render these filmic women less powerful than their predecessors, even when the woman is throwing punches or riding a horse into a library.

As a sure-fire way to make a successful film, the adaptation of comedic literature became a staple in the film industry of the 1930s. Studios began to purchase thousands of books to evaluate which could make the best possible movies. In David Garth’s *A Love Like That*, the struggling actress Carol Wallace puts burgeoning adaptations into perspective when she candidly states, “I figured that even if the play wasn’t a howling success, Hollywood was buying almost everything that raised its head” (35). This comment recognizes the skyrocketing demand for Hollywood entertainment and that fiction, no

matter the quality, was the well from which the film studios drew their material. As a result, over eighteen of the most popular screwball comedies from 1932 to 1940 are adaptations of preexisting literature. Often these original stories offer a darker, more realistic version of the world that the studio then manipulates to fit what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls “the community’s established tastes and preferences” (16). However, this manipulation results in a significant problem in research owing to the fact that the screwball comedy films have so completely eclipsed their source texts that they are now virtually unknown. Even the origins of one of the most revered screwball comedies of the decade, *My Man Godfrey*, which preceded the film as both a novel and a serialized story, are virtually unknown.

Scholars such as Maria DiBattista and James Harvey have charted the major female actresses and their characters in the screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s, while other critics such as Jane Greene and Bruce Babington have discussed the power and promise of these characters as strong women. However, these scholars focus their attention on the filmic personae that appear onscreen, while mentioning the original story only in passing, if at all. Losing the connection to the literary origins of these films limits how we view not only female characters but also the complexities of casting and adaptation.

When thinking about the roots of screwball comedy films, scholars such as Billy Budd Vermillion, Kristine Brunovska Karnick, and Jane Greene, all note that the lines of continuity between screwball comedy and earlier films appear as early as the 1910s in plays and plots of theatrical farces. For instance, Jane Greene’s article concerning *The*

*Awful Truth* provides a clear, traceable history of the play's origins in 1922 to its multiple film versions in 1925, 1929, and 1937. This process of using "pre-tested material" for films clearly began much earlier than the 1930s, but with it came the continuous neglect towards the original literature. This loss of recognition has scholarly consequences such as the problem of screwball films surviving the decades while the original fictions have mostly been forgotten. This gap in information is pertinent because the films contain more attenuated, tamped down treatments of femininity and agency for female characters. Therefore, it is noteworthy to draw attention towards the developments in the film industry throughout the 1910s and 1920s that lead to the rapid use and alteration of comedic text in films.

At the beginning of the 1910s, the film industry began a rapid growth in order to meet the popular demands of its consumers. Unsurprisingly, by doing so, new genres of films began to appear with the explicit desire to attract certain audiences. Among this new wave of genres appeared the hilarious and often controversial films that fall under the label of "sex comedy." Though the precedents to this comedic genre derived from theatrical farces such as *Divorçons* (Victorien Sardou and Emile de Najac 1800) as their foundation, these films brought new energy to the screen (Vermillion 359). These sex comedies range both in subject matter and target audience as a method of gaining wider viewership at the theater. Beneficially for the film industry, women were beginning to enter the workforce more substantially, and in doing so, controlled their own money to spend on leisure activities. As consumer culture was booming, businesses cleverly began to deploy marketing strategies to entice women, particularly younger women, into their

stores. The film industry was one of the leaders in this campaign to make the cinema a place of social respectability that could cater to women's interests and, most importantly, safety (Allen 1980). The industry began to construct films with female audiences in mind, so films such as Cecil B. DeMille's sex comedy *Old Wives for New* became a sensation as it candidly portrays a divorce, cheating, and murder (all with a happy ending).

According to Scott Simmon's chapter in *American Cinema of the 1910s*, nearly "seven million of the nation's wage earners were women" even though most of them could not vote (Simmon 29). Women in urban areas had many opportunities for employment that included positions as secretaries, telephone operators, and department store workers. Because of women's burgeoning roles in the workforce, the nineteenth-century term "new woman" is often used to explore this fresh model of womanhood. This term appears in an essay from Sarah Grand in 1894 that details Victorian women's moral superiority over men and the realization that women should hold a higher social standing in the world than was then available to them (Nelson 141). As the term was used in the early twentieth century, it applied to young, middle-class women who were educated, working, and independent. The term "new woman" becomes a marker not only of women entering the public sphere for work but also of women's newly recognized power as consumers.

The spread of consumerism throughout the early part of the twentieth century quickly and seamlessly seeped its way into the world of film. Everything from clothing to furniture in films became an item for manufacturers to capitalize on once they realized

who their market was in the theater. According to Sarah Berry's work on fashion in Hollywood, there is a clear investment in the concept of "star emulation" that emerges out of late 1920s and 1930s films when young girls would use clothing and beauty products to replicate the look of an actress (29). When advertisers realized that films sparked an interest not only in the appearance of stars on the screen, but also in the personal lives of the stars themselves, films drove a market that would expand for decades to come. Stars such as Mary Pickford and Clara Bow gave way to Greta Garbo and Jean Arthur in the 1930s when commercials saw the "greatest use of testimonial and endorsement advertising in history" (Berry 23). While beauty products and jewelry are integral to the relationship between films and the new female consumer market, it is in fashion where that relationship is most prominent. When women became more active and independent consumers in the 1920s, designers and stores began to market the fashion to them directly. Fashion becomes pertinent to the discussion of screwball comedies specifically when women began to use fashion purposefully either to follow or break "behavioral codes" set by society (Berry 29). For instance, "women had worn pants or overalls since World War I" for work or at home, but when the female stars wore them on screen, it elevated the work attire of American young women to something enticing and interesting (Berry 143). Thus, by 1930s, women such as Barbara Stanwyck and Katharine Hepburn were normalizing the wearing of pants in public and making the look attainable for women shopping in local department stores.

Alongside these economic and societal changes appeared a cultural change that forever altered the perception of marriage in the United States – rapidly rising divorce

rates. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Safety records, “These rates indicate that in 1890, the first year with data by marital status, 3.0 couples per 1,000 were divorced; this rate increased to 8.0 in 1920, 8.8 in 1940, and 17.9 in 1946” (Plateris 22). Between the years 1910 and 1920 alone, the number of divorces doubled from “83,045” to “167,105” (Karnick 287). Though the explanations for the rapidly rising rate range from “woman’s emancipation and liberal divorce laws to the general conditions of urban life,” there is no way around the impact that divorce had on the social and economic world (Shumway 8). Nevertheless, this drastic increase in divorce is a subject the film industry tackled with open arms. The numerous divorces in America led to the creation of successful genres such as “divorce comedies” and “comedies of remarriage,” in which the couple either falls out of love and then back in love with each other or gets into new relationships with other people (Cavell 1). When these subgenres of the romantic comedy, along with DeMille’s companionate marriage plot, became popular, there was a distinct need for pre-existing literature to supplement film narratives. The continuous use of literature and plays for source material becomes very apparent in Billy Budd Vermillion’s article concerning the origins of “The remarriage plot in the 1910s.” In his work, Vermillion goes farther than tracing the remarriage comedy back to the silent period or pre-existing literature by going further back to the theatrical farces of the nineteenth century. His research is crucial to the consideration that screwball comedy is also traceable back to early performances and literature. Though the early films of remarriage and companionate marriage of the 1920s do not yet have certain elements of the screwball formula, they are nonetheless part of the



foundation for the madcap genre. In particular, the work of DeMille demonstrates that audiences were interested in films that depicted marriage outside the standard monogamous, heterosexual relationship where the couple meets and falls in love.

Scholars of DeMille, such as Sumiko Higashi and David Blanke, note that the period between 1918 and 1920 is the most significant period for DeMille's work on these companionate marriage films. Four successful films, *Old Wives for New* (1918), *For Better for Worse* (1919), *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920) became the foundation for marriage comedies. One of the most significant changes to occur with these films is that DeMille's stance on divorce changes from his previous films where divorce is associated with evil. Now, in his post-war films, he places divorce forward as an alternative or a way for individuals to "escape dead marriages and find partners more suitable" to them (Musser 276). Through the inclusion of companionate marriages in his body of filmic work, DeMille provides his viewers, particularly young people, with a new approach to marriage that does not completely revolve around keeping the main couple together. DeMille's source material for *Old Wives for New* was a novel by David Graham Phillips, which advocates for more relaxed divorce regulations and laws. Some reviewers "found the film scandalous," while others praised the moral consciousness of the main character for sticking to his convictions (Jacobs 87). Out of DeMille's four sex comedy films in this era, *Old Wives for New* became the most talked about in newspapers and trade magazines. In the case of this companionate marriage, the unhappy union of Charles and Sophy leads them to divorce and then into new relationships. On the surface, their relationship does not follow all the

conventions of a companionate marriage, since the original union was entered into without knowing that it would end in separation. It is with the eventual divorce and coupling of Charles with a young woman named Juliet that the film fulfills the companionate marriage plot. In addition, the film displays a wide variety of alternative relationships that are far outside the standard heterosexual relationship, providing audiences with an even wider range of relationships that break with social norms.

As the industry progressed in the 1920s, DeMille's marriage films gave way to the films of Clarence G. Badger and Marshall Neilan, where the alternative nature of companionate marriages shifted to the newfound appeal of the romantic life of a shop girl like Clara Bow in *It* (1927) or the thrill of a rich couple fighting each other in a divorce such as the one in *The Awful Truth* (1929). Both of these films were based on previously published fiction, Elinor Glyn's "*It*" and other stories and Arthur Richman's play of the same title, respectively. The success of both of these films led to even more narratives, comedic or otherwise, involving single characters or newly divorced couples finding love and facing shenanigans along the way.

When America moved into 1930s, it was to the bleak scenes of desolation, deprivation, and unemployment that would forever mark the decade as the era of the Great Depression. In keeping with the examples set by the marriage comedies of DeMille and building on other comedic works of the previous decade, screwball comedies grew slowly but steadily in the Hollywood studios. In *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), the film that I refer to as the first screwball comedy, Ernst Lubitsch used the "Lubitsch touch" that he is so famous for and directed a humorous yet bittersweet film

about a couple, Gaston and Lily, who realize that they are both criminals and decide to partner up romantically and professionally.

As with most screwball comedies made before 1934, the setting for *Trouble in Paradise* is Europe and the romance is more about the couple staying together than getting together. Naturally, as the title suggests, there is trouble in the couple's paradise when Gaston is tempted to be unfaithful when he begins a con to seduce Mariette Colet. The love triangle becomes more intense on all sides as feelings develop between Gaston and Mariette, while Lily is left on the sidelines trying to pull off their con. After some tense and melancholy scenes, the true couples choose each other as Gaston and Lily reunite. Though this film seems almost more like a drama than a screwball comedy, the roller-coaster of emotions provides a foundation for the epic and ever-changing highs and lows that will come to define screwball comedies. Similar to other screwball comedies of the era, *Trouble in Paradise* is adapted from "an obscure Hungarian play, *The Honest Finder*, based on the memoirs of a notorious thief, Gaston Manolescu" (Grindon 84). Unlike some directors who stay faithful to the plot or characters, Lubitsch openly enjoyed disregarding the original text to keep just a few lines and the skeleton of the story in order to create his own vision (Eyman 210). Since the original play has not been translated into English, *The Honest Finder* remains in the shadows of its film adaptation.

On a similar note, one of the more obscure and difficult to find screwball comedy films is the pre-code James Whale film, *By Candlelight* (1932). With a long and torrid publication history, the original Austrian play *Candle-light* was written by Siegfried

Geyer, adapted into English by P.G. Wodehouse, and was subsequently copyrighted three times under various titles to different publishing houses (Geyer 1). Set in an undisclosed part of Europe, the film follows the play's narrative and characterization. However, there are some salient changes to the evolution of the love story in the film that make it more socially acceptable. The film's plot follows a count's (prince's in the play) valet Josef, who watches the count court numerous married women and eventually falls in love with Marie, a young woman that he meets on a train whom he believes to be a married countess. She falls in love with Josef too but believes him to be a count, thereby sparking a severe case of mistaken identity. While the film is humorous and lively in its plot, the play is slightly more scandalous in that Josef purposefully impersonates the count and courts Marie over the phone before inviting her to the count's house. The film does keep a fair amount of the racier lines from the play that directly refer to infidelity, the act of sex, and the tricks of a womanizing count.

Pre-code films and plays derived from foreign sources such as *By Candlelight* or the previously mentioned French farce *Divorçons* are an essential part of the lineage of screwball comedy. The influence of these foreign sources is seen in the successful presentation of "the divorce-and-remarriage plot" on American stages and the focus on Ruritanian romance that later screwball films would resemble in their outlandish romance plots (Vermillion 362). Thus, the omission of these texts from scholarly dialogue about screwball comedies restricts the history of the genre to films with English language and Western European influences that were made after 1934.

While early screwball comedies are adapted from sources that are virtually inaccessible in the present day, in scholarship on popular films such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) there is more likely a chance that the author will mention the original texts. For instance, there are multiple scholarly articles from Samuel Gottlieb and Lois and Robert Self that discuss the adaptation from Samuel Hopkins Adam's short story "Night Bus" to Frank Capra's critically acclaimed *It Happened One Night*. There is a fair amount of debate among scholars as to whether Capra's adaptation permits the triumph of the "male-dominated hierarchy" or whether Ellie and Peter enjoy a relationship of mutual respect and can look forward to a marriage as equals (Self 58). As one of the few screwball comedies consistently discussed in recent scholarship, Capra's film receives more recognition than most of the other films in the genre. However, by examining the original short story, it is resoundingly clear that the adaptation of Elspeth to Ellie in the film falls into the pattern of problematic representation that this thesis hopes to examine. Since this film and its original text receive ample coverage in other scholarly works, I will only mention them briefly later in this chapter as a textual comparison with *My Man Godfrey*.

Similarly, this thesis will not discuss *Bringing Up Baby* in any depth. As possibly the most well-known and loved screwball comedy of the 1930s, Hawks's film is an extension of Hagar Wilde's short story of the same name, published in *Collier's* in 1937. When looking at the edition of *Collier's* that houses Wilde's story, the reader can almost feel the chaos radiating from the pages and the art that accompanies the story. This chaos is translated beautifully to the screen in the film that Peter Swaab argues is "both the

epitome of screwball comedy and the exception to its rule” with the wildness and gags fulfilling the formula of screwball while its lack of interest in marriage, class relations, or morality set it apart (8). While this thesis will not be delving into these two films in greater depth, they are important to note as examples of how scholarship on popular screwball comedies often include research on the original text. Thus, the lack of regard for the original texts of films that are less discussed in scholarship is a present issue that could be rectified.

To round out the discussion of original texts, the complex publication history of *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), the story behind Richard Boleslawski’s well-known screwball comedy of the same name, demonstrates that publishers knew that the original texts were important as a tool for marketing films, which led to the development of “movie story magazines” (McClean 3). When the opening credits of *Theodora Goes Wild* play, one title card reads: “From an original story by Mary McCarthy.” Currently, this is the only information about the original story that is available to audiences watching in the twenty-first century. However, this story is real and was published in December 1936 in *Romantic Movie Stories*, a monthly story magazine that became *Movie Story* in 1937. Adrienne McLean calls these magazines “one of the most robust and hardy of classical Hollywood cinema’s ancillary products” (4). The importance of this original text is not the story itself, in this case, but the acknowledgement that pre-existing literature was such a strong draw for audiences that the film industry created their own “original” stories out of their own films. Unlike the previous texts mentioned, McCarthy’s story is a fictionalized version of *Theodora Goes Wild* that was written

while the film was being produced. The creation of stories such as this is a clever way for the industry to “prevent the prevalent type of book or play from becoming the prevalent type of picture” that might break the rules of the Production Code Administration (Maltby 557). Texts such as McCarthy’s story demonstrate the close connections between films and their original texts. Since the film industry placed an emphasis on adapting stories, this thesis hopes that by examining the original texts, our perspectives on the female characters in screwball comedies will expand and develop.

In particular, this thesis will focus on two distinct case studies that will be used to prove that there is a clear divide between the representation of the female characters in the original literature and those in filmic version. The case studies focus on representations of two different class positions: respectively, upper-class society and professional middle-class society, in order to explore different modes of female agency. The first mode deals with upper-class women who have control over their money and can use it at their discretion. However, their control of money is predicated on the fact that they are heiresses and their fathers’ businesses have provided the money. The second mode looks at the professional middle-class woman who holds a steady job and is invested in her work. The professional woman’s money is all her own as a result of her talents and work ethic, so these women deal with their romantic entanglements differently than do the heiresses. These case studies couple texts together based on the social standing of their characters in order to explore the problematic changes in female representation in the adaptations of screwball comedies.

The first case study will focus on the films *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Breakfast for Two* (1937) with their original works *Irene the Stubborn Girl* and *A Love Like That*. The reason for the coupling of these two stories is the shared role of the main female character as an uncompromising debutant or heiress who falls for a bachelor down on his luck. In the films, these wealthy female characters are played by Carole Lombard and Barbara Stanwyck, and they are distinctly different from the style of Claudette Colbert's proper and often bratty character Ellie in Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). They are rough-and-tumble women, prone to horse-stealing and stuffing a boxing glove with a doorknob to win a fight. However, in their original stories, the autonomy of Irene Bullock and Valentine Ransome is not overshadowed by their gorgeous looks and slapstick antics. They are smart women, except after drink number twenty-one for Irene, and while they often feign ignorance or exaggerate their coquettishness, these women are hunters, ready and willing to stalk their male prey through business moves and blatant manipulation. Their positions on marriage are serious ones because they know that their future is uncertain without a respectable husband to marry. Since marriages did not protect the assets of women without prenuptial agreements, women like Irene and Valentine would need to find a husband with whom they would not mind sharing their own fortunes once they marry. Thus, the hunting nature of Irene and Valentine can be seen as less sexually driven and more as an economic investment. This understanding of capital and the control of assets is how these women function in society as compelling, powerful, and predatory female



characters that do not need the men that they are marrying but instead are actively choosing their futures.

The storylines of all the characters are altered quite significantly from those in the original texts, but none more than the female characters' personalities. While Irene Bullock is played by the bubbly, blonde icon of screwball comedies Carole Lombard in the film, in the novel, she is "very tall, very dark" and makes people feel as though she was not "quite complete" when Nature finished making her (Hatch 1). With the reputation as "the dumbest girl who'd ever come out at the Ritz," Irene is not expected to be any more than a ditzy heiress (Hatch 1). While she often has little social tact, her intelligence becomes more apparent as the novel goes on, revealing the family dynamic to be much different from that in the film. Her mother is having an affair with Carlo, her sister is the petty blonde younger sibling, and her father is the actual villain of the story. Irene purposefully separates herself from her family, but she is still a woman floating through life on her father's money. However, she does understand the importance of work and has the ability to connect with others on an emotional level. Though her role in the film is that of a playful hunter on a mission to make Godfrey love her, in the novel, Irene is often referred to as a "tigress" or "cat-like" when she is enacting her plan of romancing Godfrey. Irene is more than merely a seeker of Godfrey's love in the novel since she is prepared to learn about life in poverty once her father runs off when he goes bankrupt. Irene's character unfolds over the novel as she learns about herself, wins Godfrey's heart, and fortifies her future for when she is no longer monetarily secure.

In Alfred Santell's film *Breakfast for Two* (1937) audiences get only a glimpse of the true personality behind Valentine Ransome's vibrant and intense character. Stanwyck does her best to find the spirit of a Texas heiress who immediately sets her sights on the lazy yet handsome owner of a shipping line, Jonathan Blair. She has some memorable lines of dialogue, but very little of her personality or background is kept from the book. From the first chapter of Garth's *A Love Like That*, Valentine is established as much more than an heiress attempting to secure a romance and change Jonathan into a more responsible man. She is a rodeo rider, a law breaker, an educated socialite who embodies the spirit of her grandfather, and most importantly, she is the owner of a few of her own oil wells. Valentine maintains her humor and personality even in her moments of business and disaster. While she becomes more reliant on her father's money to support her lifestyle after she loses a substantial amount to the Blair company, Valentine is adamant about staking her own money on the shipping line in order to show her confidence in her own actions. Valentine is clear that any relationship she has with Jonathan, in both business or love, will not be one where she submits to him. At one moment towards the end, she bluntly states, "I wouldn't make Jonathan feel like lord of the manor. I'd make him feel that it was a fifty-fifty proposition" (Garth 226). As a whole, the book provides a more fascinating view of the heiress who is not only attempting to find a suitable romantic match but also wants to further her own monetary interests and maintain her reputation as a respectable woman. Throughout the first case study, the stakes of inadequate representation for upper-class female characters such as Irene and Valentine become sharply noticeable when the film adaptations

purposefully reduce them down to a beautiful woman who wants to marry the leading man at any costs.

While this project is focusing on four films where this pattern of problems in adaptations emerges, Sidney Gottlieb claims a similar argument for one of the most prominent screwball comedies in film history, *It Happened One Night*. He focuses on Elspeth's character in "Night Bus" the original story behind the film by Samuel Hopkins Adams, and states that the process of adaptation "transforms a remarkably self-reliant woman into at best an object of desire and at worst a 'brat'" (Gottlieb 135). The first chapter agrees with Gottlieb's assertion about Elspeth's character and notices that a version of this pattern occurs throughout other Hollywood adaptations of comedic texts. Like Valentine and Irene, Elspeth is a wealthy socialite who is attempting to circumvent the traditional marriage plot, which she achieves by becoming engaged to an unsuitable bachelor, by her father's standards, and then running away on her own. Unlike her film counterpart Ellie, played by Claudette Colbert, Elspeth is resilient, capable, and "the instigator" of conversation with Peter despite her initial off-putting attitude (Gottlieb 132). Elspeth is one of many female characters in comedic literature who resists the rushed marriage that looms above her story arc and threatens her loss of independence.

