

5. Marriage as Madness: *Love Crazy* and the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage

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It is fatal to be a woman or woman pure and simple;
one must be a woman-manly, or a man-womanly.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

[Marriage] is both the cause and the effect of what
happens to it. It creates pain that it is the only
cure for. It is the only comfort for its hardships.

WENDELL BERRY, "The Long-Legged House"

There are no words to express the abyss between
isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to
the mathematician that four is twice two. But two is
not twice one; two is two thousand times one.

G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Aside from being one of the best books ever written on film, Stanley Cavell's 1979 masterpiece *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* is surely also one of the best investigations we have into the institution of marriage. Here as elsewhere, Cavell has multiple targets in his sights. Along with mapping out a new subgenre within the screwball comedy and moving the then-newly christened discipline of film studies forward, his aims are also philosophical (searching for the ways in which these films "disquiet the foundations of our lives"), sociological (searching for cultural connections between the two waves of feminism), and matrimonial.¹ Ca-

1. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

vell is trying to discover what makes marriages work, and under what conditions a married pair might be able to find the “thirst for remarriage” that he takes as its essential element. Moving well beyond accounting for filmic portrayals of the married state, *Pursuits* is a virtuosic exploration of marriage itself, with countless insights to offer.

Discovering *Pursuits* sparked my own obsession with the five films Cavell discusses at length, but also with a range of adjacent films mentioned only in passing. Over the course of reading the book, I watched many more films by the same directors and featuring the same actors, as well as others with similar plots and themes from the same period. Cavell’s insights gave me a new understanding and appreciation of such films, which I might never have discovered without his encouragement. His book reveals what is so vital and moving about the remarriage comedy genre, by showing how these comedies ultimately dramatize the search for attunement. How might a pair come to be attuned to each other’s moods, ideas, forms of life? And how might they sometimes—temporarily or permanently—fall out of tune with both each other and themselves? I had never before understood how putting such questions to popular films could be so productive, nor had a new passion sparked so dramatically, and I discovered endless delights and insights. Yet Cavell’s book is obviously not the last word on the topic. Many worthy films go unanalyzed, and *Pursuits*—like any academic book worth reading—raises many more questions than it answers. There are countless lines of Cavell’s thinking that might be extended further, and many adjacent films that could also be fruitfully placed within his genre. One might well make a case for many other superlative films of the period as being worthy of inclusion.

Which is what I want to do here. One film from this same period that has often been on my mind, and which I think both deserves a much wider audience and cries out for a sustained reading, is Jack Conway’s *Love Crazy* (1941), starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. The film passes entirely unmentioned in Cavell’s book, though he does make a passing reference to “the mutual pleasure and trust William Powell and Myrna Loy give one another” in *The World Viewed*, conceivably with *Love Crazy* in mind, although more likely thinking of their far more famous performance of Nick and Nora Charles in MGM’s long-running *Thin Man* series (1934–

1947).² Yet *Love Crazy* adheres to every last criterion of Cavell's genre: it has a female lead born between 1905 and 1911, a plot that fits his broad narrative structure, and a release date within what Cavell identifies as the genre's golden period, spanning 1934 through 1941. Unsurprisingly, it also has numerous points of connection to other key films in the genre, not least in its chief screenwriter, Charles Lederer, who adapted *The News Room* into *His Girl Friday* (1940) for Howard Hawks the year before, as well as the screenwriter David Hertz, of *I Met My Love Again* (1938) fame. The film's director, Jack Conway, also made other remarriage comedies, and *Love Crazy* was produced by MGM, responsible for many of the best comedies in this vein from the thirties through to the fifties. Moreover, it contains many subtle allusions to other films within the genre—for instance, the use of Gail Patrick as the primary threat to the marriage (reprising the same role she played opposite Cary Grant in *My Favorite Wife* [1940] and opposite Powell himself in *My Man Godfrey* [1936]), and an insider reference to *The Awful Truth* (1937), which also features a vaudevillian performance of a long-lost “sister.” *Love Crazy* also works as a revealing commentary on the already iconic pairing of Loy and Powell in the wildly popular *Thin Man* series, playing on and with the knowledge that it assumes audiences will have from their familiarity with the depiction of the Charles marriage, as well as their performance of a married couple in *I Love You Again*, yet another remarriage comedy from the year before.

Of course, one could discuss countless films of this period within the terms of Cavell's genre, even beyond those he nods toward in the book: *That Uncertain Feeling* (1941), *Together Again* (1944), *Pat and Mike* (1952), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), and *Phffft!* (1954) are just a few other titles that neatly fit within his genre. In this article, though, I want to make a case for *Love Crazy* as one of the very best remarriage comedies. My claim is that this film picks up and elaborates on many of the themes and characteristics charted by Cavell, while also containing enough intriguing variations to repay close examination.³ It offers poignant forms of cinematic knowledge on marriage as a kind of madness, as improvisation, and as requiring and

2. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 5. Incidentally, Cavell also refers in this same book to another film concerned with marriage, which he never again wrote on: “Let us suppose that *L'Atalante* is the best film ever made about the idea of marriage, specifically about the ideas of taking in marriage and being given in marriage.” (176)

3. It also contains a “difference that moves the genre forward” that Cavell sees as a requirement for a film being awarded status in this category.

enabling a particular kind of privacy. The film also has much to say on the necessary humblings that are essential to a flourishing marriage, as well as the proper way for a married couple to consider questions of gendered difference. Like the five films analyzed by Cavell, it offers something like a “spiritual parable” of marriage, which speaks elliptically, powerfully about the state itself.⁴ My key claim is the one Cavell makes for the five remarriage comedies in his own series: that if we properly appreciate what the central pair have accomplished, we might be able to find the same for ourselves. Which is to say that these films, like all the other texts, people, and experiences that make up our lives, offer models that might either be followed or rejected in the endless perfectionist search for our own “next” selves.

I am all too aware of the objections to such an argument. It is a depressing fact that in 2020, there are still many intellectual and cultural barriers to treating films of this period and genre and commercial provenance as being worthy of serious study. We are still a long way from widely recognizing them as the profound artistic and cultural achievements they really are—from “possessing them fully” as Cavell hoped we one day would.⁵ David Shumway is a contemporary film studies scholar unusual in the depth of his contempt for Cavell (particularly the Cavell of *Pursuits*), but wholly representative in his dismissal of this period of Hollywood films. Predictably, Shumway takes all “screwball” films to be motivated out of nothing more than “patriarchal interest and ideology” and designed to serve purely commercial ends.⁶ Noting that American divorce rates nearly doubled between 1910 and 1940, he takes these films as mere ideological apparatuses, suggesting that their enormous popular appeal can be exhaustively accounted for in the claim that given the rising divorce rates, “a majority of the film audience doubtless found it pleasurable to be reassured about the possibilities of marriage.”⁷ One needn’t look far to find others disparaging this period in similar ways, and it is tempting to say that such critics are succumbing to “the seedy pleasure of feeling superior to [what they perceive as] drivel”—a dubious “pleasure” that Cavell warns against in his remarks on James Agee’s film criticism.⁸ The film’s immediate success

4. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 7.

5. Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1984), 18.

6. David R. Shumway, “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (1991): 8.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 8.

and box-office takings may well also have served to discourage more generous readings: Emily Leider notes that *Love Crazy* ranked ninth in MGM's list of its ten most profitable films of 1940–41.⁹ (*Gone with the Wind* was well out in front, while another masterpiece of the remarriage comedy genre, *The Philadelphia Story*, came in second.) Even more damningly, Myrna Loy herself, at a low point and deeply unhappy in her real-life marriage to Arthur Hornblow, described the film as pure “froth.”¹⁰ Was she right? Is the film too silly, too frivolous, too far-fetched, or too tainted with nakedly commercial imperatives to sustain the pressure of such an investigation? These are legitimate questions, but I aim to stare them down in what follows.¹¹ Cavell's own writings on popular Hollywood entertainments are my guide here, as is his encouragement to run the risk of *over-* rather than *under-*interpreting. (“[M]ost texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread,” he says early on in *Pursuits*.¹²) It is part of their strange charm that such 30s and 40s comedies themselves often invite us to dismiss them as “mere” comedies or mere “froth”—to laugh off or else explain away their own frightening, destabilizing claims. Yet I have learned only too well how persistently they linger, how they prompt serious reflections and in so doing constitute part of what we say that we know about marriage, gender, and politics.

This is perhaps by the by, but I am also interested in the ways in which Cavell's readings of popular films go well beyond the tired operations of critique, which have rightly been taken to task in recent years by literary critics such as Rita Felski, Toril Moi, Susan Friedman, and others.¹³ It is important that Cavell takes these films on their own terms, letting his interest in them guide his thinking. (Try to “let a text teach you how to consider it,” he encourages in the preface to *Pursuits*.¹⁴) And Cavell has no interest whatsoever in playing the familiar game of exposing sinister ideological

9. Emily W. Leider, *Myrna Loy: The Only Good Girl in Hollywood* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 223.

10. *Ibid.*, 223.

11. Of course, many other critics, sometimes prompted by Cavell, have discovered the power of such films and taken them seriously. Maria DiBattista is one, who devotes an excellent book to the female leads in these comedies. She discovers in the women of these films “the most exhilarating and... empowering model for American womanhood,” and notes that the Italian novelist Italo Calvino also found in them something similar, taking them as crucial depictions of “the woman who rivals men in resolve and doggedness, spirit and wit.” See Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, NY: Yale University Press, 2003).

12. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 35.

13. For a good overview and introduction to the field of postcritique, see Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

14. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 10.

operations. Indeed, his way of taking these films in good faith has often prompted others to call him a naïve or misguided interpreter. Far more conventional and familiar is the kind of criticism that sees nothing but the remarriage comedies' crass economic imperatives or sinister ideological manoeuvrings. I want here to see for myself whether it is possible to approach such a text as unguardedly and as generously as Cavell does. His readings continually asks how we might treat a text as an equal partner in a conversation, speaking neither down nor up to it. I would like to aspire to something similar here.

Let me begin, then, in true Cavellian style, using the method he follows for all of the films discussed in *Cities of Words* (some of which either reprise or extend his thinking in *Pursuits*), with a detailed plot summary. *Love Crazy* is obscure enough to warrant an extended introduction, but a summary of this kind also introduces many of the threads and themes I will pick up in the subsequent analysis. I have seen it wrongly and ungenerously summarized elsewhere, and it is important to set the facts of the narrative in order. Bear with me here: the précis is a lengthy one, but a film of such complexity cannot be summarized hurriedly. Alternatively, if you have no need for this kind of summary, feel free to skip ahead, where the analysis begins in earnest.

1. The film opens with an overhead shot onto a city street; a jaunty orchestral tune plays on the soundtrack over blaring car horns. A taxi cab, emerging from the traffic, pulls up outside an apartment block from which a doorman is emerging. On a cut to the cab's interior, we see Steve Ireland (William Powell) happily singing along to a portable phonograph balanced on his knee. The song, it turns out, is the one we previously took to have been non-diegetic—"It's Delightful to be Married," which Luise Rainer as Anna Held sang to her husband (played by Powell) upon arriving in New York in MGM's *The Great Ziegfeld*, released five years earlier. (Loy also starred in this earlier film.) Steve operatically repeats the sentiment of the song ("It's Delightful to be-be-be-be-be-be-be-be Married") to the doorman, Jimmy, and asks for an affirmation of its sentiment. "Well, *sometimes*..." he replies, with a good-natured if slightly knowing laugh. Steve, in teacherly tones, tells him that "There's nothing wrong with anyone's life that a good marriage can't cure." Emerging with a bouquet of roses, he continues singing as he heads inside. Jimmy, suddenly grave and conspiratorial,

says to the taxi driver: “He’d sure sing a different tune if he lived with my old lady for a while.”

2. The elevator taking Steve up to his apartment shudders to a halt, to Steve’s considerable alarm: “I can’t be stuck: I’ve got the most important date of the year tonight!” He tries soothing the elevator as one would a horse, promising to “put it out to pasture in a beautiful green meadow.” The charm works, to the delight of the elevator boy: “There she goes, sir, she’s alright now!” After entering a luxurious and stylish apartment, the housekeeper (Fern Emmett) takes the flowers, tells Steve that Mrs. Ireland has been “primping since breakfast,” and confirms that they will, as per Steve’s prior instructions, be eating “dinner at midnight.” On tiptoe, Steve puts on the same record and conceals himself behind the curtains. Susan (Myrna Loy) enters the room, resplendently gowned, and wonders aloud to herself, though in tones clearly meant to be overheard, that the music being on is “funny,” since it wasn’t playing when she came in. Responding in a theatrically deep, exaggeratedly masculine voice, Steve playfully suggests that “maybe some *man* just put it there.” “It would have to be a man who knew exactly what I want,” Susan replies, before turning to embrace Steve, who has emerged from behind the curtains.