While their wealth creates an illusion of security that is not offered to a working-class individual, these female characters recognize that the prospect of marriage presents much higher stakes to their personal well-being. With the exception of Valentine in this case, securing a marriage to a stable man who will not abuse his wife's inheritance is one of the biggest considerations for these characters throughout their individual plots. It is

clear that their romances are not frivolous affairs but are rather calculated endeavors once they recognize a suitable partner. In “Night Bus,” Elspeth is a young woman that is “far from being content with life” and recognizes that her father wants to “boss everything,” especially her (Adams 42). She chooses King Westley as a man to “play around” with to defy her father’s wishes, but once she falls in love with Peter Warren, she purposefully speaks about him in a way that she knows her father will respect. By the end of the short story, when Elspeth show up at Peter’s residence to discuss their relationship, Peter hilariously stutters about respectability while she cleverly spins the tale of how “nobody else would ever believe” that nothing happened between the two of them when they were registered as husband and wife on their stays at the camp grounds (Adams 149). Elspeth’s manipulation of language and ability to endear herself to Peter despite their differences allows her to achieve her personal desires while maintaining her personality and drive.

However, Sidney Gottlieb notes, the original texts are by no means faultless, but they display not only a greater representation of the female characters’ personality and intelligence, but also help to create a more complete picture of the womanhood in the 1930s. In addition, this project does not claim or desire to prove that either of these original texts is a perfect portrayal of female characters. The period in which these texts were written does not lend itself to overly positive portrayals of women outside the bonds of marriage, and these texts are not free of insulting or misogynistic comments towards the female characters. Nevertheless, through the discussion of these original texts, this thesis wants to explore how the stories as a whole portray noteworthy

presentations of strong female characters with agency both inside and out of a relationship. The original texts demonstrate relationships between the leading couple that subvert gender norms and results in an equality between the pair that allows for the expectation of a healthy future relationship. This equality in the couple also comes from where the focus is placed throughout the narratives. For example, in Hatch's *Irene, the Stubborn Girl*, Irene is the main focus of the novel, not Godfrey as in later adaptations. This name change alone signifies an imbalance as the story is adapted from novel to film. In relation to this shift in focus, unlike the film adaptations, these original texts present their female characters with a rich history and a fully formed personality that allow them to use their intellect and abilities to achieve the goal of adequately securing their futures, while also having some fun along the way.

On the other hand, the second case study looks at this same issue in adaptation with a closer focus on female characters who are in the professional workforce. While screwball comedies usually have casts of characters drawn from the social elite, a few films pull back to look at the working world of the 1930s. In this case study, I will be looking at the films *Design for Living* (1933) and *His Girl Friday* (1940) with their corresponding plays *Design for Living* and *The Front Page*. These two films explore the different stakes for professional women, making their own money through their own labor, who are nonetheless still involved in a romance plot. While marriage is a critical decision for wealthy women since a part of their money transfers to the chosen husband, for women who are working for a living, their careers and identities in society are at stake, especially in the decade of the Great Depression. These films appear at opposite

ends of the decade and are two of the most drastically altered from their source material. Noel Coward's original dialogue for his play *Design for Living* is reduced to a one line in the film, while the character of Hildy Johnson in Hecht and MacArthur's play *The Front Page* becomes a woman in the Howard Hawks film. The female characters in these films juggle men and work; however, in both cases, the work of the male characters is deemed significantly more important and is used to draw the women back into the web of male machinations. In the original plays, *Design for Living*'s Gilda continues with her career as a successful interior decorator even after she leaves her two lovers, while Hildy, in *His Girl Friday*, is not deterred from leaving a job by an ex-spouse because Hildy is a man. This case study will explore how even screwball comedy films that can be praised for their smart working women struggle with the issue of female agency when a woman's job is part of the story.

In Noël Coward's play, Gilda is introduced as a beautiful, thirty-something year old interior decorator who is in love with both her current beau Otto as well as their mutual friend/lover Leo. With racy dialogue and biting wit, Coward's play begins in the middle of Gilda, Otto, and Leo's friendship/ménage à trois relationship. The trio are all in the business of producing art while the straight-man to their flippant attitudes, Ernest, is an art dealer. From the opening scene of Act I, Gilda realizes that she is discontented with her life and struggles to describe what is missing that might make her more content. Since Gilda is both financially independent from the men in her life and has the ability to go wherever she pleases, she leaves them once she realizes that Otto and Leo are neglecting her for their jobs. When it is revealed that she has married Ernest for his

money and connections, her choice makes sense and her dramatic outbursts of “Why shouldn’t I be a mad woman?” are warranted after spending two years trying to be a mature adult (Coward 120). Once she reunites with Otto and Leo, the trio falls back into their rhythm, and Gilda chooses to go back with them, disregarding her marriage entirely. The Gilda in Ernst Lubitsch’s film is considerably more subdued than Coward’s version. Miriam Hopkins plays the sweet American artist living in Paris who falls in love with both George and Tom. After a few brief mentions of her career, Gilda’s art and job are placed on the backburner so that she can help George and Tom achieve their artistic goals. Lubitsch removes sex from the equation after Gilda has already slept with both men, in order to make the joke of a no-sex pact and to keep the narrative from venturing too far into improper territory. Lubitsch’s Gilda fades into the background as the object all three male characters are vying for until she decides to leave and marry Ernest. While the narratives end similarly, the major departure in characterization produces a film that just barely remains recognizable as an adaptation of Coward’s play.

While Howard Hawks’s adaptation of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s play *The Front Page* keeps most of the dialogue and narrative from the play, *His Girl Friday* takes a newspaper play and turns it into a screwball comedy with a remarriage and a fast-paced chase for the news story. Hildy Johnson – a male reporter in the play and the 1931 film adaptation from Lewis Milestone-- becomes a female reporter in Hawks’s adaptation. Hawks’s decision to cast Rosalind Russell as Hildy provides both the representation of a witty and strong female character while simultaneously making it clear that by changing Hildy to a female, the character is no longer the hero but the

subordinate to the boss and ex-husband, Walter Burns. In the play, Hildy is a confident and well-regarded reporter who is gleefully quitting his job in order to get married and move away from Chicago. His decision upsets his boss Walter, but Hildy ignores his angry tirades and threatens to “walk right up and hammer that monkey skull” of his (Hecht and MacArthur 33). The Hildy in the play is careless about the insults that he hurls at Walter and shrugs off any that come his way as well. After staying to help write the story, Hildy decides to leave with his fiancée, Peggy, for a new life in New York. On the other side of this adaptation, female Hildy does not leave Walter for her new fiancé, but stays with him in the belief that their relationship has grown, when in actuality it has not. Nevertheless, the female version of Hildy appears at first glance as an independent, strong character who stands up to Walter until the end, but there are subtle alterations to her character and the plot that do not allow her to hold as much power as her male counterpart does in the play. Ultimately, the stakes for the representation of professional middle-class women rests heavily on how the text depicts their careers in relation to their romantic relationships.

Finally, the afterward looks at Dashiell Hammett’s *The Thin Man* as a possible counterpoint to the established pattern. Nora Charles is the only married character that this project will discuss in-depth, and her relationship with her husband Nick characterizes much of the success that the character duo had both on and off-screen. Dashiell Hammett’s 1934 detective novel *The Thin Man* features Nick and Nora Charles as a married couple, neither of whom works and both of whom are living off of Nora’s family money. As the mystery unfolds, Charles is drawn back into his old detective job,



and Nora comes along for the ride. While Hammett places Nora in a position to bear witness to and aid with the investigation, the film version carves out a space for Nora in the film as a detective herself and continually reminds the audience that she is the one with the financial power in their marriage. As James Harvey has discussed in *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, the casting of the 1934 film was one of the choices that made the film a success. The chemistry and ease between Myrna Loy and William Powell make the relationship plausible, but also equal. Nick rarely dismisses Nora in the film as he does in the source text, and there is considerably less jealousy than playful banter. Rosanne Welch argues that the screenwriters Frances Goodrich Hackett and Albert Hackett, a happily married couple, are one of the key reasons for this positive change to an already successful story. While this adaptation is successful in portraying strong females and healthy relationships, this section questions whether this is only possible because the film is as much a detective film as it is a screwball comedy. The afterward briefly explores the dinner party sequence that showcases a new scene and tone to the couple's story, which still remains comedic even through the alterations.

Overall, the hope for this project is that these original comedic texts will be given the opportunity to reemerge as important pieces of fiction, both as standalone works and in relation to their film adaptations. This thesis hopes to show that even though the film studios produced successful films with female characters that generations of audiences remember as influential figures that changed the view of women in films, these impressive works are preceded by preexisting literature. In recognizing the original texts,

scholarship will have access to new, complex portrayals of female characters that reflect the economic and social struggles of women in the United States during the 1930s.

## 2. CHAPTER II:

### SLIP A BIT IN (AND CALL IT A DAY): DEBUTANTS AND HEIRESESSES ON THE HUNT

Although newsstands and bookstores were bursting with new plays, books, and short stories, in 1935 both Eric Hatch's *Irene the Stubborn Girl* and David Garth's *A Love Like That* were released and forever changed the genre of screwball. Hatch's original story went on to become the popular 1936 film *My Man Godfrey*, which Ted Sennett has called "one of the funniest films of the thirties," while Garth's text was similarly adapted into a film called *Breakfast for Two* in 1937, although it opened to less success, causing it to take a backseat in the history of screwball comedies (16). Nevertheless, by the end of the 1960s, both of these original texts had faded into the shadow of their film adaptations. While I share the sense that these films provide audiences with the portrayal of a strong female lead, in comparison to the original texts, it is clear that the films curtail the female lead to be less powerful in her capabilities and less aggressive in her desires, sexual or otherwise. Therefore, this chapter will take a more in-depth look at both the originals and their adaptations as a way of considering the effects of adaptations on the agency of the stories' leading female characters, Irene Bullock and Valentine Ransome.

This chapter will argue that through the examination of the original texts by Hatch and Garth, the original female characters in these comedic novels are uncensored and unapologetic as they actively pursue their narratives by using social and economic

power to subvert gender norms and thereby, choose their futures. However, the film adaptations reflect only a fraction of the empowered nature of these women. Through alterations to the characters' appearance and mannerisms, language, economic capital, and marriage circumstances, the films deliver versions of Irene and Valentine that barely resemble their original characters. Of course, the film versions of these characters are still the ones that Maria DiBattista calls the "cheeky experimenters who balked at traditional gender roles and were insistent on self-rule" (11). While it is positive that the women can still verbally demolish their male counterparts with "fast talk" neither Irene nor Valentine is shown to hold total authority over her own life and choices as she does in her original form (11).

In the novels, Irene and Valentine dominate their respective texts with humor and intelligence that authorizes their subversion of the traditional role of a woman of high social class. The focus on "upper-class characters," women in particular, who "perhaps reject traditional values" is part of the standard formula for screwball comedy films. This perspective on the upper-class as a group that does not need to be overly concerned with work or following social mores becomes the stereotypical madcap nature of the elite onscreen (Green 57). While there are undertones of this in the novels, both Irene and Valentine reject and subvert the expectations of both their class and gender through their unique attitudes and appearances. For instance, unlike the stunning actresses who portray the film iterations of the characters - Carole Lombard and Barbara Stanwyck – neither Irene nor Valentine in the novels have the physical appearance of a classical Hollywood leading lady. Their beauty is often noted as a distinction from other female characters

either, by themselves or others, as something that is almost otherworldly in its nature. This recognition of their differences from the average leads to the interesting use of the most common phrase used to describe both Irene and Valentine in the novels – “Amazonian” (Hatch 44).

It is interesting to ponder that if these novels were written a few years later, a reader might think the phrase could be in reference to William Moulton Marston’s comic book creation, *Wonder Woman*, as well as her Amazonian origins. However, no matter how accomplished a rodeo star Valentine is, the reference is unfortunately anachronistic. Nevertheless, the term remains a curious choice for both of these authors to describe their lead female characters. The use of the phrase “Amazons” and “Amazonian” is compelling in that according to art historian Andrew Stewart, one of the most overlooked characteristics of the Amazon figure is “their status as *parthenoi* or unwed females” (571). He claims that an Amazon represents not only a different type of female but also a barbarian, serving to “confirm their [the Greeks’] anxieties” about non-normative women in their society (Stewart 594). Through the use of this phrase, both novels are placing their characters in the rare position of an unmarried women with strength, power, money, and a demeanor that feels foreign in comparison to the stereotype of the “dumb blonde” who does not think beyond the idea of marriage. The inherent strength suggested by the application of the term Amazon to Irene and Valentine explains the lack of fashion show or makeover that would be a normal sequence in a romantic comedy that assumes the female character needs to change her mannerisms or appearance in order to be desirable. Instead, both leading characters

actively participate in their narratives by venturing into business deals with their leading men and beginning a “hunt” of sorts to determine whether or not the men would be suitable partners for them in the future. This chapter will demonstrate that by taking a utilitarian approach to marriage, Irene and Valentine are able to control the future of their financial capital by properly securing themselves in positions of power with the men of their choosing.

By unveiling these original texts, this chapter also considers the possibility that even though the filmic women arguably have less agency than their fictional counterparts, the element of casting introduces a new level of affect that is not present in the literary texts. Lombard and Stanwyck’s casting is both a testament to their versatility in different genres as well as possibly a compensatory act to help their characters regain a part of the agency that is lost in the adaptation process. Wes Gehring perfectly describes Lombard as having “a free spirit and one-of-the-boys charisma” (127) that allows her to remain engaging while on screen, but she is also proclaimed as the “queen of screwball” with her impeccable timing and lovable blonde bombshell antics (Harvey 201). She appears at all times, bright-eyed with a sophisticated aura that is balanced with an extroverted physical nature and ditziness that endears her to audiences.

From *Twentieth Century* (1934) to *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), Lombard forcefully captures the attention of viewers with a comedic style that is genuine and actively entertaining. Stanwyck, on the other hand, is more commonly associated with comedic roles that relate to “the great female con artist,” such as in *The Lady Eve* (1941) (DiBattista 34). Stanwyck’s straightforward nature, matched with her playful intensity,

helps to build a strong foundation for her usually fierce characters to reside in the world of comedy. As this chapter will later discuss, both of these actresses possess a certain draw for audiences due to their star personas that allow their casting to compensate for the lack of agency on the part of their characters in the films. To the best of their abilities, both Lombard and Stanwyck use their roles to present new types of women onscreen even when the film is not reflecting the strength of the original story. Since hundreds of thousands of movie-goers saw films in this era for the movie stars that headlined them, the casting of Lombard and Stanwyck proves a useful and successful balance to counteract the lack of female agency throughout the adaptations. These casting choices allow for audiences to be distracted from certain aspects of the female character's representation through both an actresses' powerful onscreen and offscreen persona. Nevertheless, in examining both the comedic literatures and the film adaptations, the striking alterations to Irene and Valentine indicate a clear divide in how female agency is represented from text to screen.

## 2.1 "Irene, the Stubborn Girl"/*My Man Godfrey* (1935)

In order to properly navigate the complex publication history of Hatch's text, this project will discuss both Hatch's original novel-length work that was published serially in *Liberty* magazine under title of "Irene, the Stubborn Girl" from May to December of 1935 and the later edition published by Bantam Books under the name *My Man Godfrey*. After the "Irene the Stubborn Girl" series appeared, it was compiled into a novel under

the title of *1101 Park Avenue* in 1936. However, with the upcoming movie in September of that year, the book was re-published under the title *My Man Godfrey*. The popularity of the film prompted this change in titles so that there would be no confusion for consumers. The 1947 version of the novel that this chapter will be referencing reprints the text of the serialized novel and is one of the only editions still easily accessible in libraries. It is important to note that the reason this novel was still in circulation over two decades after its initial publication is due not only to the prominence of the 1936 adaptation but because the novel would once again be adapted into a film almost a decade later in 1957 by Henry Koster. Since copies of the original version of “Irene the Stubborn Girl” are largely unavailable, this project will cite only the first ten pages of the first serialization from the Eric Hatch collection at Boston University. Therefore, the majority of references will refer to the 1947 edition of the book. Though the serialized version is identical in text, there are many aspects of the presentation of the novel, such as taglines and pictures, that are unique to the text in *Liberty* magazine. For instance, on page three of the magazine there are caricatures of the three female members of the Bullock family and Godfrey. Readers have the opportunity to see the full faces of Mrs. Bullock, Cornelia, and Godfrey; however, the artist chose to draw only Irene’s profile. While Cornelia stands out with her sharp eyebrows and uncanny resemblance to Lombard who plays Irene in the film, Irene’s drawing has more pronounced facial features, but it depicts her with a cheerful smile on her lips as she looks off into the distance. This is perhaps a nod to Hatch’s depiction of Irene as “glassy,” since the drawing alone makes her an intriguing figure who stands out from the rest; possibly, this



representation hints that readers are only seeing a part of Irene's personality during the beginning of the story (1). Overall, these illustrations provide a visual guide to the most important players whom readers will get to know throughout the story.

When readers meet Irene in Eric Hatch's novel, she is firmly planted at the bar of the Waldorf Hotel in New York City, drinking alone as she observes the aftermath of a scavenger hunt. In these opening moments the reader is privy to an observation of Irene by Oscar, the manager of the hotel's restaurant. He describes Irene as "the dumbest girl who'd ever come out at the Ritz" (Hatch 1). While this is likely an exaggeration, Hatch uses this moment to place Irene outside of the typical standard of a comedic heroine who is naturally witty, beautiful, and wealthy. Irene appears dazzling in her gown, but she is also dazed and confused as she stares at the world with her "large bovine eyes" that appear either to be heavy with "deep understanding" or entirely glassy with thoughtlessness (Hatch 1). She is very obviously not the bombshell of the scavenger hunt, nor the innocent rich debutant who is waiting to find a husband. Instead, with this reputation, Irene appears to be nothing more than a ditzy debutant with an alcohol problem. It is only after noticing the tagline on the front page of the serialized novel that we first recognize that Irene is more than meets the eye when it promises audiences that Irene is "the most obstinate but captivating heroine" any reader has ever met (Hatch 1). This description does not shy away from placing Irene at the center of the story and leading readers to believe that she will be the main source of comedy and attention even though her appearance at the bar is not one that readers would normally associate with the lively heroine of a comedy. Intriguingly, Hatch continually presents his leading lady

as such an enigma that even a character like Oscar, a hotel manager who deals with the oddities of the upper-class all day, is uncertain in his description of her. This mention of physical appearance reaches beyond merely her dark, uncertain features and towering height in that she does not see them as a hindrance to her as other female characters that are positioned as the ugly duckling of the family often do. She does not waver in the face of competition or harshness concerning her appearance but instead uses her refreshing oddities and empathetic nature not only to win the scavenger hunt, which she gleefully relishes, but also to become the heroine of a story that in future adaptations will relegate her to a bubbly “nuisance” (La Cava).

Still, in this text, it is clear from the title that it is Irene by which readers are meant to be fascinated, and it is her decision to pursue Godfrey that sets the story into motion. As previously mentioned, Irene’s characterization is odd for a heroine who is meant to appeal to a wide range of readers who would be expecting the beautiful American socialite but instead receive a woman who is “very tall, very dark” and makes people feel as though she was not “quite complete” when nature finished making her (Hatch 1). Hatch’s humor in his descriptions of Irene is clear but never deeply biting in its delivery. There is an interesting lack of negative attributes associated with Irene, barring the possible alcoholism and the tendency towards dramatics, that establishes her not only as the finest member of her family, but intriguingly, also the most concealed. Her mysteriousness is in part due to her ability to weaponize the fact that all of the other characters underestimate her due to the naïve façade that she rarely drops. With the ability to manipulate how others see her, Irene carefully disguises subjects such as her

absence of desire for marriage and intelligence as issues that can be attributed to her being not “quite complete” (1). This does not, however, mean that she is immune to the human conflicts that accompany these issues. Disregarding her striking features and oddities, Irene fits the role of a debutant well. She is young and decently attractive but is still shamed by her mother for her lack of beaux. Mrs. Bullock’s constant focus on marriage as a social signifier is nothing abnormal, but Irene’s lack of suitors is not an overt problem for Irene herself, as it is for her family. As the oldest daughter, Irene “came out” as a young woman in high society years before the novel’s opening, but due to her family’s money, it is clear that she has not felt the need to accept or pursue marriages (Hatch 2).

In addition to her disposable capital, she is surrounded by lackluster relationships: her sister Cornelia does not love her beau “Faithful” George, Mrs. Bullock is all but having an affair with a young musician Carlo, and Mr. Bullock happily neglects his wife while attempting not to go bankrupt. It is clear through the portrayals of these relationships that the investment in marriage to the Bullock family is only for appearances, and of course, money. Irene’s lack of interest in marriage is complex because she does not have a lack of interest in marriage itself, but she does not want to marry without love. If she does not marry then she does not have to give up her relative freedom and safety in her parents’ home. As the novel’s plot unfolds and the issue of money greatly complicates relationships in the family, it is Irene’s pragmatic attitude and emotional intelligence that keeps the family afloat as disasters strike the Bullock family.