The two waltz theatrically around the apartment and are clearly besotted: the housekeeper calls them “lovebirds” (recalling the cartoon songbirds of the opening animated titles sequence) and we learn that they have been married four years. Escaping to the privacy of the bedroom, away from what Steve calls the “cross-city traffic” of the housekeeper’s commentary, his attempts to kiss Susan are playfully rebuffed, under the anxiety that they will smudge her lip rouge. “Stop it! Stop it! I’m a married woman! I’ll tell my husband,” Susan cries, as Steve tickles her to the floor. They kiss, and Steve tells her some “great news”: “I’ve decided to keep you for another year.” We learn that the couple has sworn to spend every anniversary doing exactly what they did when they were first married, a tradition that Susan clearly loves and Steve has somewhat tired of, regarding it as something of a “rigmarole”: it involves a four-mile walk to the Justice of the Peace for a glass of sherry, then Susan rowing Steve along a river, then Steve reading their future in the stars, followed by dinner, and culminating in what we are clearly made to understand as lovemaking: “Oh yes... *that*,” Susan

acknowledges cryptically. Steve's suggestion is that they do their entire routine tonight in reverse, which would of course expedite this particular activity. His scheme entails doing each constituent part in reverse too, including the dinner: Steve informs the housekeeper, who is flummoxed by the instruction to prepare to serve dessert first, finishing "with the soup," but eventually complies.

3. Back in the room, the couple fondly recollect the events (the winding of a clock, Steve stubbing his toe on the dresser, and so on) of their wedding night. Just after the lights have been turned out, and the screen goes black (drawing a tactful veil over their lovemaking), the doorbell rings. An irritated Steve answers the door to a singing telegram, wishing him a "happy anniversary," after which his mother-in-law (Florence Bates) reveals herself. Pushing her way into the room, she lays out her gift of a new, circular rug for the entrance. The married pair exchange meaningful looks, and we learn that an identical rug had been given the previous year, which didn't suit them because the floor was "too hard and polished." Mrs. Cooper wheedles her way into staying for dinner, which the couple have resignedly consented to eating in the regular order, before sending Steve on an errand to mail a letter. On his way out, Steve slips on the new hallway rug, banana-peel-pratfall-style (echoing Loy-as-Nora-Charles's similarly sprawling screen entrance in *The Thin Man* [1934]), to Mrs. Cooper's unconcealed delight.

4. After mailing the letter, Steve is surprised to find Isobel Grayson (Gail Patrick), an old flame, in the elevator. Clearly delighted to see him (greeting him with "Hello, Sugar..."), she tells him that they are neighbors. After the elevator again grinds to a halt, there are no magic charms pronounced and the three passengers are forced to escape through the roof. Steve is pressed into various compromising positions helping Isobel through the narrow passage, not least of which is having her feet on his face while he holds her pumps. (At which point she gleefully reminds Steve that the last thing he said to her was that "you weren't going to let me walk all over you.") The other two reach the roof, but after the machine begins to restart, Steve gets his head trapped in the elevator doors and is dragged painfully, humiliatingly, up and down on the same floor, before being licked by a passing dog. Eventually, they emerge on the correct

floor, and Isobel takes Steve by the arm into her apartment, telling him that he needs a drink after his ordeal.

5. Still dazed, Steve realizes that his tie is constricting his breathing. "I still feel like I'm choking," he says, in the high-pitched, womanly voice he will later deploy in the role of "Steven's sister." Isobel loosens his tie and ministers to him, evidently delighted to be in his company. "This is like old times," she says, before tickling him affectionately. We learn that her husband is an artist, who occasionally uses a female mannequin (whose presence Steve notices, in an observation that will later be crucial) as a model, and that she is often "bored" being left alone. After trying to cajole Steve into "playing hooky" by "bend[ing] an elbow with the old gang" down at the bar, he makes his escape back to Susan. A disappointed Isobel calls out that he hasn't merely been *married* since she last saw him, but "embalmed."

6. Still flustered and ruffled, Steve reenters his own apartment, where the two women have been waiting with concern. Mrs. Cooper is immediately suspicious of his elaborate story of the broken elevator, and shrewdly, shrewishly, notices his missing hat, which Steve tells her he must have left in the elevator. She rings the lobby and asks that the missing hat be brought up immediately by the elevator boy.

7. During the subsequent dinner, the housekeeper interrupts with the news that the hat has been found in Mrs. Grayson's apartment. Steve is forced into a hurried explanation, which rouses suspicion for both his mother-in-law and Susan (who recalls that Isobel gave him a black eye upon learning of their own engagement). After the housekeeper announces that Mrs. Grayson requests the return of her shoes, the two women grow even more suspicious. Nothing Steve can say in his own defense sounds plausible, and Mrs. Cooper eventually prepares to leave, in order to collect her sister from the train station, before also slipping on the new rug. Her pride wounded, she claims to have sprained her ankle, and Steve consents to stay to look after her while Susan leaves to collect her aunt.

8. Taking a much-needed break from amusing his mother-in-law, Steve heads outside for some fresh air, where he sees Isobel on the balcony below. She entices him out for a drink, arranging to release him from his obligations to Mrs. Cooper by calling him with what will sound like an urgent business call. (Unbeknownst to Steve, Mrs. Cooper has overheard the entire exchange.) After their ruse has played out, Steve hurriedly takes his leave, supposedly in order to attend to a business matter with an “old rascal” named J.B.

9. Susan returns to the apartment at 11.05, as revealed by an insert shot of the mantelpiece clock. Steve is still not home, and Mrs. Cooper smilingly, disapprovingly, tells her everything. A subdued Susan farewells her mother and rings the Grayson apartment: Mr. Grayson is equally alarmed that his wife and Steve Ireland are out on the town together. Acting under an impulse that she will later feel to have been beneath her, Susan suggests that if Steve were to walk in on her and Mr. Grayson kissing, she “wouldn’t have any more trouble with him.” Grayson agrees, similarly eager to chasten his own spouse, and invites Susan to his apartment.

10. Susan unknowingly enters the wrong apartment, where Ward Willoughby (Jack Carson), a “World Champion” archer practicing drawing his bow in an undershirt, is confused by Susan’s forthright compliments (“My! You *are* good looking...”) and her suggestion that he turn out the lights. A comical series of misunderstandings ensues, in which the two share a whiskey and embrace at several points in which Susan thinks she hears Isobel and Steve returning home, before quickly breaking off. Susan eventually realizes her error, and breaks free, running in to Steve and Isobel in the hallway. The two pairs try to explain themselves, and Isobel prompts Steve to fight Ward: “If you were half a man, you’d knock his head off.” Mr. Grayson enters from the elevator, and the explanations and accusations descend into an indecipherable chaos. Steve, hoping that levity will relieve the tension, breaks in with a loud, Groucho Marx-like interjection: “Oh, I know what: let’s room together all through school!” The four others break away and Steve is left running for Susan in the elevator. Racing to catch her, he gets his nose caught between the doors.