The beginning of the plot of the novel and its 1936 adaptation follow along a shared trajectory as both start with the Bullock family participating in the scavenger hunt at the Waldorf Hotel. While Irene sits at the bar, she notices that her sister Cornelia and her boyfriend George are leaving the hotel in order to win the competition by finding the last piece of the hunt – a “forgotten man” (Hatch 62). Irene’s “single-track mind” goes from zero to sixty once she realizes that she has the opportunity to beat her sister at a game, and she proceeds to rush after them to a “ghost city” by the river in time to see Godfrey rebuff Cornelia’s offer and push her into a bush (Hatch 3). The connection between Irene and Godfrey arises from a mutual dislike of her sister; Irene’s “simple direct friendliness” compels Godfrey to accompany her back to the hotel for her to win the game (3). Once the hunt is over, Irene offers Godfrey a job as their butler, and he accepts without knowing the insanity that awaits him in the Bullock mansion.

After the first few chapters, it is clear that Hatch goes in a noticeably different direction with his characters than Gregory La Cava’s film would in 1936. With the companionship of only Molly, the maid, Godfrey becomes a go-between for all of the Bullocks while observing their lack of concern at unhealthy spending habits and their unkindness towards each other. As a servant, he is privy to information such as Mrs. Bullock’s affair with Carlo, Cornelia’s jealous outbursts, and Mr. Bullock’s distress at work. Irene, however, is the only one watching Godfrey, and she continually attempts to draw him into conversation with her. Over time the pair becomes friends, and Godfrey develops a minor infatuation with her since he views her not only as the most bearable member of the household but also because he enjoys her sincerity and kindness towards

him. However, Irene's interest in Godfrey is more intense than a meaningless flirtation as she becomes progressively more forward in her pursuit of him romantically. It is clear from the way she "ogles him" and relentlessly flirts with him, even in moments where she thinks that it is possible that he might have nine children, that she is vying for him as a romantic partner (Hatch 44).

As the story continues, Godfrey begins to uncover the secret of Mr. Bullock's financial situation and realizes that Bullock has faked a robbery of his wife's pearls in order to claim the insurance money. Godfrey figures out the scam and convinces Bullock to return the pearls from their hiding place in his wife's mattress and tells him to place "an advertisement of the reward in tonight's papers... Then you get the pearls, and tomorrow when you come home from the bank I'll find them in the back of the limousine" (Hatch 64). This alteration of the identity of the thief and the reasoning for the robbery is one of the most noticeable plot differences between the original and adaptation. While it might appear as a minor plot point in the film, the moment defines the rest of the novel as a result of Mr. Bullock's issues with money. In the novel, Godfrey describes Mr. Bullock as a "sallywag" who is paranoid and often absent in his home life (Hatch 63). Godfrey quickly notices that Bullock is having financial troubles and lets his employer know that he has caught onto his business problems (Hatch 33). Mr. Bullock is the only source of income for the lavish lifestyle of his family; therefore, without him the family would descend into a state of financial and social ruin. Eventually, this event does occur after Mr. Bullock leaves his family due to a scandal of bankruptcy at his company. Though Godfrey is the one to retrieve the family from the messy issues of losing their

money, home, and social status, it is Irene to whom the family owes their gratitude. As Godfrey states, “Irene, because she found me and I found money for all of us, doesn’t have to work” (Hatch 119). Since Irene has endeared herself to him, Godfrey feels bad for the family, but especially Irene, because he understands the swift decline of one’s economic status. While she is ready to go to work, Godfrey declares that Irene does not have to because she is the one who saved him when others, like Cornelia, merely wanted to parade him around the scavenger hunt. Finally, after reconciling with his past, Godfrey recognizes that he has genuinely fallen in love with Irene and the pair become engaged.

After examining the narrative of the novel, it is clear there are several key variances between the original text and film adaptation that alter the structure of the plot and the depiction of all the main characters. In particular, these modifications lend themselves to the types of alterations that place the female character’s agency in jeopardy. In adaptation, as Linda Hutcheon explains, “moving from telling to showing” leads to the inevitable “re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot” (40). However, the character changes that occur in *My Man Godfrey* most heavily affect the female characters and negatively influence their representation in the films. This section will compare the construction of male and female characters in the original and adaptation. To begin, this chapter will examine how in the adaptations of Godfrey and Cornelia’s characters there are massive shifts to characterization that are not present in the originals and are overwhelmingly positive for the male character and utterly detrimental to the female.

In the novel, Godfrey is actually homeless and does not want to claim his family name once he leaves the high society life. He has previously been wealthy and married to a woman named Violet but is sentenced to prison after “trying most honorably to kill his wife’s lover with his bare hands” (113). After his stint in prison, Godfrey ends up down by the river, but feels displeasure being a part of the homeless lower class. Irene first meets him while he is living in the novel’s version of the Great Depression-era “shanty towns called ‘Hooverilles,’” that thousands of people lived in after nearly “16 million were left jobless” (Armengol 60). Though this location is not one that the novel returns to, Godfrey’s placement in the very recognizable place of deprivation allows him to represent an image of the struggles of the working class in America. As will be discussed later in the chapter, the film version of Godfrey’s character is shown to be much more inclined towards forgiveness and sympathy to others in positions of poverty.

On the other hand, in the novel, Cornelia appears as the jealous yet harmless younger child of the Bullock family. An interesting fact to mention is that her physical appearance more closely resembles Carole Lombard’s than that of Irene. Hatch describes Cornelia as “exceedingly pretty with her golden hair in gorgeous disarray around her shoulders and her bright blue eyes” (20). Her mother praises her for her fashion sense and mannerisms, even though Mrs. Bullock rarely doles out compliments to anyone besides her “friend” Carlo. Cornelia sees herself as the only socially acceptable daughter of the Bullock family and seeks to keep her place as her mother’s preferred child by remaining at odds with Irene. Where Irene is viewed as dumb and often unaware of the world around her, Cornelia takes life as a challenge and enjoys the power of her social

class to the fullest extent. As a debutant, Cornelia takes her position in high society seriously, and she feels pressure due to her sister's strange personality, "Amazonian" appearance, and her lack of friends who could potentially lead her to a marriage match. To Cornelia, Irene is a disgrace to the family, and it is a sentiment with which the entire family appears to agree. However, like sisters fighting over a boy that they both like, Cornelia recognizes that she does not have the one thing that her sister is given freely and without precedent - Godfrey's respect and appreciation. In one of the few moments that the novel focuses solely on her, Cornelia reveals that she:

in her heart, hated her sister. She hated her because she was older than herself and considered dumb by her crowd, and insisted on hanging around whenever people came to the house and because she always felt swell in the morning and because from the first Godfrey had treated her like a fellow human and because this same Godfrey had come to the Waldorf with her after he'd tossed her, Cornelia, into a bush like a burnt-out cigarette (Hatch 85).

As Cornelia's dialogue indicates, much of her aggression towards Irene stems from her jealousy of her sister's unique appeal to people, in particular Godfrey. From the beginning of the novel, Cornelia finds herself rebuffed and berated by a man whom she sees as beneath her because of his social class. Cornelia's feelings towards Godfrey are aggressively unfriendly as a result of their first encounter and she uses his lower-class position to be unkind. It is important to note this internal outburst because so far in the novel Cornelia is the sister who has everything she could ever ask for in life and acts frivolously because she knows that she has the security of her father's money and her



boyfriend's infatuation. Yet, this moment makes it clear that there are layers to Cornelia's distant attitude towards her sister and anger at Godfrey.

Interestingly, their characters' immediate antagonism might at first cause the reader to assume that it is Cornelia and Godfrey who are meant to be the couple by the end of the novel. Perhaps if this story did not have Irene's unique presence and leaned more into the comedy aspect of this romantic-comedy, then this pair would have resolved their differences and reconciled to demonstrate that social status does not matter as much as love. Even Godfrey thinks on his first day in the Bullock household that while "Cornelia hated his guts and he hated hers . . . in spite of their positions. . . each of them would subtly try to make the other fall in love" (Hatch 29). This enemies-to-lovers trope might work for the pair if Irene did not defy the stereotypes surrounding her class and gender. Unlike Cornelia, Irene is brash with her affections to those she likes and goes after her desires like a "tigress" on the hunt (Hatch 68). In contrast, Cornelia strategically positions herself to succeed in keeping her lifestyle by using her feminine physique and alluring features to fulfill the "woman's duty" of having secured a boyfriend, and thus her future (Hatch 68). Though Faithful George appears to be a decent man, Cornelia refuses his proposals until her family is in a moment of crisis, and she needs to be confident in her social standing. Cornelia understands that marriage is expected of her and agrees to George's proposal even though she will be unsatisfied with him. This acceptance results from the knowledge that marriage is an economic proposition that cannot be taken lightly for women, especially those now in a much lower class than prior in the story.

Cornelia's characterization allows her to be vapid, angry, and prejudiced while still making her a character with which readers can sympathize. In the end, Cornelia decides to keep herself safe by trapping herself in a marriage that might be unhappy but at least will be financially secure. In the novel, Cornelia represents a version of a high society woman who understands that she must orchestrate her safety for the future because, without a respectable husband to marry, her lifestyle would be gone. However, as this chapter will later discuss, in the film, Cornelia is not only a character whom the audience is encouraged to dislike, but she is also made to be the villain of the adaptation. Cornelia's transformation throughout the adaptation process is very noticeable, but even it is not nearly as dramatic as Irene's transformation.

Throughout the novel, the third-person narrator provides the reader with various perspectives on Irene's appearance and personality that present her as something vastly different from other women in the novel. There is only one moment where Irene is described as "a beautiful woman," and it is juxtaposed with the argument that she is only beautiful "if you could forget her brain" (Hatch 24). The novel's fascination with Irene stems from her lack of definition by typical standards of beauty and intelligence. No one in the Bullock family understands that Irene's value should be derived from more than her physical appearance or mannerisms, and instead they continually mock her for attributes that do not fit their standards of an upper-class debutant. The third-person narrator portrays their comments about her lack of intelligence in a humorous manner that could be taken seriously if the narration did not also reveal the ways in which Irene is purposeful in using the negative opinions of others to maintain her freedom.

As previously mentioned, Irene's appearance becomes central to her character as readers learn that she looks nothing like the "lovely creature" that is Cornelia (Hatch 20) but is a very tall brunette woman who moves like a "panther" and continually confuses people with a strange look in her eyes (Hatch 39). Notably, her mannerisms are often compared either to an animal or a dazed yet functional alcoholic. However, this particular rhetoric coincides with moments when Irene experiences extreme emotion. In a particular scene while waiting for Godfrey to return to her room post-argument, she declares aloud, "Nobody loves a fat man" which is immediately followed by the narration explaining, "She meant, "Nobody loves an Amazon" (Hatch 42). By likening her status as an "Amazon" to that of a "fat man," Irene notes that her appearance resides outside of the socially acceptable norm. Irene's apparent lack of care for the way that others perceive her is briefly shattered in this moment as she shifts from a woman who often appears emotionally distant to an empathetic human woman whose insecurities are cultivated by those around her. Though this is seemingly a flaw in her usual aloof persona, Irene's ability to reconcile with her doubt and channel it into productively controlling her desires in later chapters demonstrates her willingness to accept her oddities in order to use them to further herself in the narrative.

Whereas Cornelia's beauty appears classic and tame, one of the key descriptors Hatch uses to describe Irene embodies the manner in which she employs her unusual qualities to her advantage – the "tigress" (68). Of all of Irene's characteristics that this thesis discusses, her depiction as a panther, tigress, "human leopardess," and, ultimately, hunter are the most substantial physical indicators of Irene's agency and desires (128).

Though the novel begins with a scavenger hunt, it becomes evident that the true hunt commences only after the game at the hotel ends. In some of Godfrey's earliest assessments of her, Irene appears just as she had been at the hotel – sweet and genuine but ultimately socially unaware. It is only as they begin to interact more frequently that Irene's body language begins to play a role in how Godfrey registers her as both friend and possible foe. With features that already lend themselves to an appearance of foreignness, it is natural to assume that Irene's mannerisms are going to be comically peculiar, but the amount of cat-like imagery that Godfrey uses is overwhelming. Godfrey always sees Irene "prowling," "vaulting" and "slinking" around him when he is near providing the amusing image of her as a big jungle cat and he as her only slightly willing prey (Hatch 68). Irene's use of her body suggests a raw sexual nature that one would not associate with the Irene at the hotel bar. As a result of Godfrey's doting attention and the pair's playful banter, Irene outwardly begins to display her desire for Godfrey before she ever voices her love for him. It is in these moments, I would argue, that it is clear just how much power Hatch bestows upon his version of Irene. Once Irene firmly grasps the idea of Godfrey as her love interest, she becomes more confident as she steps into her role as the "tigress" and begins to outwardly rebel against her family. Irene does indeed live up to the title of the "Stubborn Girl" that the original edition proclaims her to be, and is a woman in a position of power who is aware of her sexual appetites and methodically plans to sate them.

It is also noteworthy that Irene's position of power over Godfrey not only appears in the hierarchical dynamics of the household, but also in that Irene knows that

she is directly responsible for Godfrey's rise out of the "ghost city" and gets satisfaction from helping him. While Irene is a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent individual when it suits her, she is also placed in the typically male position of the savior. In the middle of her revelation that she loves Godfrey, Irene notes that it was "from the moment that she'd realized he [Godfrey] was getting fat and strong and rehabilitated and that it was because she'd rescued him from that dump heap, she'd been terribly in love with him" (Hatch 41). This might appear as an odd thought to compare with the acknowledgement of love, but Irene and Godfrey both recognize that their relationship begins because of her kindness and the offer of employment that Irene extends to Godfrey. Her decision to use her control of the family's capital for the benefit of a man who needs help is arguably what saves her family when her father abandons them to destitution. Her empathetic nature becomes a key personality trait that establishes her as more than the inept debutante who cannot relate to anyone but herself.

According to Cornelia, however, Irene still lacks the social tact and conversation skills that would make her a useful member of high society. It is only when Irene interacts with Godfrey that she is a quick-witted flirt who remains actively invested in getting to know Godfrey as a person. The "dumbness" that others see in Irene is her disregard for her social position that her family does not understand. The novel makes it clear that Irene is not book smart and pokes fun at her when she points "grandly to where she thought her heart was" but instead actually "pointed to her liver instead" (Hatch 69). It is a moment of humor which reminds readers that Irene's actions often do not reflect her true intelligence. Because even if she doesn't know where her heart is located, it is

clear that she has an emotional depth unlike any other character. This also brings forth the possibility that Irene downplays even her emotional intelligence in situations with others as an attempt to avoid the possibility of entrapment in a marriage that would likely restrain her spirited attitude and agency in the world. Once she meets Godfrey and recognizes that he is the type of man who can relate to her on a personal level and would also “promise to take care” of her should economic hardships arise, she breaks out of her glazed state to engage with someone she actually enjoys having around (Hatch 71). Thus, once the layers around Irene begin to unfold, her odd appearance and eccentric displays of emotion become a part of the striking, emotionally-charged, tigress of a woman who eventually erupts with anger in a crucial moment of character development.

From the moment that readers experience the intense “bulldozer” that is Mrs. Bullock, her personality makes it clear why her family leaves her to have a suspected affair with her “butler” Carlo and ignores her opinions when they can (Hatch 30). While both of her daughters have bold personalities that clash with their mother’s, whenever she speaks with Irene there is an underlying tension due to the eldest daughter’s lack of social acceptability. After a “battle royal” involving all three, Irene and Mrs. Bullock argue once more over letting Godfrey leave his job behind during which Irene exclaims angrily that she thinks “this joint and the life we lead is perfectly gawd-awful” (Hatch 94). Out of all of Irene’s dramatic outbursts, this is her most direct expression of hatred towards her social class. She continues by explaining the reasons she would be content with leaving her family’s money behind as she yells:

“Why the hell not? What have I got here that I want? ..... You – you and Cornelia – have been apologizing for my being dumb – and Amazonian for so long now, and trying to explain why I didn’t get married years ago when I came out, that you’ve wrecked any fun that I might have had.” (Hatch 94)

Irene’s blatant statement of her knowledge of her family’s secretive apologies on her behalf to the rest of their high society associates that have affected her self-esteem and her enjoyment of life is remarkable. This is arguably the longest monologue that Irene has in the novel, and it is a formidable declaration of her intelligence that is shocking to Mrs. Bullock. Her mother is struck by the fact that she “never dreamed Irene knew she apologized for her and made curious explanations why she hadn’t snagged a duke long ago” (Hatch 96). Mrs. Bullock’s underestimation of her daughter’s knowledge shows precisely how well-crafted Irene’s feigned lack of intelligence is to those who do not care to look beyond her penchant for dramatics and labeling herself as dumb.

Perhaps the most important alteration to the original character of Irene is her adaptability and willingness to face the challenges of poverty when the family plunges into economic hardship. From the beginning, Irene’s ability to live as a single young woman in a lavish lifestyle is due to her father’s fortune. Since having disposable capital is normal to her, Irene does not concern herself with marriage, and when she finally does consider marriage with Godfrey, she is content with the fact that he is a working-class man because she still has the security of her family fortune. However, when Mr. Bullock goes bankrupt and disappears, the Bullock family scrambles to figure out how to survive. It is only due to Irene’s kindness and friendship with Godfrey that he formulates a plan

to save the Bullock family. When he states that “we’re all going to work!” the family members react with various degrees of horror. Cornelia is told that she must agree to marry George, which she initially refuses to do, while Mrs. Bullock and Carlo accept that they are to work with Godfrey at the restaurant “Chez Marianne” (Hatch 117). On the other hand, Irene jumps at the chance to work before he even tells them that they must, offering to become a secretary, a suggestion to which Godfrey kindly replies, “You see there’re so many secretaries and most of them are so dumb” (Hatch 115). This observation would be a sweet moment of Godfrey’s recognition of her intelligence if Irene didn’t immediately reply, “I’m terribly dumb – everyone’s always said so” (Hatch 116). Nevertheless, this statement is also important in that it might be Irene’s way of showing her dedication to joining the work force to support the family and gain a new type of agency that she has never had before. Since Irene is associated with the word dumb throughout the novel, she might view her dumbness as a qualification for the job that offers a new perspective on life. However, Godfrey refuses to make Irene work because she has helped him at his lowest point in life, and since he has the money that her father gave him; he takes it as his duty to make sure that she is financially secure. It is important to note that even though she is still financially dependent on a male character, Irene nonetheless manages to procure a stable future for herself in the midst of economic crisis due to her purposeful actions.

While Cornelia’s marriage to George is utilitarian in nature, Irene and Godfrey’s eventual coupling comes as a result of Mrs. Bullock’s belief that the two have slept together. Though the aftermath of this mistake culminates in the pair’s engagement,



Irene's interest in pursuing Godfrey is never about his economic status, but for her own enjoyment. However, unknowingly or not, Irene manages to secure her future in a marriage that allows her agency, financial security, and does not force her to downplay her personality or intelligence. Overall, it is safe to say that Irene has had a very successful hunt.

## 2.2 *My Man Godfrey* (1936)

Gregory La Cava's 1936 film *My Man Godfrey* begins its narrative with Irene meeting Godfrey during the scavenger hunt and ceremoniously ends with the couple's abrupt union in marriage. These moments are where the major similarities between the original text and the adaptation end. The film opens with a spectacle of lights across New York City that make the world appear blindingly bright as the names of the major actors, Carole Lombard and William Powell, shine in bold marquee letters. With the aid of this Hollywood ex-spousal team, *My Man Godfrey* becomes what Thomas Schatz calls "one of the most top-heavy budgets of any picture on the lot" in 1936 (236). The success of La Cava's expensive film launched the largest batch of screwball comedies in the 1930s, including *Easy Living*, *Nothing Sacred*, and *The Awful Truth*, all of which premiered in 1937 (Sklar 188). The film is easily one of the most recognizable screwball comedy films in history with the culmination of "slapstick violence and eccentric behavior of the lead couple" that becomes the standard expectation for this genre (Greene 45). In addition, the boost that it received from its star-studded cast drew

audiences into the theater and aided its success. Richard Maltby notes that certain types of movies become a “star vehicle,” a movie “constructed around the appeal of one of more popular stars and sold on that basis” (142). *My Man Godfrey* follows this pattern to perfection as it combines the ever-popular ingredients of a well-loved acting duo with the basic formula for a screwball comedy – physical comedy, fast banter, and wacky rich people who end up happy even though they lack common sense. Since the studio system of the 1930s effectively mechanized the “star system” for selling movie tickets and deliberately maintaining publicity around certain films, these films appeal to their audience through a “guarantee of predictability” (Maltby 145). This guarantee that Maltby examines is especially noteworthy for the genre of screwball comedies. In the face of adversity in the Great Depression, the public turned to Hollywood for comfort and escapism. Films such as *Twentieth Century*, *My Man Godfrey*, and *Nothing Sacred* demonstrate Maltby’s contention that Lombard’s versatility in similar screwball roles kept studios happy and audiences satisfied. The standard formula for the plots of screwball comedies allows the audience to focus both on the narrative but also on the actors and actresses themselves as stars that they admire.

La Cava’s *My Man Godfrey* capitalized on this formula and premiered in theaters on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1936, a little over a year after the serialization of Hatch’s “Irene, the Stubborn Girl.” It received a wave of mostly positive reviews, four Academy Award nominations, and \$684,200 at the box office, making it the twelfth highest-grossing film in both the United States and British markets for the 1930s (Sedgwick and Pokorny 96). While Eric Hatch “assisted in writing the screen version of his novel” and managed to

keep what the *New York Times* reviewer Frank S. Nugent calls “the feather-brained quality of his novel,” the light-heartedness of the film seems to be one of the few aspects of the novel that made it through the adaptation process unscathed (Nugent 18). This film warrants comparison to the original text because there are drastic alterations to the female characters, particularly weakening Irene and villainizing Cornelia. The emphasis on changing female characters is important because the male characters’ adaptations result in their more positive and heroic portrayal. I would argue that the pattern of agency established for the female characters throughout the original novel is significantly diminished in the 1936 film adaptation and results in the refocusing of the narrative onto Godfrey, the restructuring of the plot to make the villain a woman, and a version of Irene that is a mere shadow of her original character. In making this argument, this thesis will consider the modifications made to characters’ personalities, language, financial independence, and relationship to marriage, as well as the impact of casting, production, and reception of the film. What an analysis of these features will show is that while the box office numbers soared and most critics applauded the acting and directing, the narrative was not praised in its portrayal of the Depression or depiction of its leading lady. Therefore, this section hopes to show how *My Man Godfrey*’s adaptation displays the systematic softening of the leading female character that results in less agency for the character and a diminishment of her personality, as well as exploring the narrative shifts that produce an evil Cornelia and a sympathetic Mr. Bullock.

In La Cava’s *My Man Godfrey*, it is clear from the opening scene that the scavenger hunt will be both considerably more cut-throat and socially aware of

Godfrey's living conditions than is the case in Hatch's novel. When we meet Irene in the film, she is tumbling out of a taxi following her sister Cornelia and George as they race to find a "forgotten man" to win the scavenger hunt. After Godfrey's confrontation with Cornelia, he and Irene bond, but only after she states that she was in the hunting party "but...not anymore" (La Cava). This moment serves to separate Irene from her sister and George, but it also detaches her from the notion that she is any sort of predator. After listening to Irene ramble, Godfrey asks if she "could follow an intelligent conversation for just a moment?" immediately placing Irene in a position of inferiority to Godfrey's suave and clever speech (La Cava). While this sequence and the following scenes of her asking Godfrey to be the Bullock's new butler do establish the base for Irene's emotional intelligence and dislike of typical high-class standards, she is also shown to be considerably more child-like than in the novels. In a brief exchange between Mrs. Bullock and Irene in front of the Waldorf, Mrs. Bullock asks "what will people think?" to Irene's conversation with Godfrey and barks "Don't shout at your mother" to which Irene responds childishly, "I will shout!" (La Cava).

Similar to the Irene of the novel, the filmic version of the character is also vastly underestimated by her family. However, this Irene is not subtle or sly in her appearance or attitudes, but instead desires to gain attention and get her way through shouting or dramatically faking a fainting spell. During the scene where Godfrey is waking Irene up the morning after the scavenger hunt, she even claims that having him around as her "protégé" makes her "feel so mature and grown-up" (La Cava). Irene's lack of maturity is supposed to be part of the charm of her role as the harmless, rich girl who appears

frivolous and only occasionally has a spark of intelligence. During the film, an example of her childishness is revealed when she takes a trip to Europe just to take her mind off of Godfrey's lack of interest in her. Once she returns home, it is clear that she still has her sights set on Godfrey, but the family's monetary troubles briefly overshadow her desires. After Godfrey is declared the hero of the Bullock family and the savior of the people living down at the city dump following his construction of a restaurant and housing plan for the people to work and live there, Irene takes it upon herself to remind him that he is her "responsibility" and that she wants to take care of him, which she does by bringing food and firewood. Godfrey then jokingly asks why she did not "bring a minister and license" before subsequently finding himself standing before a rapidly appearing minister with Irene and hearing the words, "Stand still Godfrey, it'll all be over in a minute" (La Cava).

As Peter Swaab mentions in his book on Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), viewers of screwball comedies "often ask where the protagonists fell in love" because the plots often make the romance aspect elusive (36). He states that for *My Man Godfrey*, it happens when Godfrey and Irene are doing dishes together near the end of the film when she tells him, "You look cute in your apron" (La Cava). However, this abrupt ending leaves us feeling that Godfrey, as critic Frank Nugent says, "is being led to the slaughter" and not as though this is a completely unanimous decision by the pair to get married. The changes to Godfrey's character enable him to become a more heroic figure in not only his martyrdom in marrying Irene, but also for the reason behind his position as a "forgotten man." Godfrey is not a formerly wealthy man who attempted

murder and served a prison sentence like the original character but is instead a disillusioned wealthy gentleman who wandered down to the docks to commit suicide and then chose to stay as one of the men in the city dump when he finds he enjoys the company of the people. This change drastically alters the reception of his character since underneath his “forgotten man” attire, he is still a wealthy, relatable young man who is both irritated and fascinated by the Bullock family. While Godfrey’s accessibility in the film is due, in part, to William Powell’s performance, overall, the script reforms the narrative around Godfrey Parke in the way that the original text focuses on Irene.

Accompanying the shift in Godfrey’s characterization, the narrative arc is transformed when the villain of the story is no longer Mr. Bullock, but Cornelia. While Hatch’s novel begins with Irene at the bar, *La Cava*’s film shows the exasperated father and businessman Alexander Bullock standing at the bar trying to ignore his insipid wife and troublemaking daughters. Audiences are immediately sympathetic towards Mr. Bullock after a brief exchange with another high-class man at the bar where he appears to condemn the whole of the “Fifth Avenue asylum,” as he later calls it, or the higher-class society that his wife and daughters enjoy (*La Cava*). A sequence that unites Mr. Bullock with the audience and establishes him as separate from his family occurs the morning after the scavenger hunt when he is called on by a “processor” that arrives at his front door. Their conversation occurs as follows:

Processor: “Well, here I am again, Mr. Bullock, with another little present for ya...”

Alexander Bullock: “Yes, I’ve heard it all before. Which one of the family is it this time?”

Processor: “It's Miss Cornelia. Seems she was feeling pretty gay last night, and on her way home, she busted up a few windows along Fifth Avenue. You know, I’m sorry to give you that, but you know how it is...girls will be girls!” (La Cava)

As Mr. Bullock shuts the door and looks at the bill for Cornelia's damage, Molly, the Bullock’s maid, chooses that moment to let him know that Irene’s escapades from the night before resulted in her riding a horse up the front steps and leaving it the library. This scene offers Godfrey and viewers a taste of the family that Mr. Bullock contends with every day. It is clearly meant to evoke sympathy for this frustrated father-figure character and make his grievances intelligible not only to the audience but also to Godfrey as the only other “sane” figure in the house. While Mr. Bullock’s complaints about his family’s use of money and their disregard for his labor are the same as in the novel, his character is neither the conspirator behind the disappearance of his wife’s pearls nor does he choose to abandon his family once his finances go south. However, Mr. Bullock does allow his household to run rampant and is not as successful of a paterfamilias for the family as Godfrey. His lack of control and decision to surrender his authority to Godfrey when he is in financial trouble places him in a vulnerable position that makes him more human to audiences. This departure from the original narrative places Mr. Bullock in a considerably more positive light while forcing another character into the position of the villain.

Although La Cava's Cornelia is just as acerbic in her witty commentary and dislike of Godfrey as she is in Hatch's original text, in the film, her faults are accentuated to transform her bratty younger sibling act into a selfish and conniving older sister who wants revenge on Godfrey. The alterations made to Cornelia's character might appear as just augmenting her qualities to make her the complete opposite of her sister Irene, which would be part of the typical Hollywood formula if these characters were not already extant. By swapping the blonde, blue-eyed Cornelia of the novel for the mysterious brunette Gail Patrick and the "very tall, very dark" Irene for Carole Lombard, the film plays into the deep-rooted history of hair color as a "signifying agent" in the typecasting of Hollywood films (92). Scholar Maria DiBattista dedicates two chapters of her work *Fast-Talking Dames* to exploring the work and reception of blondes and brunettes in 1930s and 1940s films. Throughout the chapter on "Blonde Bombshells," DiBattista mentions the underratedness of Gail Patrick and how she "excelled in feckless or selfish or simply second-best brunette" roles opposite actresses that are the heroines of the plots (DiBattista 120). Unlike her harmless original character, Patrick's version of Cornelia is full of malice and, ultimately, the thief who steals her mother's pearl necklace in order to frame Godfrey in retaliation for her earlier humiliation. Even before she plants the necklace, Cornelia is firmly set as the wrongdoer of the film when she continues to prod at Godfrey's past and then eventually tries to blackmail him about his family. By shifting the negative attention onto Cornelia, Mr. Bullock becomes the most grounded member of his family even though he makes disastrous business mistakes and does not try to correct his family's behavior. Without



Mr. Bullock as the perpetrator of the family's downfall, the entire narrative shifts to maintain an atmosphere where women are to blame for the family's misfortunes, and consequences of poor decisions can be easily remedied by a savvy butler who is actually a wealthy businessman.

In thinking about the process of adaptation for this film, it is crucial to note that while the original elements of the story were satisfactory to Joseph Breen, there were considerable changes that he wanted for the script. In a letter to Harry Zehner, the assistant General Manager of Universal Studios Corp., written on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Joseph Breen states that there are numerous details that are "plainly objectionable" and that there must be "radical corrections" made to the script in order for it to meet the standards of the Production Code (Collection 102, series 1, Margaret Herrick Library Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Special Collection, 2). In the first letters exchanged in February of 1936, the main objectionable issues were the "sex element" in regards to Irene and Godfrey, the issue of Carlo being a "gigolo," the treatment of Mr. Bullock's character, and the excessive drinking throughout the script (Special Collection 2). Over the course of six months, numerous letters are exchanged between Breen and Zehner discussing the state of *Ten Eleven Fifth*, the original title for the film. In these letters, Breen describes concerns with how Irene is positioned and portrayed as well as how Mr. Bullock cannot end up on an island in the South Seas with an implied harem of women. He firmly states that Irene's "costume and demeanor when she is sitting up in bed" need to be handled with restraint, that Irene cannot be with Godfrey for too long in her bedroom, and that she cannot be implicated in indecent acts such as sleeping over at

Godfrey's apartment (Special Collection 6). These demands might appear relatively tame, considering the amount of cutting that could have been asked for, but they still manage to chip away at Irene's freedom within the narrative. Even lines that express her clear desires and questioning of the family's lack of structure such as, "If mother gets to have Carlo, why can't I have Godfrey?" are altered for being too suggestive (Special Collection 9). No longer is the audience being promised a stubborn yet captivating heroine; instead, it is clear from these letters that Breen and the Production Code Administration (PCA) were more inclined to have the creators promise a sexually naïve and ditzy debutant that only vaguely resembles Hatch's original Irene in order to receive their "seal of approval" for the film (Londino 27).

If we ignore the original text and consider only the PCA's strict guidelines combined with Hollywood's formula for screwball comedies, for the most part the end result is that La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* is an entertaining and well-made film. However, there is nothing overly original about the "playing, writing, or direction," as the critic from *Time* magazine stated in a review; instead, he notes that there is "something that mysteriously adds itself to those things" that makes the film "tip-top" (*Time* 32). I would argue that Lombard is the "mysterious" additive that allowed the film to rise to the top of the charts in 1936 and to acquire a revered place in film history. This section agrees with the scholarship of James Harvey on Lombard in his book *Romantic Comedies in Hollywood*, where he claims that Lombard "was one reason the public indulged and tolerated some of the wilder excesses of that comedy" (201). As possibly the actress most heavily identified with screwball comedy, Lombard leads the way in *My*

*Man Godfrey* and other films such as *Twentieth Century* and *Nothing Sacred* (1937) as a force of charm and utter insanity onscreen. Thus, the casting of Lombard as Irene does not seem abnormal in retrospect when considering her connection to the genre, but many critics such as Harvey note that the character of Irene in La Cava's film does not fit with Lombard's "air of fierce intelligence" (Harvey 215). Instead, Lombard's personality appears to align more closely with that of Hatch's original version of Irene, who has hidden depths and witty lines that rival other comedic heroines. Since she does not fit with her character as well as it appears on the screen, this section would like to consider the act of casting Lombard as a compensatory one on the part of the filmmakers to alleviate the major alterations to Irene's character.

As previously mentioned, the role of casting heavily influenced the creation and reception of Hollywood films in the 1930s. Charles Eckert confronts this in his influential article "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window" when he describes how "Hollywood designers, beauty consultants, and merchandizers" began to focus on how the film industry's involvement with advertising could benefit their businesses (10). He imagines that they all had a vision of an ideal girl who was "single, nineteen years old, Anglo-Saxon," who would stumble upon and purchase a version of a dress worn by Lombard in her film *Rumba* (1935) (10). This capitalization on star power to influence the consumption of products, particularly by women, operates effortlessly when viewers want to "emulate Hollywood stars" (Berry 22). Lombard's status as a star provides her with the ability to attract audiences no matter the role. This is especially helpful for her role in *My Man Godfrey* after Irene's character is stripped back to the giddy, dingbat of

an heiress that endears herself to Godfrey and audiences. The lack of substantial personality or background material for her character provides Lombard with only the bare-bones of what should be a strong leading character. La Cava's Irene, as Harvey notes, "is less a character than a comic routine" due to her consistently incoherent speech and apparent lack of intelligence that goes beyond not knowing where the heart is located (215). The reduction of Irene's character to dramatic, dumb, and eager to please forces Lombard to creatively situate Irene as a young rich woman who might not be the smartest or the most intuitive, but who is genuine in her actions and lacks the frivolously haughty nature of other members of the upper class. The success of Lombard's performance is largely due to her ability to transform a character written to be a childish nuisance to all others into an amusing portrayal of a lovesick young woman who revels in getting tossed in a shower fully clothed and being near the object of her affection. By oscillating equally well between being warm with Godfrey and cold with her family, Lombard regains Irene's emotional capacity that resonates throughout the novel in an attempt to provide greater depth to her portrayal of Irene.

Although the "screwy" part of screwball comedies generally comes not only from the playful antics of upper-class characters but also from the reversal of rigid social conventions, the alterations to the character of Irene do the exact opposite for the film. As Harvey states, *My Man Godfrey* "really reverses the joke...[that] the woman is smarter, stronger, and finally more independent" than the male character (215). The film's refusal to play into the common theme of the screwball comedy places a heavier emphasis on the wit and suave nature of Godfrey while throwing a childish debutant at

him to contend with as though it were a fair fight. Gone are the days of Irene as the huntress; Irene instead becomes a bubbly blonde who more often resembles a lovesick puppy than a fierce jungle cat. The transformation of Irene's physical appearance and mannerisms is the most drastic alteration even though it is only on the surface level. However, this section argues that everything is surface level for La Cava's Irene since she is no longer physically unique, does not hold complete contempt for her social class, and does not appear all that aware about the ramifications concerning her lack of marriage thus far in her life. By the end of the film it becomes clear that most of Irene's internal characterization is transferred to her father who becomes the grounded figure who holds a grudge against the money-oriented desires of his class.

When Irene's agency no longer relies on her enigmatic appearance and intelligence, or her use of language, her treatment becomes heavily reliant upon the physical comedy of the film or the "romantic play" aspect of screwball films (Krutnik 59). Though the shower scene also occurs in the novel and maintains its comedic effect, there are numerous times when Godfrey ends up carrying Irene or when Irene threatens physical violence to solve a problem. The slapstick nature lends itself to the film's success but is necessary because there no characterization for Irene to fill the space of the narrative. Irene's place as the overexcited and scheming debutant leaves her with little ability to break that mold when her character has nowhere else to draw from as a source for her character growth.

As the film progresses there is an expectation that Irene will develop mentally and morally into a young woman who recognizes her fortunate lot in life and chooses to

celebrate it by marrying her love interest. This anticipation is never truly fulfilled by Irene because even though she cultivates a fondness in the hearts of audiences, at the end of the film she still ambushes Godfrey into a marriage and does not truly take him into account. While the Bullock family is happy that Godfrey saves their way of life by selling the pearls Cornelia hid in his bedroom and investing them in Mr. Bullock's name, thus saving the family, the concern with money is not something that Irene ever directly addresses. There does not appear to be pressure on her to marry for money as there is in the novel. This may have to do with the fact that Irene and Cornelia have switched ages in the adaptation, making Cornelia the elder sister and Irene the younger in the film. The age change allows Irene more leeway than her sister since marrying off the first-born is generally the concern for upper-class families. This lack of concern with marriage for Irene completely alters her agency in the script since she no longer needs to be clever or cautious when contemplating marriage. In the film, Irene lacks an honest desire to remove herself from the upper class which allows for the script to remove crucial layers to her character that allow her strength and control over her life in the novel. The only major sense of agency that Irene holds in the film is the disposable capital that comes from her father. However, Irene's financial status remains dependent on Mr. Bullock's ability to support his family, and then when he proves inefficient, Godfrey heroically steps up to take his place. Similar to the novel, Irene is financially secure due to the male characters in her life, but unlike her original iteration, the Irene of the film does not see money or marriage as a hunt for survival, only as a game that happens to be played by

two very wealthy players in a secure environment that could never end any way but happily.

Throughout this section there is an attempt to indicate that the narrative shifts and alterations to characterization in *My Man Godfrey* (1936) is consistent with the pattern that softens female characters in the adaptation process and deeply effects their agency within the filmic texts and reception. Moreover, that the process of casting appears to be one of the only elements that significantly impacts the development of female characters in the film, thus showing Carole Lombard as the reason behind the triumph of Irene's character. The factors that compromise the characterization and agency of the female character throughout the adaption process create a noteworthy foundation for examining how other screwball comedy films dismiss the original characters for a version that might appear less intelligent and less threatening.

### 2.3 *A Love Like That* (1935)

Valentine Ransome's first appearance in David Garth's *A Love Like That* is memorable not only for her cowgirl outfit and her striking red hair but for the fact that she enters the novel on the back of a bucking bronco at a Texas rodeo that she is financing with her own money. From the beginning of Garth's novel, Valentine grabs the narrative by the reins and throws one hand up in the air for fun just to see if she can hold on. Similar to Irene's place at the hotel bar, the first location that readers find Valentine in is one that is familiar to her and one where she has control over her surroundings.

Readers meet her through the eyes of Jonathan Blair, the heir to a New York shipping company and playboy bachelor, who is immediately captivated by the fearless vixen who dominates the pages of Garth's novel. Thus, this section will explore *A Love Like That*, the little-known 300-page novel that serves as the basis for RKO's 1937 film adaptation *Breakfast for Two*, a film that is barely feature length. By examining the impact of drastic alterations to Valentine's character this section seeks to demonstrate that Valentine's personal fortune provides her with greater independence than a character like Irene, but also forces her to lose more agency in the adaptation process. The alterations reduce her from an independently wealthy businesswoman to a sexy heiress who merely wants to mold Jonathan Blair into husband material. Though the fictional versions of Irene and Valentine both hold a fair amount of agency in their narratives, their financial interests and the ability to secure their futures with a proper marriage are their underlying objectives throughout the original texts.

However, unlike Irene, Valentine's unique characterization does not come from the concealment of her intelligence, but from an overt flaunting of her abilities to manipulate the social standards for upper-class young women to her advantage and carve her own path to financial fortune without the help of a man. In *A Love Like That*, it is clear that partnership, both business and personal, is Valentine's goal. This is possible because, unlike in the film adaptation, Garth's novel does not subject her to a vague background and a flighty romantic interest that only becomes semi-serious when punches and cakes are thrown.



Unlike the rich publication history of Hatch's *Irene, the Stubborn Girl*, Garth's novel was published under its original title for only two editions, one in 1935 and another in 1937 after the release of the film. The obscurity of this novel is astonishing and is augmented by the fact that the film does not even reference Garth's work by name but instead only briefly states "Story by David Garth" in the title sequence. Ultimately, Garth's name was not as well-known enough to conjure a widespread readership and his novel was correspondingly treated as disposable after it was adapted into a film.

*A Love Like This* is a comedic novel that begins in Pointdexter, Texas, the hometown of protagonist Valentine Ransome. The opening scene takes place at a small rodeo where cowboys and the crowd watch in amazement as a Valentine rides and then gets violently thrown from a bronco. After the rodeo, Valentine and Jonathan briefly meet when she helps him catch his train and only see each other again once Valentine goes to New York for a trip. Unlike the industrious Valentine, Jonathan is quickly running his family's shipping company, Blair Lines, into the ground. His lack of interest in the business, barring money, coupled with his reckless spending patterns and monotonous approach to life, cause the company's stock to plummet, leaving him nearly broke. His girlfriend, Carol Wallace, an unlucky actress who often requires that Jonathan invest in her plays, enjoys the idea of Jonathan as her future fiancé. When Valentine arrives in New York and realizes that the stock in Blair Lines is available to be purchased at a low price, she buys up all the stock until she is the major shareholder in the company. The pair repeatedly clash as Jonathan fights to get his family legacy back. While masquerading as a seaman aboard the ship *Orinoco* to torment Valentine on her

trip, Jonathan valiantly saves the lives of passengers on a sinking ship and realizes the value of hard work and caring for others. Meanwhile, Valentine begins to learn about the shipping business and recognizes that she should not underestimate Jonathan's determination. Jonathan's maturation pays off when he eventually manages to get Valentine to sign back the company to him and the pair politely compliment each other's business prowess. Once Valentine learns that Jonathan and Carol are engaged, she returns to Texas where she begins to explore her family's oil fields and finds herself a position where she can be active, challenged, and, most importantly, wear pants. However, when Jonathan is informed that he is unknowingly engaged to Carol, he breaks off their relationship, Carol marries her director the next morning, and he flies down to Texas to speak with Valentine. Finally, after a heated exchange and geyser explosion, they declare their love for each other.