11. Back in their apartment, Susan tells Steve she doesn't think she can bear to learn "what really happened tonight." She interrupts his flippant attempt at an explanation and tells him not to proceed "if it's a lie—I couldn't forgive that." She ends up listening to a brief explanation, and says, halfheartedly, that she believes him. Yet later on, in bed (following the puritanical strictures of the 1930 Production Code, the couple sleep in separate beds), the darkness is once again disturbed when Steve puts "just one little question" to Susan, asking why Willoughby was wearing nothing more than an undershirt in the hall. "He has to have his torso free when he shoots his bow and arrow," Susan replies, either innocent or playing at being innocent of the double entendre that makes Steve snap on the bedside lamp.¹⁵ The two are clearly distrustful of the other's explanations, but eventually turn off the lights. The darkness is disturbed yet again by a ringing telephone: a waiting taxi for Steve Ireland, ordered at 9.30. Susan is inconsolable, and tells the driver to wait for *her*. Packing her things, she tells Steve that the call was nothing less than "the end of the world." Steve helplessly tries to persuade her to stay, and to stop crying. "I'm not crying," Susan says before leaving, "And if I am, it's because I think that twelve o'clock at night's a pretty rotten time to start my life over again." Call this the end of Act 1.

12. We find ourselves in a lawyer's office, where Susan is seated, attempting to look as composed and as dignified as she can (considerably so, of course, given what Maria di Battista calls Myrna Loy's "unaffectedly regal" mien).¹⁶ She is filing for a divorce this very day, and is impervious to the appeals of both Steve and the lawyer. When the latter claims to be lost for words ("I don't know what to say..."), Steve says that "There's everything in the world to say," proceeding with a long monologue on the grotesquery of divorce and defending the institution of marriage, as well as claiming that Susan has been too swayed by "circumstantial evidence" that is "unfair" and "doesn't take everything in to account." ("Possibly," she concedes. "But it was quite conclusive.") After hearing his professions of undying love, Susan counters that she will "never again believe anything you say." Alone with George afterward, Steve says he is con-

15. For a detailed account of the PCA response to this film, and the negotiations and compromises with the filmmakers, see Jane M. Greene, "A Proper Dash of Spice: Screwball Comedy and the Production Code," *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2011): 45-63.

16. DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames*, 134.

vinced that he could talk his way back into the marriage, if only he had enough time. Happily, he learns that the trial will not be for another two months.

13. The next shot is rolling footage of a “Divorces Files” list, which scrolls through countless names (“Allen vs. Allen,” “Arnold vs. Arnold,” and so on) until reaching “Ireland vs. Ireland.” Two months have evidently not been long enough, since we now see Steve in the office of his architectural firm, looking miserable and preoccupied. He has no idea where Susan is: a montage of private investigators around the country reveals that Susan is still at large. (It will emerge later that she has been hiding out in Arizona with her mother and Ward Willoughby, presumably in preemptive defense against her own susceptibility to Steve’s pleas.) Later, George phones to tell him that Susan has just shown up at a nearby party, and Steve races over. Managing to get Susan alone, she is pleased to hear of his distress. She concedes that their shared pain speaks to the love between them, but is unmoved, telling Steve that “there’s no such thing as marriage based on deceit.” Then, yielding slightly in spite of herself, she says that there is nothing she couldn’t forgive if he would only tell her the truth. When Steve admits to being guilty of having had a drink with Isobel and being in her apartment, she is furious, calling him a “despicable cheat” and retracting her earlier promise. She leaves with Willoughby.

14. In order to prolong the case, Steve hits on the plan of orchestrating an insanity defense, in which the courts will rule that he is mentally unfit to attend the divorce trial. A series of farcical capers ensues, including posing as Abraham Lincoln and “freeing” both a bemused black butler and all of the partygoers’ hats by sailing them on the pond. He also riles up one of the stuffed-shirt partygoers he dubs “General Electric Whiskers” (for his resemblance to the Italian General of the same name); and pushes Mrs. Cooper into the water. He himself is pushed in afterward, and wears a bed sheet wrapped around him like a toga while waiting for his suit to dry. Yet even after these exploits, most of the attendees think Steve is merely drunk. Looking for an unambiguous means of proving his “insanity,” Steve has a fortuitous encounter with a pet cockatiel who steals his watch and flies into a nearby tree. In his attempt to retri-

eve it, Steve slips from a window and loses his toga, exposing himself beyond frame to the entire party.

15. The next scene opens with Mrs. Bristol, the party's hostess, reporting the night's events to a courtroom, in which Steve continues his ploy of acting crazily, by assuming a vacant expression and flying paper planes around the room. Heedless of Susan's claim that the whole thing "is really a lot of nonsense," the judge rules that Steven is suffering from a "nervous breakdown," and orders a 30-day adjournment. During her testimony, Susan has told the court about Steve having previously "chewed up a phonograph record" of "the host's favorite rumba" at a party in Florida, and once, on their honeymoon, of putting on overalls to "dig a hole in the middle of Fifth Avenue." She also tells the court about Steve's having wanted to eat dinner backwards on their anniversary, and of his insistence that they follow "the wedding ceremony of the Batten Land Eskimos," all of which admissions are interpreted as further signs of his mental decline by the court.

16. Susan exercises her right to refer the matter to the Lunacy Commission, who diagnose Steve as either having "schizophrenia" or a "split personality." (The chief psychologist evaluating him is none other than "General Electric Whiskers" himself, who engages in some spurious phrenology around the "medulla oblongata" and brings forth more incriminating evidence from the party.) Despite admitting to the ruse to get his wife back, Steve is declared "insane," and ordered to be "placed under the care of his wife," with the divorce postponed for at least five years. Susan finds a loophole: she can commit Steve to a sanatorium, and thus be released of her obligation to care for and live with him. So ends the second act.

17. Steve is being forcibly committed to a Rest Home run by Dr. Wuthering (Sig Ruman), a pompous and stereotypically Teutonic psychologist who promises to "eradicate the source of [Steve's] troubles." While wandering the grounds, he sees Willoughby in Steve's car beyond the fence. Willoughby taunts him by making a blubbering idiot noise by wiggling his forefinger across his lips, a child's signifier of insanity, before Steve runs inside to catch Susan speaking with the doctor.

18. Susan is in the office, insisting on Steve's sanity. The doctor ridicules her claim to "know what is behind all this" and suggests that he is getting progressively worse, since he has become "a kleptomaniac" and may even be in danger of attempting suicide. "Oh, doctor! If that were the truth, I wouldn't leave him here another minute," Susan replies, suddenly unsure of herself, "I'd take him home and nurse him night and day." Steve has overheard this exchange from outside the office door, and takes a mounted trout from the wall as he enters, bearing a melancholy expression. After Steve requests a kiss, the doctor encourages it, though Susan resists. Steve kisses her in the middle of her protest—"that makes my head feel so much better. Can I have another?" Again Susan refuses, but Steve kisses her a second time at Wuthering's encouragement. "I've got to get out of here. The rules are too one-sided," Susan says, before running out.

19. Some time has passed. Steve is out in the garden, where he steals a gardener's ladder to try and escape. Ward Willoughby, again just beyond the fence, mocks his attempts. He informs Steve that Susan is planning on heading back to Arizona and leaving him interred unless he can somehow get the divorce case brought forward. Disgusted, Steve calls him a "fake Hiawatha," and threatens him again: "One of these days, I'm going to spread you around like warm butter." Willoughby laughs off the threat, and begins practicing some "archery exercises" while he waits. Thinking fast, Steve plays at being an Indian (complete with a reversed cap and broom-horse) and manages to have Willoughby interred on the grounds of being an escaped patient.

20. Willoughby soon escapes, using a rope that allows him to drop clear of the fence and leave Steve hanging upside down by the leg. After the staff arrive, they assume the dangling Steve has tried to kill himself, a view confirmed by Wuthering. Trying to prove that he was in fact trying to stop a man from escaping, Steve uses the same trick on Wuthering, who is likewise left hanging upside down while Steve finally escapes.

21. Back at Steve's apartment block, he makes it to the elevator seconds before the police enter the lobby. Upstairs, we watch Susan learning that he has "tried to kill Dr. Wuthering" and is now being "regarded as definitely homicidal." She is not convinced

by this interpretation, and is only concerned for Steve. The police know he is in the building, and begin their search.

22. Desperate for a place to hide, Steve enters Willoughby's apartment, narrowly escaping via the balcony to Isobel Grayson's. Isobel helps him, but is worried that her husband (who is in the bathroom) will discover him. Steve hides in the shower, and is scalded with hot water as Mr. Grayson prepares to rinse his hair. Steve escapes again, and spies Mr. Grayson's dressed mannequin and two bosom-shaped yarn balls in the next room. Stroking his mustache thoughtfully, he has clearly hatched an idea.

23. Upstairs, in the Ireland apartment, Willoughby is comforting Susan. Chastened, and softening her voice, she says that she wishes to talk to Steve. She asks him to get the police off the scent and give Steve a chance to get to her.

24. Still in the Grayson apartment, Steve has shaved off his mustache, applied thick makeup and lipstick, and changed into a matronly costume. He positions the yarn balls and adjusts his wig.

25. Isobel, Willoughby, and others are either assisting the police or putting them off the scene—it's hard to tell which. While the apartment block is in a commotion, Steve, using a warbly, womanly falsetto, asks Isobel whether they have "caught the murderer." She doesn't recognize him at first, but then smiles tenderly, and tells him to be careful. In a brief interaction with Willoughby, during which she is aghast at being taken for Steve's mother, she snippily corrects him, saying that she is his sister. Steve rides the lift up to the apartment one more time, leaving Willoughby to remark to Isobel, "That's the screwiest old dame I ever saw."

26. Upstairs, Steve introduces himself to the waiting police as "the unfortunate man's sister," enters the apartment and, when the police have gone, reveals himself to Susan. He professes his love and gives an account of what his devotion to her has led him to do, but still she holds onto the unexplained taxi cab on the night of their anniversary. Steve tells her he spent the whole evening talking about her with Isobel, and

simply forgot about the waiting taxi after walking to the bar. He proposes that they fly to Canada tomorrow morning for “a second honeymoon,” but Susan, still unconvinced, says she will not go with him.

27. Willoughby raps on the door, telling a group of officers “That’s his voice....” Susan lets Willoughby in, but speaks sharply to him, and covers for Steve. Mrs. Cooper enters as well, giving a shocked “ooh” at the sight of the police. Meanwhile, an officer has walked in on “Miss Ireland” adjusting her stockings in the bedroom. Embarrassed, he retreats, but Miss Ireland enters the living room and introduces herself to the gathering as Steven’s sister from Saskatchewan. The police are dismissed by Susan, who then turns to Willoughby, still persisting in claiming that she must know where Steven is, and protests that he is only trying to stop her “making a fool of [herself].” “Suppose I want to make a fool of myself,” Susan replies. Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper both try to prejudice her against Steve, but Susan is distracted by noticing Miss Ireland’s visible garter, which she subtly tells her to fix. The camera follows Steve’s fumbling recovery of the garter: Susan conceals the movements by holding out her dress, and the other two continue to complain about Steve beyond the frame.

When Willoughby calls Steve “a stinker,” Miss Ireland leaps to her brother’s defense, but is stuck on some difficult piece of feminine clothing. Mrs. Cooper offers to undress her and help resolve the problem, to which Susan and Steve hurriedly protest that this will not be necessary. When Miss Ireland then takes Willoughby to have threatened her, there is a comic sequence of first slapping and then punching him twice against her better judgment. Miss Ireland says that it is her duty to defend her brother: “Steven is my own flesh and blood!” “He certainly *is*,” says Susan—a quip that only we and Steve comprehend. When Willoughby calls Steve “a fake, and a cheat, and a bad sport,” he receives another slap. In reply to Mrs. Cooper’s startled remark about her “hasty temper,” Miss Ireland says that it runs in the family, and that “Steven once nearly killed three men with his bare hands.” Willoughby accuses her of lying: “Why if I were a man I’d knock you down for that,” Miss Ireland says, before delivering a proper uppercut punch that sends Willoughby flying. Susan, growing more and more amused, again contorting herself bravely—*gallantly*, even—to conceal Miss Ireland’s slip from showing, before Miss Ireland explains to Willoughby that the

voice he heard was from the phonograph, which she now puts on. It is the same song as in the opening scene, and a close-up reveals that a piece of thread from her clothes is caught on the needle and is slowly unspooling.

28. Willoughby leaves to search the apartment. Susan defends Steve to her mother, but says, “I don’t love him. I just don’t want Steven hunted and hounded like a common criminal, when all he’s done is, is...” “—is try to prevent you from divorcing him, any crazy way he could. Just because he loves you too much to let you go,” Steve supplies. Susan tries to dismiss Willoughby and her mother, but not before the latter has admitted her dislike of Steve, and for Miss Ireland to suggest that her interferences might be part of why the marriage dissolved. Finally noticing the snagged thread on the phonograph, which he sees is slowly causing one of Steve’s “breasts” to shrink, Willoughby races off to fetch the police, tripping over the hall rug (the third person to do so) and knocking over a large vase. “Good heavens,” Miss Ireland says, in her most schoolmarmish tones, “what a stupid place for a rug!”