Although the plot for this novel spans states and continents, the heart of the narrative lies within the character of Valentine Ransome – a wealthy Texas heiress who enjoys rodeos, impressive business conquests, and challenging high society's status quo. From her first appearance at the rodeo, Valentine exudes a wildness that appears natural to her yet is also carefully constructed as her persona. She exudes confidence when she wears “khaki breeches” and a “bandanna over her hair,” yet she can also don a beautiful dress with ease (Garth 5). Unlike wealthy characters such as Irene, Valentine is the granddaughter of a Texas Marshal and grew up in the rural town of Pointdexter, Texas. At first glance, Valentine fits the mold of the upper-class heiress who is educated, beautiful, and well-aware of her family's social class. However, she is not impressed by

the family fortune because she was already sixteen when “oil was discovered on the Ransome land” (Garth 14). By growing up without the strain of the family fortune, Valentine’s childhood consisted of her training horses, riding in rodeos, and going off on adventures that left her father frustrated enough to force her into boarding school on the East Coast and abroad. However rigorous her schooling, Valentine makes it clear that once she returned to Texas after her education was complete, she was back wearing pants and recklessly launching herself into an adventure where she “fractured her collarbone” by her second day home (Garth 15). Valentine’s appearance, particularly her physicality and mannerisms, in the novel is of significance due to the sheer number of different descriptors used by other characters to define her. While the film version of Valentine provides audiences with Stanwyck in a comedic role that allows her to perform vast amounts of physical comedy, that Valentine is not able to execute some of her more crucial and defining actions because they are cut from the film.

Through the use of chapters with alternating points of view between Valentine and Jonathan, Garth’s novel allows for a clear and consistent image of Valentine to form over the course of his novel. After the rodeo and an evening event where Valentine is told by her father to leave town, her appearance shifts from the casual fashion of a small-town Texan to that of a professional businesswoman. Her outfits are often used to define her as the one woman moving through a boardroom or party full of men. Interestingly, her business attire is not “masculine-coded clothing,” like the clothes she wears in Texas, but consists of beautiful dresses, blazers, and skirts that display her class and femininity (Berry 143). The choice for this attire works as both a declaration of her

womanhood and her armor against the business world that is dominated by men. Similar to Hatch's Irene, this Valentine uses her appearance to slip into whatever role she needs to play on any given day. For instance, when Valentine knows that she is about to be hounded by reporters when she disembarks the *Orinoco*, she carefully takes her time to dress in her "soft blue wool traveling suit...[and] silver fox fur" and apply her makeup to perfection (Garth 145). Bard Calhoun, "one of the most brilliant young advertising executives" and an associate of Valentine's, watches as she completes her look and then abruptly calls her "A calculating hussy" before implying that she is going to lift her skirt up to her knees and flash the cameramen (Garth 157). This seemingly awkward moment is one that Valentine handles with nonchalance as she agrees, "Good idea. My legs aren't bad" (157). While she manages to turn it into a joke, his comment is unwarranted and offensive to her simply based on her appearance. This scene in the novel is one where Valentine must play a softer version of her "warlike" business persona due to the dramatic rescue of the passengers from the *Dorinda*, therefore, leaving her more open in her attire with lighter colors and impeccable makeup (Garth 188). Bard perceives this openness as a ploy on Valentine's part to gain more publicity for Blair Lines as she makes herself more feminine for the press. While this might be true, that Valentine is being judged for upholding a certain standard of femininity becomes a testament to using her clothing as armor. By producing different reactions based on her clothing, Valentine is constantly prepared for any situation that would call on her to perform as a tough businesswoman, the sweet new owner of a shipping line, or something in between. In noticing Valentine's fashion sense, readers gain knowledge of how the novel's leading

lady views herself as well as how she contends with various professional situations that alter her appearance.

Due to her propensity for masculine clothing in Texas, Valentine is able to enter spaces such as the rodeo and oil fields because her “pants” and durable clothing allow her to be perceived as relatable. Although the rodeo hands call her “Miss Val,” and she has an office at the oil fields, Valentine is well respected by the men she works with, and there is never any doubt concerning her work ethic. Her attitude towards her appearance and desire to be in business result in her father stating that he often thinks that Valentine “should have been a man” (Garth 21). While Valentine understands the struggles of being a woman with money in an all-male business, Garth does not let that become the main conflict of the novel. Valentine’s confidence in herself is refreshing, and her position in society does not deter her from following her desires. Her confidence manifests itself through her clothing, which leads to a wide variety of descriptors that Jonathan uses to identify Valentine. When they first meet, he begins with “cowgirl,” and once she buys his family company out from under him, he drastically shifts to terms such as “vixen” (105), “Valkyrie” (189), “Amazon” (60), and “tigress” (210). Though Valentine does not always enjoy the designer outfits that she must don instead of the pants, she understands the power of perception and constantly uses her various appearance as a wealthy heiress and a grounded cowgirl to her advantage. When contemplating Garth’s Valentine in relation to Santell’s filmic version, their business attire is very similar, and the confidence with which Valentine presents herself in

*Breakfast for Two* resembles that in the original text, but there is a lack of depth to her fashion decisions and her performance of femininity does not resonate as powerfully.

Notably, those terms that Jonathan uses to describe Valentine are similar to the ones previously mentioned to describe Irene in Hatch's novel. Through the use of this rhetoric, Garth and Hatch's novels do not appear to have a problem with identifying women with appetitive agentic femininity. However, the film adaptations differ in that they acknowledge the women as having a sexual appetite but have difficulty imagining her as self-possessed enough to manage her own affairs. Thus, identifying Valentine as both a female warrior figure and a sexual huntress shows that Jonathan recognizes the power that she holds both personally and professionally throughout the novel. While in *Breakfast for Two*, Valentine becomes reduced to predatory figure on Jonathan who not only has less financial control but also needs help to catch her prey. Interestingly, the repetition of these terms indicates that relating women to predatory creatures or warrior women is widely disseminated. For instance, in Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), the rhetoric linking women to predatory wild cats establishes Susan as the one with the most control in the film since she can control Baby through singing and David through her powerful presence. This representation of Susan provides a stronger image of the predatory female character in control of the narrative than either Irene or Valentine in their own films.

In relation to power, Valentine's command of language sets her apart from all other characters in the novel. While her character in *Breakfast for Two* does have some of the most memorable lines, in *A Love Like That*, Valentine takes pleasure in exercising

her dry sarcasm, cunning wit, and use of expletives as she confronts the mess of a company left behind by Jonathan after his initial disregard for hard work. Throughout the narrative, she does not shy away from being straightforward with the men she works with and expressive when a situation calls for emotion. There are rarely any unnecessary frills to Valentine's speech, but she often combines the persona of a rich, naïve woman with manipulation skills in order to produce a certain reaction from another character. Valentine understands men's perceptions of her as a woman who should not be "playing with the boys," so when she acquires Blair Lines, Valentine goes toe-to-toe with their assumptions by using direct and emotionless language to get her point across (Garth 188).

For example, the scene when Valentine officially meets the *Orinoco's* Captain Thomas Marston becomes a crucial moment in recognizing how she operates as a business woman. As he explains to Valentine that he doesn't know what she is "doing in a man's job" and that he does not want to follow her direction, she cordially follows along and then calmly lets him know that she thinks he should resign due not only to his feeling towards her but also because of his age (Garth 93). Captain Marston relates his surprise at her declaration to "leading with your right and being smacked heartily by an unexpected left" (96). Valentine's delivery is amplified by the fact that she bases her judgment of his ability to complete his job on something arbitrary like his relatively young age, just as he is doing to her based on the fact that she is a woman. When they speak again after the sinking of the *Dorinda*, the tone of the conversation is friendlier since Captain Marston has witnessed her capabilities and kindness under duress while

she has seen his ability to organize an impromptu rescue mission. However, it becomes clear to Marston when Valentine teases him about his age that he has “been rather a jump or two behind the whole way” (Garth 124). Although it is an inconsequential scene overall, it provides perspective on Valentine’s ability to manipulate and then endear herself to the people with whom she works. Since she cannot acquire respect the same way a man could in her position, Valentine recognizes that she must work harder to keep her reputation as a dependable leader for her business, even if it is through some roundabout manipulation. Overall, Valentine’s mastery of language aids her in capturing the attention of others and gaining allies as she moves through the business world that tries to isolate her.

Although Valentine is not overly welcome in the shipping business, she makes it her goal to raise Blair Lines from its watery grave and run it properly to a booming success. Though the acquisition of Jonathan’s company remains the same throughout the adaptation, perhaps the most crucial feature of Garth’s Valentine is that she buys the company with her own money, not her father’s. Valentine’s status as an oil heiress would easily allow her to purchase the cheap stock when the business crashed, but she is firm when she states that it will be “on my own hook” (Garth 42). In spending her own money, Valentine showcases a new level of independence that is rare for women in the 1930s who were of a higher class. Though it might appear that women of a higher class have more financial freedom due to their inheritances, they are perhaps the most concerned with controlling their money since they do not want to see it all sequestered away with the arrival of a husband. For Valentine, she not only has her father’s oil



money to fall back on, but her own “private fortune” that provides her with a flow of capital that is solely hers to manage. Garth presents Valentine as this empowered protagonist in order to showcase her as an individual entity that is self-sufficient and does not need to focus on marriage until she chooses to do so. When she takes on the Blair Lines it is less for trying to control Jonathan as in the film, and more for her own personal business experience. Even though it “shot a tremendous hole” in her fortune, Valentine displays pride at saving Blair Lines from Jonathan’s failure (Garth 238). Her biting remarks to him throughout the early parts of the novel show her contempt for his lack of work ethic and focus on trivial playboy activities such as chasing girls, polo, and fishing. During their first meeting as Jonathan Blair, formerly of Blair Lines, and Miss Valentine Ransome of Blair Lines, she leaves Jonathan speechless with her blunt assessment of his skills when he asks her to step back from the deal:

Jonathan: “One last time, Miss Ransome,” he said tersely. “Will you quit this crazy idea? Will you please go back to Texas and ride broncs, and let people who know the shipping business run it?”

Valentine: “If you’re speaking of yourself,” she remarked, “I fail to see any connection” (Garth 61)

Unlike the board members of the Blair Lines or any of his friends, Valentine cuts through Jonathan’s fake interest in the company and declares him unfit to run the shipping lines since he does not care about working hard for a living. In doing so, Valentine triggers Jonathan’s desire and interest in learning how to work that leads him to regaining the company. However, for Valentine, the loss of the company back to

Jonathan is not an event that she views as her losing to him, but rather that she has won by showing him the adult business leader he should be in life. Although she is a business woman that dislikes losing her money, the fact that she cannot continue on with her work is the most disheartening to her which is the reason that she immediately launches herself into working in the oil fields. In relation to the loss of her personal funds, Valentine jokes with her father once she returns to Texas that he will have to give her “an allowance” until she can get back on her feet (Garth 241). Her newfound lack of money forces her to become more dependent on her family’s fortune than before, but it is an issue that she takes in stride and rationalizes as just a part of her business decisions. Strangely, while her father does not approve of her disregard for social mores or her choice to go into random business ventures, he is supportive of his daughter’s persistence in her work and cares about her emotional state when she returns from her loss in New York. Valentine’s fortune, her own and her inheritance, remains heavily tied to her family who are only briefly mentioned in Santell’s film adaptation. Her father is a politician who does not have a great head for business and influences the narrative due to Valentine believing that he would be happiest if his daughter conformed to the “country club” standard where she “played golf, attended tea dances, rode saddle horses in a nice civilized way, and waited to fall in love with someone and get married” (Garth 19). With these expectations on her mind, Valentine uses her financial independence to avoid entrapment in a sedentary lifestyle.

On the other hand, her younger brother Ned thinks that she is “one of the most amazing persons on earth” because her “independent strain of action” is strong and

won't yield because of the pressure that "valuable black liquid" places on the family to be part of the upper class (Garth 19). Ned is not the only male character who views Valentine with such esteem, but his support is even more crucial since he understands the difficulty that his sister endures in a world that is dominated by men who do not think her capable of being a business woman. Their relationship is not one of bitterness or rivalry since Ned is a lawyer and their father does not have overt expectations of him like he does of Valentine; instead they are partners in a united front against the traditions of upper-class society. By allowing this in-depth discussion of Valentine's family as more than just entities back in Texas, Garth provides the foundation for Valentine's personality that makes her desires for certain partnerships in business and love more logical.

Although Valentine gives the illusion that she will be allowed to wait for marriage until she falls in love as a result of her family's fortune, she maintains that marriages are instruments to aid both parties in achieving their goals. For instance, setting her slight jealousy of Carol aside, when Valentine is told that Jonathan is engaged to Carol she thinks that it is a poor decision but an understandable one. She observes that "He's got brains and vision and humor and he's giving them all to a person with ash-blond hair because she makes him feel big and masculine and capable" (Garth 225). This moment is the first occasion that Valentine truly considers how different a relationship with Jonathan would be for a woman like herself rather than Carol. Unlike the young actress who is willing to give up her career, Valentine knows that she is a businesswoman who would not cater to her husband's career. Valentine views her ideal

marriage as a partnership in which she would make “him feel that it was a fifty-fifty proposition” and would not be afraid to “get interested and mixed up in all kinds of things” that her husband might not enjoy (Garth 226). Unlike Carol, Valentine does not need to get married in order to support herself financially. However, she does need to take a vested interest in making sure that her future spouse respects her financial independence and the family fortune that would become his with their marriage. When the theme of enemies to lovers quiets down towards the end of the novel, the couple’s level of respect for each other’s business ventures and kindness towards others becomes apparent when they discuss each other with acquaintances who have only seen Jonathan as the idiot heir and Valentine as the bossy vixen. Jonathan’s recognition of his love for Valentine sparks a trip to Texas where he learns for the first time that she is not only independently wealthy, but also comes from oil money. He does not concern himself with the idea of her fortune and simply declares his love for her only to have her respond that he “never acted once as though you gave a hoot about me and then as soon as Carol runs off...you turn up” (Garth 268). By not having Valentine immediately fall into Jonathan’s arms and accept his proposal, the scene showcases Valentine’s caution in discerning if his declaration is sincere.

When she states that “marriage is the greatest business of all to me,” and that she has thought about it all her life, Valentine is not talking about the glamorous aspects of a wedding or falling in love, but about how the prospect of marriage will affect her as an independent woman (Garth 270). This desire to confirm his thoughts on the future is satisfied when Jonathan begins to discuss how much she will be involved in the growth

of the shipping lines and their expansion into airlines, as well as the adoption of a new dog and their potential children. While Valentine is somewhat swayed by Jonathan's words, his heroic actions when the dangerous geyser blows up in front of them is what solidifies her acceptance of his proposal. By witnessing Jonathan's growth into a successful businessman who also cares about the lives of other and is willing to place himself in danger to help is the final piece of Jonathan that Valentine needs to witness. Once he pulls himself out of the oil and mud, Jonathan is shocked when Valentine kisses him and accepts his proposal wholeheartedly. Even though Valentine is technically financially dependent on her family's money and will be working with Jonathan's company, she maintains her agency throughout the novel and willingly chooses to marry for both personal and utilitarian reasons. Similar to Irene's decision to marry Godfrey, Valentine's decision to marry Jonathan is due to the growth of their emotional connection and respect for one another. Ultimately though, the female character's concern with securing her future with a man that is respectful and successful is a leading factor in her decision to marry. Nonetheless, in Garth's novel, it is clear that from the moment Valentine agrees to help Jonathan ride a horse to catch his train that the couple are both willing to take crazy chances for each other, even with the possibility of getting bucked off the animal like a bronco rider at a rodeo.

## 2.4 *Breakfast for Two* (1937)

When Valentine Ransome confidently pokes her head out of Jonathan Blair's shower to address his extremely startled valet, Butch, at the beginning of Alfred Santell's 1937 film *Breakfast for Two* it is evident that this adaptation will be vastly more sexually charged than the original novel. While the sexual nature of screwball comedies is standard, usually, the tension is built over the course of the film. However, with only sixty-seven minutes to work with, this film ramps up the speed of the narrative from the opening sequence and barrels ahead. Deemed a "respectable and somehow rather drab little comedy," which film critic B.R.C. did not think warranted much laughter, *Breakfast for Two* does not fall within the accepted canon of popular screwball comedy films of the 1930s (B.R.C. 21). Even though the film stars the ever-popular Barbara Stanwyck and Herbert Marshall, not even the acting is highly praised throughout the few reviews that it received. Appearing as a product of RKO Radio Pictures in the midst of one of the most popular years for screwball comedy films, *Breakfast for Two* follows the formula for a screwball, but the scripts lack of interest in developing the characters results in numerous schemes by Valentine to bring down the wedding between Carol and Jonathan, and only vaguely antagonistic relationship between the main couple. The most interesting parts of the film are the result of Valentine's hilarious quips and the intense slapstick violence. Naturally, the adaptation of a nearly three-hundred-page novel into the sixty-seven-minute film is bound to be a feat, but Santell's film is extreme in the alterations to the plot.

By beginning the narrative in the middle of the novel's plot, *Breakfast for Two* lacks any sort of depth in its leading couple's antics. In particular, this section will show that Valentine loses her background, her mannerisms, and, most importantly, financial autonomy in an effort by the filmmakers to condense her into a stylish heiress with merely an interest in business whose ultimate goal is marriage. As the plot progresses, it becomes clear that Valentine does not buy Blair Lines to pave her way as a businesswoman but to capture Jonathan Blair's attention and train him to be a responsible heir to his fortune. This can be understood by referencing Maria DiBattista's work where she explains that in comedy films with business oriented "fast-talking dames," it is the woman's job to "first to create herself; second to bring the male of her choosing and delight into her sphere of life by making him a fit...companion for her" (23). On the surface, the plots appear similar, but the execution of the film restricts Valentine's character to more of a wild horse-tamer than the "warlike dame" with the "femininity of a machine gun corps" that she is in the original text (Garth 189).

Before delving into the impact of losing critical aspects of Valentine's character, it is essential to glance at the characteristic of Valentine that is the most well maintained throughout the adaptation - her entertaining use of language. Although the majority of her dialogue in the film is barbed quips towards Jonathan, there are also many amusing horse training metaphors, including, but not limited to, lines such as "slip a bit in his mouth and make him like it" and "When you break in a horse, you should be the one to tie in the feed bag otherwise he might get attached to somebody else" (Santell). While these lines serve as some of the only references to Valentine being from Texas, they also

very clearly present her objective of inserting herself into Jonathan Blair's life and business – corralling him into marriage. The extended use of the horse training metaphors not only displays Valentine's fierce determination in changing Jonathan but also her poor opinion of Jonathan and the way he conducts his affairs. In Garth's novel, even when they are at complete odds, the couple is good about recognizing that the other is smart and capable. However, in *Breakfast for Two*, Valentine's opinion of Jonathan is completely played for laughs when she purposefully prods at his masculinity and goes so far as to move into his house. While there is not much space for plot development in the film, this section contends that the reason for any depth to the characterization of Valentine is due to the decision to cast Barbara Stanwyck as the leading female character. This choice is even more pronounced when compared to the casting of Herbert Marshall as Jonathan. Although the original character of Jonathan is recognized as “not good looking,” he is still a young bachelor who likes to shirk his duties (Garth 124). This makes Marshall’s older, more sophisticated appearance feel unsuitable for the role of Jonathan. The contrast between Marshall and Stanwyck allows her vibrant energy to dominate the film.

Similar to the casting of Carole Lombard as Irene in La Cava's *My Man Godfrey*, *Breakfast for Two* is saved from dullness by the performance of Barbara Stanwyck. While the reviewer B.R.C. deems her performance to not be “especially illuminating,” her whole-hearted attitude with which she approaches her character keeps the film afloat (B.R.C. 21). In 1937, Stanwyck is fresh out of filming what would become an extremely popular film, *Stella Dallas*, and is operating as a “featured player” under RKO (McClellan



7). As one of Hollywood's "best dramatic actresses" it was rare for Stanwyck to star in a comedic role in the 1930s (Lugowski 100). James Harvey successfully argues that films like *The Bride Walks Out* (1936) and *Breakfast for Two* were mostly made as "ways to keep [Stanwyck] working" even though the results were "pale or worse" (560).