29. Willoughby tries to convince the police that Steve is upstairs, but is recognized by the asylum staff as the patient who escaped over the fence that very afternoon. He is baffled to find himself being dragged away.

30. Upstairs, Miss Ireland is still yet to realize that her bosom is rapidly diminishing, though Susan tries several times to alerts her. In the course of trying to warn her, during which she makes the universal finger-rotating-around-the-ear motion for craziness, which Steve first interprets thus as a reference to Mrs. Cooper, before realizing that she is referring to the winding of the thread. Miss Ireland says that she has “a woman’s intuition” that Steve and Susan are “meant for each other”—“you either feel it or you don’t,” she tells Mrs. Cooper, disapprovingly. “And I feel it right here,” clutching her hand to her breast, which she now realizes is missing the crucial yarn ball. “Do you?” says Susan, archly, still uncertain of what she can let herself believe. Smiling, she directs him to the missing skein.

31. In the final moments, Miss Ireland says that she will “retire” to bed, heading for the master bedroom, though Susan pointedly directs her to the guestroom. Mrs. Co-

per tells Susan, *sotto voce*, that she doesn't like Miss Ireland any more than she does Steven, and vows to spend the night in the apartment, "bunk[ing] in with your guest" to prevent her from "influencing" Susan. Again bringing up the fatal anniversary night, Mrs. Cooper tells Susan that she saw Steve and Isobel "walking up the street, as bold as you please," which finally convinces Susan of the pair's innocence, unbeknownst to her mother. Susan realises that she has known the truth of Steve's innocence all along: "You saw them walking along the street and you never told me!?" "Well why should I?" her mother replies, "You knew he was with her." Susan is startled into momentary speechlessness, before exclaiming, "Why yes of course I did! Of course I did!" She spins her mother around so that their positions are camera positions are flipped: now Mrs. Cooper is on the left of screen, Susan on the right. After directing her mother to sleep in the master bedroom, Susan says that she will take Miss Ireland back to Saskatchewan in the morning. "All right," Mrs. Cooper says, "but I hope you get a good night sleep." Laughing cryptically to herself, Susan knocks and is invited in by Steve, who is offscreen but still using womanly tones.

32. After a dissolve (the only one used in the film, and clearly indicating that the couple have either just made love or are about to), we see Willoughby making his one and only call before being locked away. A cut back to the bedroom shows a ringing telephone on a bedside table that also contains a glass lamp, Miss Ireland's wig, and a large and unmistakably vulva-shaped shell. Susan answers on a cut back to Willoughby, who has a swollen right eye from one of the earlier punches and is trying to explain his predicament. His tone suddenly changes: "Hey... who is this?" he asks, at what we understand is now Steve's voice on the other end of the line: "what are *you* doing there?" On the same discreet, bedside table shot, an out-of-frame Steve makes the blubbering-idiot sound used earlier, before reaching his arm down to hang up the phone.

I. Marriage as Madness

One of the central revelations of this film is that marriage involves voluntarily living within a kind of madness—or at least what the external world is likely to take for

madness. By choosing unpredictability and comic disorder as a form of life, the couple's world will at times look like one governed by insanity. The films of this genre remind us that there is something truly outrageous—perhaps palatable only to unhinged minds—about the arrangement of marriage itself. Each comedy foregrounds the sheer improbability of two people committing to each other against all the odds, cleaving for better or worse, despite what they might subsequently learn about each other and themselves. Needless to say, the peculiar logic that keeps them together may well be at risk of breaking down at various points. In *Love Crazy*, the fragility of this logic is made clear in the unlikely chain of events that causes such a break. Steve's hurried defense to Susan and Mrs. Cooper, about his being waylaid by a broken elevator and a subsequent series of mishaps, clearly stretches the limits of their credulity. How much of his unlikely story is Susan obliged to take on faith, and how much is she right to be skeptical of? How many improbable explanations can a marriage withstand? Yet what could be more improbable, the film asks, than the very state of being married?

The central plot hinges on the misrecognition—by the court, by the Insanity Commission, and by Mrs. Cooper, among others—of Steve's mind as being diseased and unsound. It is the contents of his mind, and his very character, that are being put on trial. Yet the only data the court has to go on are his recent "attacks" of impulsivity and oddness. "They weren't attacks, they were just *fun!*" Susan exclaims to a baffled court. Steve is undeniably impulsive, comical, and fond of capers that have previously won him Susan's affections—but since they now they strike the court as evidence of an unsound mind and character, Susan herself is tempted to see them in a new light—as possible markers of Steve's lack of regard for consequences, or else a tendency to make light of things that demand seriousness. Yet Susan has also been driven crazy—with anger and resentment. She tells us that she wants to punish Steve, and it is in anger that she escapes to Arizona to live with her mother and Willoughby. She is also determinedly, stubbornly unmoved by Steve's pleas—a response clearly at odds with her own nature. She has been forced by the gravity of her suspicions of Steve's infidelity to experiment with a new way of being in the world, and it is not until the final scene, when she delightedly learns that her suspicions have been unfounded, that she is called back to herself and led out of confusion. It is only in this scene that she can acknowledge what on some level she has already known: that Steve's devotion to her

would make him immune to Isobel Grayson's charms. "I'm not confused any longer," she tells her mother before entering the room where Steve is waiting. Revealingly, she has just dismissed Willoughby by telling him not to discount the possibility that she wants to "make a fool of [her]self." Marriage, it seems, entails an appetite for a particular kind of foolishness and even insanity—but it is, crucially, an insanity of one's own choosing. By the end of the film, what we as viewers know, but what all other characters outside of this couple are oblivious to, is that what looks like insanity is in fact a shared form of freedom.

In *Love Crazy*, a significant aspect of such insanity is an appetite for repetition, not merely in order to make peace with the prospect of seeing the same person day after day, but in repeating key moments of a shared life in the form of rituals. These rituals establish a narrative that is crucial to the pair's understanding of what it is that holds them together across the years. This is what Susan instinctively knew in her insistence that they carry out the same anniversary ritual year after year, and what Steve saw as being in need of reinvention, as registered by his suggestion that it be kept fresh by a reversal. The extent to which repetition and familiarity (Susan's more natural values) versus spontaneity and comic experimentation (Steve's) define their relationship is one that they will continue to work out. While such negotiations may well strike the external world as markers of insanity, the film is interested in what it means for a married pair to educate themselves and each other in the process of working them out.

As in the five films analyzed in *Pursuits*, *Love Crazy* also finds countless ways to dramatize the indignities and humiliations that will have to be endured for the married pair to find a way back to each other. These indignities provide yet further grounds for the external world's ruling that the marriage appears insane, but they are also crucial in allowing the couple to find a path back to each other. I will pick up on these humiliations in a later section, but for now I want to note the ways in which the genre tends to pit a conventional notion of dignity as a serious obstacle in the way of a necessary humbling of oneself before the other. For Cavell, it is one of the many "virtue[s]" of the heroes of remarriage comedies that they "be willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity" (8). Is dignity overrated? Certainly standing on one's dignity, or holding

it too closely, or cultivating a “false dignity” is, as Susan Ireland discovers. She learns that her own studied performance of dignified coldness in the face of a perceived injustice (enacted primarily for Steve’s benefit at the party and at the lawyer’s office, among other settings) must be given up in order to laugh with her husband at the perpetual human tendency for error and misunderstanding. In other words, a tragic worldview is given up for a comic one. Susan’s eventual delight in Steve’s outrageous and elaborate performance of matronly femininity (a burlesque of female dignity) marks the point at which she has given up a certain vision of gendered respectability and is ready to laugh at herself and the world. Steve’s flamboyant cross-dressing performance allows Susan to see the ways in which her own attempts at dignity have also been performative, and a betrayal of who she understands herself to be. Susan’s obvious happiness in rediscovering her better instincts of generosity and openness (learning that “of course she knew” she could trust Steve) signals that she has overcome certain of her own weaknesses and shortcomings. She has learned to look smilingly on those character flaws she knows she lives with and has discovered, via Steve, that many of her shortcomings have been replicated from her overbearing mother. In doing so, she seems to take an amused and slightly resigned attitude toward the possibility of ever fully overcoming her own tendency to folly. Such an acknowledgment, this film suggests, is crucial in reaffirming a marriage.

The film also asks whether our own desire as audience members to see the marriage continue isn’t an equally mad or misplaced one. David Shumway takes it to be a token cynical commercial manipulation that “screwball comedies typically position the viewer as the subject of their romance so that he or she must feel marriage as the thing desired.”¹⁷ But is it something we are right to desire? Can we justifiably hope that such insanity be prolonged? In so relentlessly foregrounding the particular possibilities of unhappiness entailed within the married state, along with the countless misunderstandings that emerge between the married pair, don’t the films of this genre thereby acknowledge the extraordinary—perhaps ultimately impossible—effort required to maintain a marriage? Part of the genius of the films lies in their acknowledgment that we as viewers also need convincing of the viability of the onscreen marriage—and thus of the institution itself. We watch for signs that the couple is in-

17. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 82.

deed well-suited, that they are attuned to each other, and that there is indeed “no one else with whom they would rather quarrel.”¹⁸ But we also look for signs that the married state is, or can be, a desirable one—worthy of the continuous effort and unavoidable appearance of insanity it entails. Cavell writes that the couple must understand themselves as a “rich and sophisticated pair who speak intelligently and who infuriate and appreciate one another more than anyone else” (*Pursuits* 18). Undertaking this particular project may well appear as madness to the world beyond the couple, yet *Love Crazy* finds a way to affirm it as the best of all possible worlds.

II. Marriage as Improvisation

Part of what the external world beyond the pair mistakenly sees as markers of insanity is merely the result of the necessary improvisations on which a marriage relies. The pairs in this genre all share (or else discover) a delight in improvisation—a perpetual appetite for being surprised by the other. In the midst of the fatal courtroom scene, the gathered witnesses look scornfully on Susan’s admission that Steve, on their anniversary, suggested doing the entire elaborate evening backwards, chalking it up as further evidence of his mental decay. To a gathering of objective and dispassionate onlookers, the suggestion seems unhinged. But what, in a marriage, can be legitimately done backwards? And what must be done conventionally? What is the married pair free to invent and improvise between themselves, and which social norms still need to be upheld? These are questions that the marriage will keep on throwing up, and on which agreements will need to be reached.

One of the striking features of a remarriage comedy is that no member of the audience could chart an easy path for the pair to find their way back to each other. The return should seem impossible, and as though it will take a miracle to effect—in this genre, a secularized miracle, refigured as a series of improbable hijinks. But the very improbability of *Love Crazy*’s hijinks (the cross-dressing, the false imprisonment, and so on) speak to the ways in which the marriage itself must be continuously improvised, left open to the vagaries of chance. In the narrative before us, chance has

18. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 18.

ultimately tended in a fortuitous direction, though of course there is no guarantee that it will always do so. (Indeed, in the opening scenes of comic misunderstanding, it is happenstance that has driven the pair apart: without a slip on an unwanted rug, a broken elevator, and a mistaken entry into the wrong apartment, there is no quarrel to set the plot in motion). Being married, the film teaches, entails accepting an alarming degree of randomness, and acknowledging that unforeseen events may well fundamentally alter a relationship. This awareness is at the heart of Cavell's implicit claim that marriage is a perfectionist pursuit with no preordained endpoint but rather a series of shared aspirations, in which what the pair aspire to is a richer and more meaningful union. It is as much a verb as a noun. As Steve and Susan discover, it may not always be "delightful to *be* married," but there are considerable delights to be found in the search for such a state. That this search is itself an unpredictable one, requiring countless improvisations along the way, is a fact that Susan and Steve learn to delight in.

III. The Privacy of Marriage

One of the key claims of *Pursuits of Happiness* is that there is no longer any external authority with which to authorize a marriage (not the church, says Cavell, nor the law, tradition, or children), meaning that the pair will have to find such an authority for themselves. An important implication is that there is likewise no authority who can pronounce an accurate *verdict* on the state of any given marriage: it is something that can only be understood and assessed from inside. Cary Grant's character, in *His Girl Friday*, ridicules all would-be external judgments, characterizing divorce as merely "some words mumbled over you by a judge." A similar contempt for such judgments is also present throughout *Love Crazy*. It is telling that both the court and the Insanity Commission find Steve to be of unsound mind, thus ruling his marriage to be—and in fact to have always been, since the court finds traces of his decline as far back as the wedding night, where he insisted on enacting the marriage ritual of the "Batten Land Eskimos"—likewise unsound. But their rulings are merely the most institutional incarnations of the film's many verdicts on the state of the Ireland marria-

ge: we have already heard Isobel Grayson liken the marriage to a stylized corpse (in her accusation that Steve has been “embalmed”) as well as Mrs. Cooper’s many uncharitable assessments of the pair. Even the housekeeper’s characterization of the Irelands as “lovebirds” in an early sequence is faintly irritating (to Steve, at least), implying yet another mistaken assessment of what these two mean to each other. Likewise, Dr. Wuthering will later make stern pronouncements on what will “cure” both Steve’s insanity and the marriage—he tells Susan both that she must kiss Steve whenever he requests her to do so and, revealingly, that she “humor” his every whim. (Dr. Klugel has issued similar advice earlier.) All such judgments, the film makes clear, are entirely spurious: they arise either from an uncharitable and ungenerous stance toward the couple, or else are rash verdicts and prescriptions based on what Steve has previously called “inconclusive evidence.” They claim to know far more than they have grounds for knowing. At the heart of the film is thus a question about who might rightly claim to be an authority on another person. Who, precisely, is in a position to judge another’s character? Who might pass judgment on how another inhabits the world? *Love Crazy’s* answer is that where a married couple is concerned, all external claims to such an authority are invalid, since they are inevitably done in the wrong spirit and are thus fated to misperceive the couple’s true character. The only person fit to judge the sanity or otherwise of Steve Ireland is his wife, and then only after she has regained her faith in their shared project of marriage itself.