However, no matter the content of the film, Stanwyck never appears to be lackluster or foolish even in situations that have her throwing cake at her costar or tumbling on the floor. It is truly Stanwyck's vibrant presence in the film that permits audiences to enjoy the experience even though the script is underwhelming. Since this film is overlooked in scholarship on screwball comedies there is little known about the adaptation process, however, it is clear that there were multiple contributors to the script. Screenplay writer Viola Brothers Shore was a veteran by 1937, but the other two lead writers on the script, Charles Kaufman and Paul Yawitz, were both relatively new to the film industry.

Though the film's script varies greatly from the book, Valentine's continuous sharp wit and determination allowed Stanwyck to build a noteworthy female character for the film. What Harvey deems "the Stanwyck temperament and style" is what draws audiences to connect with her character (559). Stanwyck taps into the Valentine of Garth's novel as best she can by exerting a powerful energy that is backed by a stunning wardrobe.

For being the "kind of gal who'd rather be an actress than look pretty," Stanwyck seamlessly fits into Valentine's varied clothing selection from elegant dresses to a striking suit, all while maintaining an impressive level of sophistication and physicality (Lugowski 100). In Garth's novel, Valentine uses clothing as way to express herself and as a tool to control how she is perceived by others. Stanwyck's Valentine uses clothing

in a similar manner as a way for her to establish her wealth, power, and disregard for social conventions. Stanwyck does not shy away from running or boxing in the casual pants that she dons halfway through the film, nor is she timid in altering her body language to make herself appear more sensual. As Sarah Berry discusses in her work on style in 1930s Hollywood, there is a pattern that many films follow where “workaholic women are usually enticed via romance into reasserting their neglected femininity” (177). However, that is not the case for Valentine and the boldly feminine appearance that she sustains even while wearing a pinstripe suit at a board meeting. Berry also states that there is another exception to this pattern with Alison Drake in *Female* (1933) where “the heroine’s identification with her work is satirized but not convincingly negated” (177). As the owner of a car manufacturing company left to her by her father, Alison “treats men exactly the same way that men have always treated women” and disregards the social norms that surround being a young business woman (Curtiz). Like Stanwyck, Ruth Chatterton breathes life into the character of Alison Drake through her ability to maintain being a professional in business meetings while simultaneously indulging in her sexual desires. While *Female* is a romantic comedy that ends rather ambiguously as Alison and Jim run to catch a plane to save her company, it plays on the “taming of the shrew” trope and does, in fact, force Alison to choose between her company and Jim once she recognizes that she is neglecting her desires for a stable romance. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that both Alison and Valentine have a degree of sexual freedom in their films that can be attributed to their self-assuredness and their control of money. While Valentine is in a position of power throughout most of the film due to her ownership of

the company and overall confidence in herself as a businesswoman and a tamer of men, the use of slapstick violence is an element that the film desperately relies on in order to reinstate balance between the couple.

Although there is little direct physical contact between Valentine and Jonathan within the novel, the film sets the tone as overtly sexual from the opening sequence when Valentine emerges from the shower having spent the night at Jonathan's apartment. The sexual tension reigns around at the breakfast table and throughout their subsequent meetings. Their friction comes to an apex when Jonathan insults her and she responds by hitting him with her purse multiple times. This confrontation escalates as they both put on boxing gloves and start to swing at each other until Valentine breaks the cycle and falls. However, she recovers with gusto and punches both Jonathan and his valet Butch, leaving them both with black eyes. While her earlier swings did not appear effective, the audience soon realizes that Valentine stuffed a doorknob into her glove so that she would pack more of a punch. The sequence of her dropping the doorknob on the way out of Jonathan's apartment produces one of the most genuinely funny moments in the film. Though, the film's reliance on physical comedy does not end at one fight scene but manifests itself again at the end of the film after Valentine and Butch have conspired to stop Carol and Jonathan's wedding. This scene occurs in Jonathan's apartment after it is revealed that Butch forged a marriage license between the leading couple and they both react poorly, resulting in more punches, cake throwing, and lots of falling down. Though physical gags are an integral part of screwball comedies, the reason that these scenes are successful is that Stanwyck and Marshall put forth effort in the sequences and

sincerely appear to be having fun. The casting of prominent actors who dedicate themselves to their comedic scenes appears to be an attempt to reconcile the lack of character development, but it is only just achieved.

While the use of slapstick comedy in the film reflects the physicality and daring nature of Valentine and Jonathan in the novel, the drastic alterations to Valentine's financial status and relationship to Jonathan in the adaptation are not completely outweighed by the scenes of humorous physicality. Unlike in Garth's novel, when Valentine purchases Blair Lines it is only to teach Jonathan that his laziness and disregard for the family business results in his financial ruin. However, Valentine does not completely oust Jonathan from the business but places him in the role of vice president. By doing so, Jonathan does not actually have to grow on his own and learn valuable skills outside of New York City, nor does he have to be financially independent. Instead he spends his time fighting and undermining Valentine until he decides that marrying Carol, who in the adaptation is rich, would be an easier option than surviving on his own. While Jonathan is intrigued by Valentine, he is still angry with her for buying his company and treating him with contempt, so there is no apparent lost love when he announces his engagement. However, Valentine's desire for Jonathan runs deeper than his interest in her so the wedding is thwarted by noisy window washers, a man claiming to be Carol's husband, and a forged marriage license. With such a lack in development in their romance, by the end of the film their animosity towards each other is only just beginning to fade into a playful antagonism. While the "capacity to play together" is critical for a couple in a screwball comedy, it should not be the basis

for the relationship (Krutnik 59). By the end of the film, Jonathan has not done much to earn Valentine's respect, and she still views capturing Jonathan as a game. There are also only a few scenes that touch on Valentine's economic status and they all revolve around the concern of money being part of her inheritance. Unlike her counterpart in the novel, this Valentine does not have a personal fortune that she stakes on the company; she is instead financially secure in the disposable capital that she receives from her father. The lack of financial necessity placed on her marriage is intriguing since she is highly invested in a relationship with Jonathan, but does not necessarily need to be. Though this appears as a form of agency for Santell's Valentine, in reality, she is more economically restricted than the Valentine in the novel. Here she relies on her father's money to buy Blair Lines and then on Jonathan's once they marry, never truly owning anything by herself. This change in Valentine's financial independence coupled with the film's disregard for characterization and reliance on physical comedy makes their marriage the end of her individuality.

Additionally, Valentine's success in forming a relationship with Jonathan is not achieved as a solo endeavor as it is in the novel, but with tremendous amounts of help from other characters. Butch and Valentine's uncle Sam begin by conspiring with her to make Jonathan mature and fall in love, but by the end of the film have all but taken over the coupling plot. Butch plans loud window wipers who descend from the rooftop to noisily interrupt Carol and Jonathan's wedding while Sam intervenes to claim Carol as his wife. Though Valentine is in on Sam's interruption and states "I'm not walking out on my losing streak," she eventually does give up when Jonathan tells her about the

second wedding (La Cava). After she decides to return home, Butch produces a forged marriage license between Valentine and Jonathan. The lack of input Valentine has in her own “marriage” exhibits her complete loss of control by the end of the narrative. She is reduced to a predatory figure who wants Jonathan, but is not trusted to handle the rest of her romance once he does not marry Carol the first time. Though Valentine and Jonathan marry with boxing gloves on, the final scene is complex in its representation of their marriage. The use of one boxing glove on each character’s hand might indicate that both characters have won their fight or that they are ready to keep fighting. However, it is possible that this scene alludes to the couple’s desire to stop fighting now that Jonathan has gotten the girl and the company, and Valentine has achieved her goal of marriage. Nevertheless, the scene possibly better resembles one of Valentine’s horse metaphors. Perhaps one about finally corralling Jonathan into marriage so Valentine can pack in her independence and call it a day.

### 3. CHAPTER III:

#### “DON’T WORRY I’M ON THE JOB” – AGENCY FOR THE WORKING WOMAN

Adaptations of comedic literature into screwball comedy films range far and wide on the spectrum of fidelity to the original text, but none stray farther from fidelity than Ernst Lubitsch’s version of Noël Coward’s play *Design for Living* and Howard Hawks’s treatment of the play *The Front Page*. Unlike in the previous chapter where the original source texts were less well known, these two plays were popular in the theater world with each appearing on stage to roaring success. While the overall “skeleton” of the play still “rattles the same” in the films, as one *Design for Living* review states, there are drastic alterations to the most important areas of the plots that leave crucial elements of the original plays by the wayside (Hall). The concern surrounding the lack of faithfulness in the adaptation of these two films appears throughout scholarship and is an issue that many reviewers and critics discussed in 1933 and 1940, respectively, with the release of each film. Nevertheless, each of these films have secured their place in film history as texts separate from their original stories. They are lauded for their highlighting of strong female roles, characters who choose to be part of the working world and end up in relationships that defy the norm. While I agree with the notion that these female characters, Gilda Farrell and Hildy Johnson, are two of the leading ladies who most successfully juggle men and work, the divergence from their original texts results in a significant loss of their agency in their worlds.

Thus, this chapter will explore how a second mode of female agency, one pertaining to the representation of professional middle-class working women, is problematically altered in the adaptation. There are clear connections to the issues discussed in the prior chapter with upper-class female characters, however there are different and possibly more vital stakes for professional women. Since the professional woman's money is all her own as a result of her talents and work ethic, these characters have more to lose in the transition to the screen. As previously discussed, marriage is a critical decision for wealthy women since a part of their money transfers to the chosen husband; however, for women who work for a living, their careers and identities in society are at stake, especially in the decade of the Great Depression. With these concerns for their independent status in the public sphere and ultimate financial security, these female characters deal with their romantic entanglements differently than do upper-class women like Irene or Valentine. At the base level, the adaptation of Gilda and Hildy's characters differs greatly from other characters in that Gilda is entirely reimagined to become the toy in a tug-o-war game between the male characters, and Hildy transitions from a male character to a female in order to add a romance element. While there is a lot of criticism surrounding the adaptation of these plays, there is nonetheless little focus on the female, or soon to be female, character and its place in the working world of the play. Ultimately, this chapter will show that there is a salient reduction of the female character's abilities and a matching disregard for her career once she is in a relationship that renders these filmic women less powerful than their predecessors and showcases the intention of the films to contain women within roles that



make them subordinate to the male characters' desires. Since women were still prompted to reside within only the private sphere of the home, these films downplay the importance of the female character's job to maintain their distance from the world of capital that would grant them agency that was previously unavailable. In the discussion of these professional middle-class women, this section argues that while there are specific aspects of Gilda and Hildy's troubling adaptations that differentiate them from the upper-class characters, fundamentally the pattern that governs Irene and Valentine also determines the construction of Gilda and Hildy by way of forcibly removing the agency that their professional experience provides them.

While the films appear at opposite ends of the decade, the original plays of *Design for Living* and *The Front Page* were both written and performed on stage by the year 1932. With vastly different plots, these plays focus on middle-class characters who have the ability of "crossing or blurring of class boundaries" due to their professions (Beach 52). In *Design for Living*, all four of the main characters are working professionals in the arts. Although each of them has achieved a different level of success in their careers when the play begins, each has a "world of taste" and a desire for success (Lahr 73). The characters, with the exception of Ernest the art dealer, belong neither to the "traditional working class nor the bourgeoisie," but instead fall somewhere in between (Beach 52). Similarly, in Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page* the focus is on middle-class characters focused on work, only the profession here is that of the newspaper industry and the main characters are reporters. This is a profession that Christopher Beach views as the one "capable of greater class mobility" due to reporters'

ability to cross into different levels of discourse and social class (52). The focus on work in both of these plays provides insight into the art and newspaper subcultures that are often withheld from public view.

While the characters of Gilda and Hildy in their plays might not appear to have many similarities, surprisingly they both share their desire to leave environments that are emotionally unhealthy in exchange for new opportunities that might be more stable. Since women were often expected to return from work to the domestic sphere to become a wife and mother, the eventual departure and subsequent marriage of Gilda to Ernest is not odd because it is a marriage of convenience for Gilda's financial security. Similarly, Hildy in the play is leaving the *Examiner* to take a stable advertising job at a company run by his future uncle-in-law. He chooses to remove himself from an adventurous work environment to have a steadier lifestyle. Gilda declares to Ernest in Act I that she is "sick of this studio; it's squalid! I wish I were somewhere quite different. I wish I were somebody quite different" (Coward 7) and Hildy tells the other reporters that he has "always wanted to walk in and quit just like that! *A snap of the fingers*" (Hecht and MacArthur 38). This desire for other opportunities outside of their current work and lifestyle unites these characters for this discussion. It is also especially interesting that Gilda, a female character with three potential husbands, wishes to leave in order to escape the pressure of marriage while Hildy wants to escape the chaos of the newsroom to settle down with his wife at a high-paying advertising job. Thus, this chapter hopes to demonstrate that even though the Gilda and Hildy of the films are working heroines, the

epitome of fast-talking dames, the adaption process nonetheless diminished the power of their characters to shift the dynamic of the plots in the favor of the male characters.

### 3.1 *Design for Living* (1932)

Noël Coward's reputation as a playwright and actor in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century made him a highly regarded and sought-after source for theatrical and lyrical materials. *Design for Living* was written by Coward for himself and the Lunts, Lynn Fontanne and her husband Alfred Lunt, at a time in their lives when they "had become stars of sufficient magnitude" and could successfully portray characters negotiating fame and relationships (Lahr 73). The concern with succeeding in their professions and its ramifications permeates the play and is hit upon most aptly when Gilda bluntly states to Leo, "Success is far more perilous than failure, isn't it?" (Coward 36). The concern with career success drives Otto, Leo, and Gilda to climb their way up the ladder of achievement even when it results in insults and broken hearts. Although their professions are difficult to succeed in, both Otto the artist and Leo the writer manage to make names for themselves in the first two acts of the play with Gilda aiding both of them individually. Gilda herself also holds a job as an interior decorator and has connections with Ernest, an established art dealer. While the play may appear serious with all the discussion of the work environment, the precise and hilarious dialogue coupled with the setting of each male character's apartment for each act removes any issue of characters withdrawing into

their work and replaces that potential for atomization with unusually open discussion of their feelings.

Noël Coward's *Design for Living* resonates with the idea that "life is to be enjoyed idiotically...in defiance of all the holy shibboleths mouthed by the morally righteous" (Glicksberg 65). Coward's leading characters are genial and witty from their first scenes in Otto's apartment in Act I of the play where audiences discover that the trio is in an on/off ménage à trois. Unlike the film, the play begins in the middle of the trio's friendship/relationship, which provides the characters with a level of familiarity that the audience must catch up to in the midst of the onslaught of fast-paced, destabilizing dialogue. Coward's play operates in a manner that switches "from flippancy to seriousness" so quickly that the narrative constantly feels like it is teetering on the edge of more than a comedy about an unconventional set of relationships and their work lives (Eltis 219). Sos Eltis's concise summary of the play, "Gilda lives with Otto, sleeps with Leo, leaves Otto for Leo, sleeps with Otto, leaves Leo and marries Ernest, leaves Ernest for Otto and Leo," demonstrates just how unpredictable the characters, particularly Gilda, are in their sexual and personal desires (217). The role of the traditional romantic couple in a romantic comedy play is replaced by the ménage à trois that is offered by Coward as a fact instead of a something that might return to heterosexual monogamy by the end. Though there is a brief moment of Gilda and Ernest as a married couple, the majority of the play revolves around fast-paced, often racy dialogue between the main trio as they attempt to sort their lives out. While Otto and Leo are critical to the narrative, it is Gilda who is "the emotional centre" for the play as

she struggles to identify her desires after each relationship she has with the men in her life leaves her conflicted (Eltis 217). Gilda's character goes through the most transformations over the course of the play, leaving her in a position where she must finally decide which battles are worth fighting and whose perspectives to consider when it concerns her desires.

When Act I opens in Otto's "rather shabby apartment," audiences meet Gilda, a "good-looking woman about thirty," as she converses with her acquaintance, Ernest, an art dealer who is clearly infatuated with Gilda (Coward 1). She is shamelessly lying to him about Otto being sick so that he won't question anything suspicious that might lead him to discover her secretive affair with Leo. Before that cat gets let out of the bag, Ernest endeavors to have a good conversation with Gilda, but he jokes instead that he does not think that she is a good interior decorator before repeatedly asking her why she does not marry Otto or anyone else. Gilda takes these remarks in stride, but it is in her response where audiences first get a glimpse at the rationale for her decisions:

GILDA (*calming down*): The only reasons for me to marry would be these: To have children; to have a home; to have a background for social activities, and to be provided for. Well, I don't like children; I don't wish for a home; I can't bear social activities, and I have a small but adequate income of my own. (Coward 10)

In this moment, Gilda rationalizes that her position in life is one that she is content with and can continue due to her profession. However, she feels different from other women of her age who conform to the societal desires that accompany marriage. Gilda, like Otto and Leo, is eccentric, attention loving, and snobbish, but her wariness of success and

aversion to marriage sets her apart from the male characters. In addition, her profession of interior decorator is considerably less public than that of Otto's painting career and Leo's writing triumphs. Throughout the play, Gilda desperately tries to figure out how to properly voice her feelings and quell the idea that "Something's missing, and I don't know what it is" (Coward 41). After hopping between Otto and Leo's apartments, in Act II, Scene 2, Gilda realizes that her life is becoming "untidy" without having a real direction in life and, by the next scene, she exuberantly remarks to Ernest that in the future, she "intends to be only one thing" which is her "unadulterated self! Myself without hanging, without trimmings, unencumbered by the winding tendrils of other people's demands" (73). With this decision comes Gilda's idea to leave Leo and Otto to go explore the world about her. After watching both of her lovers become extremely successful, Gilda expresses the desire for her world to shift its focus to be more on herself than on the men she loves. This is reflected in her rationale for leaving, namely that she is "not needed anymore," and therefore can figure out who she is in the world without Otto and Leo.

Although her career is spoken about offhandedly in the beginning of the play and more prominently at the end, it is made clear that Gilda has the ability to support herself and is not in relationships with Otto or Leo for their money. Her relationships with the men in the play become strained once all of them begin to ask her to consider marriage. When Gilda leaves, or as she says "ran away" from Otto and Leo, she is doing so because the success of their careers has altered each of their relationships. Unlike the Lubitsch film adaptation that begins with the first meeting of the trio, Coward's play

launches audiences into the middle of history between these three friends. Therefore, Gilda's decision to leave in Act II, Scene 2 is not the abrupt choice that it might appear to be at first glance. Although Gilda's decision does result in the freedom that she desires, that she has the emotional and financial ability to leave the relationship to pursue her own goals indicates the impressive amount of agency that Coward provides her.

In addition to her career as an interior decorator, Gilda's other main job became aiding Otto and Leo in becoming successful. Once she is gone in Act II and the pair have discovered her "Dear John" letters to them, the men reminisce about the impact that Gilda had on their lives:

LEO: She's done a tremendous lot for us, Otto. I wonder how much we should have achieved without her?

OTTO: Very little, I'm afraid. Terribly little. (Coward 91)

With this admission and Leo's announcement that Gilda is the "only really intelligent woman" that he's ever met, the pair are distraught by their loss of her and try to design a plan for living without her. While Gilda is normally dramatic, the pair appear prone to selfishness and decisions that are self-destructive. Though Otto and Leo drown their sorrows together and reconcile, the pair are still in love with Gilda.

After nearly two years, Act III opens with the knowledge that Gilda has married Ernest and has not seen Otto or Leo since she left. It is clear from the persona that she dons around her wealthy friends that Gilda has matured, but she is also more subdued than she ever was in previous scenes. As she walks her guests around the apartment, she mentions her success in her interior decorating career and how everything

in the rooms is for sale except for the paintings. In a momentary aside between the characters Henry and Helen Carver, Henry laments the way the evening has gone due to Gilda's focus on Grace Torrence as a potential client. He asks his wife to promise him that she will "never become a professional decorator" because they are "hard as nails" (Coward 108). Thus, while Gilda maybe more restrained now, evidently her business prowess has increased and she is skilled at luring in clients. After she ushers her guests out when Otto and Leo arrive, the three subsequently spend the night together and then confront Ernest in the morning when he arrives home the next morning from Chicago. From the opening pages of the play it is clear that marriage for any combination of these characters is not going to survive. For Coward, marriage is not the ultimate goal of this comedy nor it only beneficial to the male character. Though Ernest appears less often than the trio, he is still heavily involved in their lives and wants what he thinks is best for Gilda, which is marriage. Ernest acts as the straight man to the trio's relationship and the counter to their values. Unlike in the film adaptation, Coward's Ernest does have some redeeming qualities, one of them being that by the end of the play, he recognizes her as having "worked hard and made a reputation for herself" in the design world (118). Nevertheless, since marriage is irrelevant to Gilda, she and Ernest were doomed from the start. In the moment Gilda makes the decision to enter back into a relationship with Otto and Leo, she informs Ernest of her deception and rational for continuing their marriage for as long as she did:

GILDA: I'm ashamed of many things, but not of this! This is real. I've made use of you, Ernest, and I'm ashamed of that, and I've lied to you. I'm ashamed of that,



too; but at least I didn't know it: I was too busy lying to myself at the same time. I took refuge in your gentle, kind friendship, and tried to pretend to myself that it was enough, but it wasn't... I've worked hard and bought things and sold things, all the time pretending that my longing for these two was fading! But it wasn't (Coward 119-120).

Undoubtedly, Gilda's relationship with Otto and Leo is stronger than her marriage to Ernest, but what is most intriguing about Gilda's confession is that her reason for staying with Ernest has to do with a desire to find a new relationship and new career avenues. That Gilda's career is a continuous thread throughout the play that does not get dismissed after it is introduced is significant. By focusing on her hard work and the success she has in her career as the reasons for her distance from Otto and Leo in the two years between Act II and Act III, Gilda is finally a completely equal member of the *ménage à trois*. As with Otto and Leo in the prior acts, Gilda has built a reputation around her work, and, like them, is able to recognize her mistakes and step away from her success and security in order to fight for the relationship she actually desires. While Gilda's desire to depart from her original spaces is not fulfilled in the way she hopes, it nonetheless provides her with the distance and clarity that she needs in order to appreciate the reunion with Otto and Leo. Though their flippancy and lack of social decorum upset Ernest, the trio laugh together with the knowledge that they are reunited and, in their own ways, successful in business and in love.

### 3.2 *Design for Living* (1933)

While screwball comedies usually have casts of characters drawn from the social elite, a handful of films pull back to look at the working world of the 1930s. With an “increasing population of female film spectators” likely to be in the work force, the portrayal of working heroines becomes all the more important to the representation of women on screen (Berry 143). Many of the professional middle-class female characters in films like *Theodora Goes Wild*, *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *Nothing Sacred* hold jobs as writers, newspaper reporters, or factory workers. Tina Olsen Lent skillfully traces the origins of the history of the flapper girl in films alongside that of the burgeoning screwball comedies to argue that the “movie flapper helped to legitimize the single woman’s role in the work force” because, despite the reality that women were working outside the home, many “strongly supported women’s traditional role as the homemaker” (318). In the 1933 film *Design for Living*, this rhetoric concerning the taming of Gilda is fulfilled by Max Plunkett, a wealthy middle-aged man who is Gilda’s boss and “devoted friend” at the advertising company (Lubitsch). Unlike in the original text, Gilda has less overt opinions about marriage and does not have as active a role in her relationship with George and Thomas, since they spend parts of the film fighting over her. This underusage of Gilda in the film adaptation appears as a shock considering the amount of dialogue Gilda has in the original. This is just one of the numerous alterations in Ernst Lubitsch’s 1933 adaptation of Noël Coward’s play that modifies Gilda’s character to a troubling point.

In 1932, Paramount, like other studios, continued to collect literary material for new films that had a guarantee to be a sure-fire hit with audiences. So, when they turned to Noël Coward's play *Design for Living* it made sense that they offered him "\$50,000" for the text due to the success that it was having on stage that same year (Eyman 206). Unfortunately, that success would not be shared by the film version due to a number of reasons, the first of which was that Ernst Lubitsch knew from the beginning of production that he was planning on having Coward's play rewritten and that it would make reviewers question the film. According to Scott Eyman in *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise*, when he assembled the cast and crew before shooting began, he said "The critics will not like our picture... But the people who do not read reviews or care about them will love it, and Noël Coward means nothing to most of them. Gary Cooper means something to them..." (209). Although Lubitsch was correct when he told them that the critics would not be overly happy with the film because of the lack of fidelity to Coward's play, this problem was exacerbated by Lubitsch's boasting about keeping only a few phrases of dialogue from the original (Harvey 56). This complete disregard for the "ruining" (Eyman 209) of Coward's play becomes integral to why the film was, as Molly Haskell put it, "blasted for Ben Hecht's piss-elegant screenplay . . . [and] Hollywood's toning down of racy dialogue" (99). While the jettisoning of Coward's original dialogue might appear unusual, scholarly work on Lubitsch suggests that this was his typical practice. Known for being one of the most "theatre-oriented" directors, Lubitsch often used plays as the basis of his films, but he rarely remained faithful to the original texts (Isaacs 300).

For example, one of his most widely-acclaimed films, *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), was adapted in a manner similar to that of *Design for Living* from a play called *The Honest Finder* (300). Lubitsch's career-long interest in transplanting plays from both Anglophone and Central European sources to film is what Neil Isaacs deems "the filmed-play syndrome" (299). Interestingly, "few, if any, German filmmakers took to American-style lighting" and the Hollywood industry as well as Lubitsch. However, in the case of *Design for Living*, his adaptation was still no match for Coward's familiarity and accessible as a playwright (Thompson 49). In his work, Isaac traces the results of Lubitsch's use of source material throughout the 1930s and early 1940s to demonstrate that in cases such as *Design for Living*, the director's decisions alter the "basic comic mode from wit to farce" and sanitize the character's personalities (304). This section agrees with Isaac's findings and will further explore the impact of Lubitsch and Hecht's alterations in regards to Gilda's character and her position in the film.

As Molly Haskell notes in her book *From Reverence to Rape*, the "number of sacred cows gaily demolished by the film...is staggering;" however, the adaptation slaughters these cows humanely in comparison to the original play (101). Lubitsch's film, as previously mentioned, begins with the meeting of his version of Coward's trio--Gilda, George, and Thomas--on a long train ride. As Gilda sits down in the train car, she does not break the silence of the film as she begins to sketch the sleeping pair that sits across from her. It is interesting that audiences are introduced to Gilda through her talents as an artist, yet this ability is rarely returned to later in the film. Perhaps this introduction as a talented artist might be the film's way showing that the reason Gilda is

importance to the lives of George and Thomas is because she can help them become successful at their craft. In Lubitsch's adaptation, Gilda is still the center of the male characters' attentions; however, when her interest in her own life and work is diminished, she becomes a less active participant in the narrative than she is in the play. After Gilda puts away her sketchbook on the train and the three begin to speak about their jobs, there are only three other moments when her work is directly referenced in the film.

Viewers learn the most information about Gilda during the first scene on the train when she introduces herself as an American commercial artist working in Paris for Max Plunkett Advertising Co. Inc. She shows a clear interest in their professions when she recognizes George's paintings and speaks with Thomas about his plays before the three of them part ways in Paris. The only major glimpse into Gilda's work appears immediately after the trio separates after the train and audiences see that the drawing in her sketchbook of Napoleon gradually undressing is now the advertisement for Kaplan & McGuire's underwear with the slogan "It was my unprotected rear that cost me Waterloo" (Lubitsch). I would maintain this appearance of Gilda's advertisement occurs because her work can only flourish when she is separated from the men who are infatuated with her. Because the film focuses on the characters prior to their professional success, it emphasizes the achievement of success more than the play does. For George and Thomas, this means figuring out how to make ends meet when they are poor in Paris and Gilda is the only one of the trio with a real job. The lack of emphasis on her job when George and Thomas are around proves to be a pattern that Gilda herself confirms

when she states, “we’re gonna concentrate on work. Your work, mine doesn’t count. I think both you boys have a great deal of talent but too much ego” (Lubitsch). This assertion of “mine doesn’t count” could be taken as Gilda’s confidence in her own work ethic and ability since she is the only one of the trio with an actual job, or it might be her dismissal of her talents as less important than those of her male counterparts.

Gilda’s decision to help George and Thomas with their work sparks a conversation where the trio decide to engage in a Gilda’s idea of a “gentleman’s agreement” to “forget sex” and instead use their friendship to further their careers (Lubitsch). The creation of a sex pact sets up the hilarious encounters that occur as each man attempts to not sleep with Gilda again in order to keep their eleven years of friendship intact and develop in their crafts. While this idea to completely cut sex from the narrative fits the screwball plot of replacing marriage and the norm of heterosexual relationships to cause tension between characters, Gilda’s decision results in her limited participation in the film. Once she becomes the “mother of arts” to keep things nonsexual, Gilda’s main purpose shifts to being the “baseball bat” who critiques George’s and Thomas’s work in order to make them successful. While she succeeds in helping them achieve their goals, when she and George break the pact to kiss, her status in the relationship sinks even further once the trio breaks apart and she becomes George’s secretary.

Though it might appear inconsequential, the dismissal of Gilda’s career throughout the film is not an uncommon practice in screwball comedies. For instance, in *Easy Living*, Jean Arthur’s character Mary begins as a writer for a boys’ magazine.

While she gets fired within the first twenty minutes, leaving her devastatingly broke in New York City, the fact that she held a job as a writer and not as a shop girl or store clerk is an aspect of her personality that repays notice. The film nonetheless glosses over her work and focuses instead on how she is mistaken for the mistress of powerful businessman J.B. The situation “gives her an entirely new social status” and she no longer has to be concerned with working, even going so far as to take in Junior, the son of J.B., who is trying to succeed without his father’s money (Berry 39). Mary’s rapid evolution from her desolate state after being fired to a life of luxury leaves her in a position of vulnerability that is only obvious once people find out that she is not actually J.B.’s mistress. By the end of the film, there is a brief glimmer of hope of a possible career for her when Junior yells “Mary, I’ve got a job! So, have you,” only to have him continue by saying that her new job is “cooking my breakfast” (Leisen). While *Design for Living* does not progress in the direction of a heterosexual domesticity, once Gilda decides to leave George and Thomas because she does not want them to fight over her, the plot does briefly dabble in marriage.

Since there is no apparent conflict within Gilda about her life or work that reflects the uncertainties of the original version of the character, there is very little reason for the filmic Gilda to accept Plunkett’s proposal. The only rationale that she provides is that it would “be nice to be a law-abiding citizen” instead of being in a relationship that is not socially acceptable (Lubitsch). Once she marries Plunkett, Gilda not only has a heterosexual marriage but also stability for her future considering she apparently no longer holds her old job as an artist. Instead, her new position as

Plunkett's wife has "more than doubled" his business since they got married (Lubitsch). Though marriage is the goal for most screwball comedies, Gilda is unhappy and cannot consummate their relationship. Unlike the Gilda of Coward's play, the film's leading lady does not even marry for a utilitarian purpose such as money or exposure to more clients for work, but merely as a distraction from her former relationship. It is noteworthy that none of the relationships that Gilda has in the film provides any benefit of personal growth or true security for the future. Perhaps the marriage to Plunkett might have kept her financially satisfied, but Gilda's unhappiness with Plunkett is rooted in his use of her as arm-candy. When Gilda decides to leave her husband, she tells him that he can "sell them anything you want, but not me...I'm sick of being a trademark and married to a slogan" (Lubitsch). This final mention of Gilda's former profession places her not in the position of the artist but as an object that can be claimed or sold. As a professional middle-class woman who has held a steady job and has been invested in her work, Gilda manages to leave her lackluster marriage in defiance of social custom in order to continue the trio's relationship. In one of her few solo moments in the spotlight, this decision to leave Plunkett is the moment that Miriam Hopkins's Gilda comes closest to embodying the desires of the original character.

Though the massive departures from Coward's play led Lubitsch's film adaptation to be poorly received and a flop at the box office, Lubitsch's version of the text provides a vastly different story that sheds light on the perils of the adaptation process (Harvey 56). Although her character is often reduced to an American artist in Paris who is overly serious in her relationships, it is true that Miriam Hopkins "plays her



part resourcefully and imbues it with the much-desired levity” (Hall). Unlike the “unsuave” Gary Cooper and Fredric March, Hopkins is charming and genuine in her portrayal of Gilda as a young woman who is navigating work and relationships that are all out of the ordinary. Although the risqué dialogue, familiar banter, and rapid tonal shifts from “flippancy to seriousness” of the play is lost in the adaptation, the loss of Gilda’s own ambitions in exchange for helping the male characters’ with theirs is just as significant since *Design for Living* is often mentioned as one of the first films that created the pattern for screwball comedies (Eltis 219). Therefore, elements such as the disregard for the female character’s job and the solution of heterosexual marriage instead of alternative relationships might be traceable back to Lubitsch’s entertaining yet questionable adaptation of Coward’s play.

### 3.3 *The Front Page* (1928)

It can be difficult to quit a job when there are friendly colleagues and your work is fascinating, but when a job makes a person feel as though they are “a cross between a bootlegger and a whore,” it is clearly time to pack up and leave. This is exactly what Hildy Johnson of the *Herald-Examiner* attempts to do one fateful Friday night in Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s play *The Front Page*. Though the job of a newspaper reporter is a profession that appears in numerous plays and films, this single-set play brings audiences into the unfamiliar backstage world of the newsroom. Hecht and MacArthur’s newsroom opens to a state of calm with the men playing poker to pass the

time as they wait for Earl Williams to be hanged, only to be rapidly thrown into a state of chaos when Williams breaks out of jail and goes on the run. All the while, Hildy only stops by to bid his fellow reporters goodbye before he leaves to get married to his fiancée, Peggy. Quickly, Hildy becomes drawn back into the world of the newsroom not only by the story itself but also by his demanding and controlling boss, Walter Burns.

Although this play does not exactly fit into the pattern that the previous sections establish, the transformation of the character of Hildy from male to female in *His Girl Friday* reveals reductions in the character's agency once the gender is switched. Though they both hold the same job and are leaving the business to get married, the male version of Hildy does not have to deal with romance or the "boy-girl stuff" that permeates the 1940 film (Doherty 188). The play's Hildy is decidedly less sophisticated and modern than Hawks'; however, the male Hildy is not completely at the mercy of Walter by the end of the play unlike the female version of Hildy in the closing moments of the film. Maria DiBattista is not wrong when she calls *The Front Page* "a nostalgia piece that celebrates the pressroom," because with the nostalgia for the journalism days of old, the play emphasizes the maleness of the press room and provides verbal authority only to male characters (273).

Deemed the "wordsmiths" of the 1920s, Hecht and MacArthur were known for writing plays and films where "stabbing the enemy with a verbal dagger" was the ultimate goal (Doherty 188). *The Front Page* delivers this verbal carnage with glee as the fast-paced dialogue flies between the newspapermen waiting around the press room at the Chicago's Criminal Courts Building. When audiences first meet Hildy, he is well

received by fellow reporters and is so dedicated to his job that the other reporters describe him as so much of a “fixture on the Examiner” that he “goes with the woodwork” (Hecht and MacArthur 7). His description when he enters the press room sets him apart from the other reporters in that he is:

*a happy-go-lucky Swede with a pants kicking sense of humor. He is barbered and tailored like a normal citizen – a fact which at once excited the wonder and mirth of his colleagues. Hildy is the vanishing type – the lusty, hoodlumesque, half-drunken caballero that was the newspaper man of our youth”* (Hecht and MacArthur 31).

Unlike the other men, Hildy is vibrant and confident in himself when he walks in. This happiness may have to do with the fact that he has just quit his job at the *Examiner* and is planning on accepting a job at an advertising company. Hildy is obviously disillusioned with the work that he has done at the newspaper and hates his boss, Walter Burns, for everything that he has put him through while working there for ten years. This is noticeable from the previous statement about being a “bootlegger and a whore”—a line that could only be said in a comedic tone by the male version of Hildy, lest the female version be associated with either illegal professions that might question her reputation. For male Hildy, this comment exposes how much of himself that he has given up to the newspaper life. When Walter refuses to accept his resignation, Hildy releases his anger towards Walter through calling him names such as “paranoiac bastard” (33), “lousy buffoon” (33), and “ungrateful ape” (38). With some of Hecht and MacArthur’s “verbal daggers,” Hildy hurls insults at his former boss like there is no tomorrow. As a confident

young man, Hildy is not shy in showing his emotions as he threatens Walter or flaunts his relief to the other reporters that he no longer has to be on call as they do. While Hildy has been an integral part of the *Examiner* it has cost him time with Peggy and the ability to have a normal life. His desire to move to New York to have a normal life is not unfounded since he does not want to end up a “grey-haired, humpbacked slob[s], dodging garnishes” when he’s ninety (Hecht and MacArthur 41). However, when the story breaks that Earl Williams has escaped from prison, the first thing that Hildy does as the rest of the reporters rush out of the room is to call Walter with the scoop.

While Hildy is introduced within the first few scenes as a main character, his main adversary of the play--Walter Burns--does not appear until over halfway through Act II. Instead, he hovers over the press room as this disembodied voice on the other end of the telephone. When he finally has his dramatic entrance, Hecht and MacArthur describe his exterior appearance as “dapper and very citizen-like” but note that he might have “the Devil himself” on the inside (129). By introducing Walter in this fashion, they make clear that he has no scruples or even concern for those around him. However, because Walter is even more antagonistic than the arrogant yet charming version that Cary Grant embodies in the film, male Hildy becomes the hero of the play with his righteous anger towards Walter and his pursuit of the Earl Williams story for the *Examiner* in spite of his impending departure. When Hildy finally declares to Peggy that he is “A bum! Without any feelings!” and that she will have to accept him for who he is instead of trying to turn him into a “lah de dah with a cane,” it is an explosive moment (Hecht and MacArthur 106). The rapid dialogue among Walter, Peggy and Hildy culminates in the latter

yelling at Peggy to shut up and know that he is “a newspaper man” (106). While this moment occurs almost identically in the film among Walter, Bruce, and female Hildy, it is more of an argument between Walter and Bruce with Hildy nodding along as she rapidly mutters her responses while typing up her story. This scene works seamlessly as well, but it does not grant female Hildy a climactic moment to declare herself as a newspaper man. It is said and heard by Walter and the audience, but it is not as much of a defining moment as it is when male Hildy is confronted by Peggy. By keeping female Hildy distracted throughout the scene, the film does not permit her to show frustration towards Bruce. Perhaps this is because female Hildy yelling at an otherwise nice male character would be considered too masculine or forward for her. Considering that Hawks’s film uses much of the dialogue from the play, it is odd that in such a crucial moment Hildy’s character is subdued instead of empowered.

While the play and film follow much the same narrative, it is at their ends that the two texts diverge. Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the two Hildy’s final scenes is that the male Hildy actually gets to escape for a brief moment of hope while the female Hildy must continue to suffer under the demanding Walter. Besides the gender transformation, the chief distinction between the two versions of Hildy is that male Hildy is only an abused former employee while female Hildy is both former wife and employee. The lack of a personal tie places male Hildy at more of a distance from Walter and allows him more agency within their work relationship. Since male Hildy is marrying Peggy, he has an escape to the outside world, which is exactly what female Hildy would have if she married her new fiancé Bruce. However, when Walter meddles

with each couple, he does not break up Hildy and Peggy's relationship as he does Hildy and Bruce's. It is clear that even though he is threatened by Peggy's influence over male Hildy, it is nowhere near the level of jealousy and disappointment he feels when female Hildy decides to leave her job, and, most importantly, him. Though male Hildy escapes not knowing that his boss has planned to get him arrested once he leaves, it is clear that their relationship is mended to a certain extent. The bond between male Hildy and Walter is one that revolves around their work relationship so there is more of a distance between the two that allows male Hildy more freedom. While there is always the looming threat of Walter poisoning someone at a farewell party, ultimately male Hildy escapes relatively unscathed, while a few years later female Hildy will not be as lucky.

### 3.4 *His Girl Friday* (1940)

"Don't worry, I'm on the job," is the breathless statement that Hildy Johnson speaks over the phone to her ex-husband and former boss Walter Burns right before she runs out of the press room to literally tackle her lead on the story (Hawks). A force to be reckoned with, Hildegard "Hildy" Johnson springs from an idea in 1940 when Howard Hawks hosted a dinner party and had a woman read Hildy's part in Hecht and MacArthur's play *The Front Page* (Grindon 96). Columbia Pictures agreed to adapt the play with a leading lady instead of a man, and filming began in 1939. Hawks's *His Girl Friday*, innovative as it is, it is not the first film adaptation of Hecht and MacArthur's play. In 1931, Lewis Milestone directed a very close adaptation of the play which

eventually became the lesser known film *The Front Page*, starring Pat O'Brien as the male Hildy. The fidelity of this film to the text is obvious as Milestone's film is a newspaper film from beginning to end. However, its place in film history is not as prominent as the 1940 adaptation that focuses on the "boy-girl stuff" that Thomas Doherty states is usually absent from the newspaper film (188). While Hildy's gender change does alter *His Girl Friday*, the dialogue and action of the plot mostly stay the same as in the original play. However, it is the alterations to Hildy, along with the casting of Rosalind Russell, that mark this film as another example of how adaptation alters the representation of character.

Since this film comes on the tail-end of the screwball comedy era with the rapid approach of World War II, the darker narrative world of *His Girl Friday* sets it apart from the screwball comedies of the 1930s. In this bleak world, the attitudes of the characters are naturally coarser than those of characters in *My Man Godfrey*, but their language is also drastically different. The pace of life in Hawks's film is possibly the greatest difference between *His Girl Friday* and other major films of the genre. It is well known that the director was "proud of his snappy direction of dialogue, the interruptions, the overlapping exchanges, and rapid-fire speech" that gave his film an unparalleled quality (Grindon 103). In her study on the editing, speaking, and movement in the adaptations of *The Front Page*, Lea Jacobs notes that *His Girl Friday* is "often said to be 'faster' than Milestone's *The Front Page*" (402) with scenes such as the one in which Walter convinces Hildy to write the Williams story clocking in at "5.2 w/s" (406). This active use of fast talk not only builds the sexual tension between the couple, but also

generates anxiety about Hildy's decision to stay with Walter. Walter takes on the qualities of a used-car salesman in this scene as he tries to sell Hildy on the dream of breaking the story and taking down the corrupt mayor and sheriff.

While *His Girl Friday* has attracted the most scholarly attention out of the four films discussed here, it is nonetheless useful to investigate how well it fits into the pattern of adaptation of female characters of comedic texts. That Hildy was originally a male character does slightly complicate the analysis, my analysis suggests that either diminished agency mandates a change in gender, or the change in gender inevitably results in diminishment. James Walters aptly states that the gender swap of Hildy's character "transforms the story from one in which a controlling editor schemes to keep hold of his ace male reporter to one in which he wishes to claim back his ex-wife" as both his romantic interest and star reporter (90). This raises the point that *His Girl Friday* is also categorized as what Stanley Cavell calls a "comedy of remarriage," where the goal of the plot is not to get the couple together, but "to get them *back* together, together again" (2). Though Cavell does not discuss screwball comedies by name, he views *His Girl Friday* as a departure from the other films he discusses, such as *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *The Awful Truth*, in that the world of the film is "unlike any other place we witness" in comedies of this time period (169). James Walters's article on *His Girl Friday* delves deeper into Cavell's idea of a dark fictional world in the film and exposes the remarkable "tonal fusion" that allows the film both levity in the adventure-romance and bleakness in displaying the horrors of the world (97). Though Hawks's film is definitively a screwball comedy, the added melodrama of the jailbreak,



suicide of Mollie Malloy, and corrupt Mayor and Sheriff allow audiences to focus on more than the squabbles of the ex-couple. Walter and Hildy are still the heart of the film, but unlike the other screwball comedies, they are not completely the end-all-be-all of the narrative.

Oddly, the most noticeable alteration between the original play and Hawks's film, barring the gender change for Hildy, is the new title for the film. Considering that all the other comedic works of fiction that this thesis focuses on were either severely cut or completely jettisoned, *His Girl Friday* retains most of the original script from *The Front Page* play. Thus, the change of title is interesting in that it was not necessary for this adaptation, but was purposefully chosen as a nod to the character Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, who is a manservant. So, when the title reads *His Girl Friday*, it is actually supposed to mean Walter's girl version of this servant, Friday. DiBattista questions this use of the word "girl" and the name of a "manservant" in relation to the leading lady, and determines that Hildy is not a "girl" in any sense of the word and that her "instincts" in the business are "indispensable but subordinate" to Walter (278). This unnecessary title change harkens back to the change in Hatch's title from *Irene, the Stubborn Girl* to *My Man Godfrey* suggesting that not only is the heroine rendered less potent but the narrative itself is conceived to be about the male half of the couple. In this case, the title displaces the neutrality of *The Front Page* for that of a direct attack on the strong female character. Since the film's Hildy is based on a male character, it is obvious that the changed in title, Hildy's diminished confidence, and ultimate subordination to Walter demonstrates how even the strongest female lead ranks below her male partner. As

Harvey notes, when Hawks turns Hildy into a heroine, Walter goes from the Devil incarnate in the play to the unquestionable hero of the film (442). While he is still a “monster” to those around him, the casting of Cary Grant makes him more charming and less threatening. Therefore, where Hildy is the hero of the play because there are two lead male characters, when Hildy becomes a female, she plays second-fiddle to the bulldozer that is Walter Burns, both her boss and her ex-husband.

Although the female version of Hildy takes some blows from the adaptation, overall, she is the fiercest leading lady in the films we have examined so far. As what Maria DiBattista accurately describes as the “fastest of the fast-talking dames,” Rosalind Russell as Hildy Johnson is a revelation on the screen (269). As previously mentioned, the concern with casting the correct movie stars plays a large role in the process of making the film. However, Russell was “not a favorite with men” due to her comedic intelligence and intensity, and she also was not Hawks’s choice for the role (Haskell 133). After numerous actresses, such as Irene Dunne, Ginger Rogers, and Jean Arthur, turned down the part of Hildy, Russell came as a recommendation from Harry Cohn, the president and co-founder of Columbia, and a more perfect choice could not have been selected (Harvey 433).

Russell is committed to the role of Hildy with all her wit, animation, and occasional gracelessness. As Lombard elevated Irene with her warmth and Stanwyck salvaged Valentine’s biting humor, Russell embodies Hildy as the “sophisticated, strong-minded career woman” who takes the reins in difficult situations and presents a controlled front when challenged (Smith 72). Russell’s Hildy is complex in that she not

only exudes confidence in herself as a hard-boiled journalist and a feminine woman but is also unafraid to perform awkward stunts. Her ability to switch between strutting into the newspaper office in her stripe suit to running full speed at a man in the street establishes Russell's performance as one of the most versatile in a screwball comedy. As a striking brunette who in no way resembles the childlike Lombard or the sweet Hopkins, Russell slips into Hildy's work attire of a pinstripe blazer and skirt with ease, and she commands attention from the moment she walks out of the elevator into the Examiner building. Like Hildy in the play, Russell exudes the same confidence that borders on cockiness when she banters with Walter and the other reporters. Notably, the only time she ever slows down the fast rhythm of her speech is around Bruce, her fiancé.

Both versions of Hildy have fiancé(e)s who do not understand their devotion to the newspaper or their willingness to drop everything to work with Walter Burns. While Bruce cannot keep up either literally or figuratively with Hildy, Walter matches her pace for pace, which is how each of the films models them as the correct couple. In thinking about Bruce as a character, Grindon positions him as part of an "infidelity plot in which Hildy is tempted by ... a normal life, by the traditional privileges of being a woman" (98). This is an intriguing way of framing his position in the narrative since it places Hildy in the position of the guilty party for desiring normalcy. To Walter, Hildy having Bruce is the ultimate sin because, in his mind, he "created her" as a newspaper man from the "doll-faced hick" she was when they met (Cavell 167). This Pygmalionesque trope is part of Cavell's laws for remarriage and dominates the conversations between the couple.

Nevertheless, unlike in the play, Hildy and Walter are clearly more compatible with each other than Hildy is with Bruce. I would argue, though, that the female Hildy has less of an opportunity to be fulfilled by her fiancé since Bruce is vastly more immature than is Peggy in the play. While Bruce is a mama's boy who naïvely follows Hildy around and trusts Walter without a thought, male Hildy's fiancé, Peggy, is depicted as "overwhelmingly mature in comparison to Hildy" (Hecht and MacArthur 78). Peggy is severely underdeveloped, but from her interactions with Hildy and Walter she demonstrates awareness and determination, which is much more than can be said for Ralph Bellamy as Bruce. Bellamy's casting is just as crucial as Russell's or Grant's since he played a similar role in *The Awful Truth* (1937), one that also sees him losing the female lead to Grant's character. Therefore, I would argue that Hildy's other option is not a valid one; she will not be satisfied to spend the rest of her life in Albany with her mother-in-law. Perhaps Peggy would also not fulfill male Hildy's desire for the newspaper business, but she even gives male Hildy the opportunity to stay at the end before he confirms his desire to leave. Ultimately, female Hildy's chance at a "normal" life is never truly an option for her in the adaptation. Though Walter offers Hildy true companionship and purposeful career, the film does not provide a way for Hildy to be equal in the professional or romantic relationship with Walter, even if he is the man she prefers. Walter's dominant presence in the film outweighs all others, and although Bruce is not the right choice for Hildy, there is still a desire for Hildy to resist Walter's control at the end and fight for equal footing in their relationship.

When thinking about Hildy's desire to leave the working world and enter the domestic sphere, it is noteworthy that the film is lauded for keeping her in journalism when so much of the rhetoric of the late 1930s and early 1940s still advocated that women be at home. It is even Walter, her ex- and soon-to-be-again husband, who cajoles her into staying because for all of his faults, he respects her talent as a newspaper reporter. As important as work is to Hildy and Walter, it is often "impossible to tell where love of work leaves off and where love of one another begins" (Haskell 135). Even their perspective on the job is different, with Hildy's commitment to work focusing on her inclination is to help individuals like Earl or Mollie, while Walter is in it for the story and the glory. Walter's determination to keep Hildy at the newspaper is for his own selfish gain, both professionally and romantically, which calls forth the issue of the new title.

For instance, after she decides to stay to write the story, Hildy starts to type as Walter calls out suggestions, which leads to them bantering over certain parts. This scene reads as Hildy taking control of her destiny by disregarding the social norms of marriage in exchange for her hit story. However, Hildy appears to be doing the majority of the work with Walter making phone calls and reading over her shoulder. At one point he even criticizes her use of a second paragraph to which she responds "I'm sorry" (Hawks). This moment is replicated nearly exactly from the play, with the exception of Hildy's responses to Walter. While Russell musters up a semi-apologetic "I'm sorry," the male Hildy responds with "Listen, you bastard. I can blow better newspaper stories out of my nose than you can write!" (Hecht and MacArthur 143). While the cursing

would not be acceptable onscreen, in response to such harsh criticism, one would expect Hildy to go in for the verbal kill. Instead, now that she is staying with Walter to finish the story, she is once again subordinate to his desires. For as much physical presence as Russell gives to the character, her lines from this point onwards in the film push her right back into Walter's shadow. When contemplating the characterization of working heroines and the flapper in films, Tina Olsen Lent hypothesizes that "The majority of the screwball comedies with working heroines (with the possible exceptions of *His Girl Friday* and *Woman of the Year*) implied that they would 'return' to the home after marriage" (319). While Lent is right in that Hildy will not be going to the domestic sphere when the film ends, nevertheless she is returning to a space in the working world in which she is controlled by a man. Sure, Walter's proposal to become the biggest name in journalism sounds great in the heat of the chase for the Williams story, but by the end of the film it becomes clearer that he is offering her nothing more than a fantasy. Lent is uncertain about whether or not Hildy fits into this category of working woman who will "return" to their socially-expected state, but it is clear that the film's overwhelming message is that Hildy's emotions and ambitions are disregarded when she is with Walter.

Nevertheless, due to the casting of Rosalind Russell, even at her weakest, Hildy presents an inner strength that allows her to be the most self-assured and independent female character thus far. As the only leading lady in this thesis to go through a divorce, be financially independent with a well-paying job, and experience life outside the domestic sphere, Russell's Hildy does not fit the stereotype of an average screwball comedy woman. Since Hildy is a middle-class professional, she has the ability to be

more physically and verbally expressive than any other leading lady. The physicality of Russell's Hildy is far more impressive than the male Hildy's stage directions in the play. Though the film's Hildy is more modern and mature than the play's Hildy, Russell's extremely expressive face suggests that she is unafraid to throw herself into dangerous situations. The film's Hildy is composed and dignified in her body language, but the moment Hildy becomes embroiled in the jailbreak, Russell breaks her composure and gives her all to the physical aspect of running, tackling, and shoving her way to the story. While Hildy tackles a man, disarms Earl Williams, and holds her own against the other reporters, perhaps the best example of her physical comedy comes when she is caught between two telephones where one caller is Walter and the other is Bruce. Russell puts her whole upper body to work in this scene when she rapidly fires words into both receivers to the point that it feels almost as though she is talking over herself. In an intensely comedic scene, Russell does not skimp on any sort of physical reaction. It is this devotion to physical movements that is the reason the ending of the film is both subtly heartbreaking and completely accepted by audiences.

While Russell provides ample compensation for the loss of certain aggressive lines for her character, her casting cannot override the ending of the film. Once Hildy and Walter finish the story, he tells her that she should marry Bruce and Hildy agrees before accepting a phone call that leaves her broken down into tears of frustration and anger. The phone call from Bruce is made from jail since Walter has set him up with counterfeit money and that, coupled with Walter's newfound approval for her marriage and his decision not to fight for her any more, briefly leaves her emotionally exhausted.

Her mood turns on a dime when Walter says that they are going to be married and she excitedly asks “Can we go on a honeymoon this time, Walter?” to which he agrees (Hawks). However, this excitement is shattered when Walter hears that there is a strike in Albany on their way to a honeymoon in Niagara Falls. When she hears this news, Russell’s impressive control over her body language allows her entire body to sag. Her face drops its smile gradually, her shoulders slump back down, and the briefcase she is carrying becomes her support system that she hugs tighter to her chest when she lightly breathes out her consent to honeymooning in Albany. While the casting of Russell brings the positives aspects of Hawks’s Hildy to life through her humor and commitment to physicality, her acting is also what showcases the defeat of Hildy’s character in the end. Harvey states that the reason audiences “don’t squirm at the end” when Hildy is ushered out of the press room and right back into the life she left when she gets divorced is because of “the outrageously elated” nature of Cary Grant’s Walter (433). I would agree that the rapid shifts in emotion in the scenes immediately preceding the honeymoon comments are enough to leave audiences scrambling to find the tone of the ending. When they land on the happiness of Walter on the phone, Hildy’s reaction is almost unnoticeable now that the screwball comedy formula is fulfilled by the couple uniting.

Nevertheless, *His Girl Friday* became one of the most lauded films of the classical Hollywood era for its portrayal of a strong, working female character who verbally and physically matches her male counterpart throughout the film. Without the knowledge of male Hildy’s original lines or the play’s ending, the Hildy of the film



becomes a standalone figure that is unparalleled in the surrounding films of 1940.

Ultimately, Hildy in *His Girl Friday* is on the job and her portrayal should be lauded for its strength; however, it is clear that she will be carrying all the luggage and writing all the stories while Walter continues to charm her into staying with him.

#### 4. CHAPTER IV:

##### CONCLUSION: THE “DELICATE CONDITION” OF *THE THIN MAN*

“We were hesitant about tackling a detective story –  
but the director Mr. Van Dyke – said,  
“I don’t care anything about the mystery stuff –  
just give me five scenes between Nick and Nora” – A. H.

- Inscription on first page of *The Thin Man* script from the Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett papers 1927-1961 (Curtsey of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives).

As one of the most iconic fictional couples in film history, Nick and Nora Charles are a progressive symbol of marriage in the 1930s film scene. In a time when filmic relationships are prone to problematic dynamics that often leave the female character in a position of diminished power, the characters in *The Thin Man* franchise provide a beacon of hope for monogamous, heterosexual marriages on screen. As James Harvey candidly states, Powell and Loy’s Nick and Nora “made even marriage seem fun” (123). This afterward will explore the possibility that there is an exception to the systematic pattern of softening female characters in the adaptation process. In doing so, it will look at W.S. Van Dyke’s 1934 film adaptation of Dashiell Hammett’s novel *The Thin Man* (1934) to question whether the successful adaptation of a female character in a comedic text can only be possible when a screwball comedy is combined with another genre of film. This section will also take into consideration the argument that Rosanne

Welch poses concerning the influence of the screenwriters Frances Goodrich Hackett and Albert Hackett on the final film version.

A note from the original script of *The Thin Man* provides the epigraph for this section. It offers a worthy starting point for considering the focus on Nick and Nora's relationship in Van Dyke's film version of Hammett's original novel. The author of the note, Albert Hackett, was half of a prolific writing team with his wife, Frances Goodrich Hackett. Together they "wrote over 30 films between 1931 and 1962," including *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), and the very successful *The Thin Man* (Welch 158). In their long list of writing credits, the Hacketts did not write mysteries until Van Dyke approached them with the need for a writing team that could "make relationships spark" (Welch 161). The reason for wanting writers who could evoke sparks from the Nick and Nora relationship was not for the lack of them in the original text but because Van Dyke wanted more fireworks and less arson from the filmic sparks.

Though the marriage between Nick and Nora is strong in Hammett's novel, scholarship agrees that the characters are "richer and more compelling" in the film than in the novel (Harvey 122). Hammett wrote *The Thin Man* in 1934, which sold 20,000 copies within the first three weeks before MGM purchased the screen rights (Polito xii). Clearly, MGM saw the potential for a successful film adaptation not only because of the combination of comedy and mystery but also due to the strong personalities of both characters. When Van Dyke commissioned the Hacketts to write the screenplay, it was not to alter the plot or revamp the character, but so that the already vibrant characters

would not get lost in the adaptation process, as was the case with many original texts in the Hollywood machine.

As vital to the film adaptation as were the writers, the stars that were to play the Charles couple were not easily cast. According to Ted Sennett, neither Myrna Loy nor William Powell was a frontrunner for their roles, but once Van Dyke convinced Louis B. Mayer, the co-founder of MGM, to give them a chance, it was one of the best decisions MGM made that year (163). Made on a budget of \$200,000, the amount usually given to a B-picture, *The Thin Man* “grossed over \$2 million at the box office” (Castonguay 227). The film was even nominated for Best Picture at the 7th Academy Awards, leading to multiple sequels starring Loy and Powell. However successful it was in hindsight, there was understandable hesitation in casting Loy and Powell as the leading roles in a jaunty thriller that is more focused on the couple than on the solution to the mystery. These hesitations sprung from the fact that until *The Thin Man* Loy appeared as the “exotic screen vamp” or the “Oriental siren,” and Powell was in the middle of a “villain period” (Castonguay 223). Although both received positive reviews for their performances and had acted together once before, it was a shot in the dark whether or not Loy and Powell could live up to not only Hammett’s characters but also to the Hacketts’ even more remarkable version of them. These uncertain beginnings established one of the most impressive onscreen romantic couples in film history, leading Loy and Powell to star in thirteen movies together (Castonguay 220). Although Loy and Powell both starred in screwball comedies, separately and together, it is *The Thin Man* that launched them into true stardom.

While 1934 is a pivotal moment in film history with hits such as *It Happened One Night*, *The Merry Widow*, and *The Gay Divorcee* on the screens and the official enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code beginning in July of that year, it is also the commencement of Dashiell Hammett's career as a novelist. *The Thin Man* appeared as a result of Hammett's former career as a "Pinkerton detective" and his new relationship with the young Lillian Hellman (McDonald 101). Though the novel was extremely successful and the film "made the most of Hammett's dialogue and the dramatic structure" of the book, the Hacketts and the cast enrich the couple with charm, genuine affection for the other, and a dislike of social conventions of governing gender and class (103). The Charles's marriage is one that scholars believe reflects Hammett and Hellman's often tumultuous relationship. However, I would agree with Welch that the characters in the film adaptation more closely resemble the fun and loving relationship of the Hacketts. The alterations that are made throughout the narrative, such as deleting lines pertaining to infidelity, clarifying Nick's contentment with Nora being rich, and amplifying Nora's involvement in the mystery, provide evidence that the Nick and Nora of Van Dyke's film are a couple who love and are proud of each other, even if the occasional punch is thrown.

In the process of adapting Hammett's novel, both Nick and Nora evolve, but the character of Nora becomes even more prominent in the film since *The Thin Man* was Hammett's first time writing a female as an active participant in a detective novel. This results in a fully-formed woman who is an heiress in control of her vast fortune but who also does not hesitate to throw a dinner party and hobnob with Nick's lower-class, and

occasionally criminal, friends. For his part, Nick is perfectly content with Nora's control of her own fortune and his decision to quit work to help manage her inheritance. His contentment with the situation is visible during the dinner party scene, a sequence that the Hacketts crafted specifically for the film. During a chat with some acquaintances, Nick jokes about not working for almost four years and becoming "a gentleman" in his time off from being a detective (Van Dyke). Unlike any other leading man this thesis has examined, Nick is completely relaxed about the fact that Nora has more money than he does, even if the imbalance "opens the door to questions about who controls whom in the Charles' marriage" (Castonguay 228). A little later in the dinner sequence, Nick even offhandedly jokes to Nora that he is too busy to return to detective work while he is "making sure you don't lose any of the money I married you for" (Van Dyke). This admission is playful, and Nick truly does not hold her wealth over her head or dismiss her as a helpless rich girl when the time comes for their involvement in the mystery to begin.

While Harvey notes that it is Nick and Nora's "humor, shrewdness, and poise" that sets them apart from other romantic couples in films who are often less sophisticated or even sappy, this departure is also a result of the unique genre. Van Dyke's *The Thin Man* is not the first detective thriller to be mixed with comedy, but it is perhaps one of the most successful in its blending of the two. Though comedy and mystery go well together when actors like Powell and Loy bring a certain levity to the script, the final addition to the genre – romance – is the most unstable element that nonetheless works seamlessly in this adaptation. While romance in screwball comedies is notorious for

being questionable, the stakes are considerably lower when the romantic couple is meeting for the first time or working through their relationship. However, there is considerably less leeway when it comes to marriages since there is an element of commitment that will either make or break the couple in the narrative. In the case of *The Thin Man*, both versions begin years into the Charles's relationship, and the lack of cracks in their love for each other is obvious. By securing the romance element, the comedy and mystery fall into place. Since the couple is secure in their relationship, there is an ability to showcase teasing banter and even physical comedy to the enjoyment of the audience. Thus, the film version of Nick and Nora is unlike any other screwball comedy couple because, in the end, Nora's character has not been lost in the adaptation, and Nick does not become a macho hero who must solve the mystery alone. Ultimately, the process of moving from a detective novel to comedy-mystery is a delicate matter. As Welch states, "the art of adaptation is about knowing what to keep as well as what to dismiss, or change, from the original source," and clearly, the Hacketts were experts at this form (168). Unlike the other adaptations this thesis examines, the 1934 film version of *The Thin Man* was not only adapted to roaring success but remained faithful to the original plot and characters, even with the purposeful changes to Nick and Nora, in order to create a film that is enjoyable and demonstrates that there is no structural necessity for the weakening of female characters.

Throughout the screwball comedy films of the 1930s, there were scavenger hunts, rodeos, sex in artist's apartments, and crying in press rooms. However, these scenes barely scratch the surface of the original comedic literature from which some of

the most memorable screwball comedies are adapted. Perhaps if these films had been aided by the type of devoted screenwriters that *The Thin Man* was lucky enough to have, then the value of properly representing female characters might have resulted in even stronger and more independent women on screen.



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