We might well view such external judgments as allegories for the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that post-critique literary scholars have taken issue with in recent years, as a “mood” and style of criticism in which the interpreter assumes far too much knowledge and superiority over the object of interpretation.¹⁹ Beyond being merely benignly misguided, the external judges of the Ireland marriage make hasty and uncharitable assessments, presuming that they know far more than the couple do about their own state of affairs. If heeded, the consequences of their assessments would be disastrous. It is an interpretive stance that the camera itself warns us to take no part in, since it instead finds pleasure in granting the Irelands privacy away from the overly presumptuous gaze of the world, giving us ways to look upon this couple that are conspira-

19. Rita Felski characterizes such interpretations as inhabiting a certain “mood” in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20.

torially linked with both their own aspirations and their particular way of seeing each other. This viewing stance is particularly obvious in sly and strategically replicated shots of the couple's ploys in deceiving onlookers as to the true identity of "Miss" Ireland. When Steve's garter comes loose, for instance, or when his false bosom unravels, the camera delights in screening off Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper, and letting us in on the subterfuge. The camera lingers appreciatively on the couple's ruse and is clearly on their side, as by this point viewers of the narrative surely are as well.

By comically pointing out the faulty judgments of external figures, the film asks whether we as viewers, with our own far more substantial knowledge of both sides of the story (via dramatic ironies that give us more information on the other half of the pair), could justly adjudicate whether the pair should remain together. Are the Irelands really "meant for each other," as Steve (as Miss Ireland) claims? What verdict would we ourselves make? Is Steve justified in having gone out for a drink with an old flame on the night of his wedding anniversary? (Do the not inconsiderable irritations of Mrs. Cooper make this act permissible, in spite of Steve's knowledge of how it will surely appear to Susan?) Is Susan right to have hit so quickly upon the plan of orchestrating a scene wherein Steve and Isobel would find her and Mr. Grayson embracing? (Is her desire to "teach him a lesson" of this kind a justifiable reaction?) The film's conclusion, in which the door to the bedroom closes and we, like Mrs. Cooper, are locked out and on the wrong side, suggests that as viewers we ourselves might be almost as hapless as the court in judging the validity or otherwise of the marriage bond. Cavell reminds us of the essential hiddenness of all successful marriages, a lesson dramatized in one way or another in all the films of this genre.²⁰ And though the later sequence of bedside table shots will give us considerably more access to their private world than is granted to Mrs. Cooper, the camera only affords us a glimpse of a forearm, and two brief lines of dialogue. As Steve hangs the phone in its cradle and the screen fades to black, the pair retreat to a private sphere. (And will soon retreat to a sphere more private still—not the "green world" of Connecticut that so often provides the final resting point for the couple in such films, but Canada, a world in which Susan and Steve, via the Eskimo rituals of their wedding night, are more at home.) They have at last escaped the "cross-city traffic" of both the external world (as set up

20. *Ibid.*, 195.

in the film's opening frame) and the social world of misguided judgments (signalled at the beginning by Steve's assessment of the housekeeper's misguided commentary) that only they themselves are in a position to make. There is an important sense in which the couple form an island, as their surname punningly suggests. It may well be the case that no (single) man or woman is an island, but a married pair might well be.

All of which is to say that marriage creates gestures and signs and a language that are fully interpretable by only two people, and will be impenetrable to those on the outside looking in, who will be forever bound to misunderstand them. The film gives us more access to the world shared by the couple than that of any other character, though we are of course still held at a discreet remove. Such a notion extends the familiar idea that we love those with whom we share adjectives, and in whose language we become more and more expert, such that we can arrive at a point at which we know precisely what another person means by *generous*, say, or *kind*. (Which may be as close as we ever come to having a private language between two people.) What does *trust* mean between this pair? What does it mean to be *confused*? Just as Adam and Amanda Bonner, in *Adam's Rib*, "invent gallantry" between themselves, as Cavell says, the Ireland (again, Island) couple will have to negotiate these meanings privately, in order to find the particular virtues and understandings that will sustain and be useful to them.

IV. Scenes of Instruction

There are other important moments of instruction in the film. Steve, for instance, comes to understand that certain crises in a marriage cannot be laughed away, as he has attempted in the face of Susan's serious questions about his evening with Isobel Grayson. (Serious, that is, to *her*; not yet serious to him.) Indeed, Steve's cavalier response to the events of the ruined evening only deepens the wound. Changing tack, Steve has also tried soothing Susan in placating tones reminiscent of those he used in the elevator, as to an obstinate (and, tellingly, female) horse; but in this case, the object of his linguistic caresses is not nearly as pliable. Other male protagonists in adjacent films within the genre have also tried laughing off the complaints or suspicions or accusations of their wives, all equally to no avail. Adam Bonner, in *Adam's Rib*, for

instance, tries to laugh off his wife's long-pent grievances about gender inequalities in their profession, as does Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday*, who repeatedly makes light of Hildy's various complaints. But these are not grievances that can be so lightly dismissed. The "new woman," as Cavell dubs her, must be heard out—her desires acknowledged, her questions, complaints, and enthusiasms treated with the seriousness she brings to them herself.²¹ Indeed, the lightness of response on the part of these uncomprehending husbands brings about further separation. Unable to comprehend the extent of their own shortcomings, failures, and thoughtlessness, they require instruction from their wives. Each of them bears what Cavell memorably characterizes as "the taint of villainy," which, though it cannot be expunged entirely, can be lessened by the right sort of wife.²²

And yet the wives in these films are also themselves instructed: what they learn, and have need of learning, varies dramatically from film to film, but in *Love Crazy*, Susan is schooled on the role that trust might play within a marriage. "There's no marriage without trust," Susan tells Steve bitterly at the garden party, referring to what she understands as Steve's lies about Isobel but unwilling to recognise the cautious trust he has placed in her unlikely explanation of her own evening with Willoughby. Susan here exhibits what Tracey Lord, in *The Philadelphia Story*, calls "the wrong kind of imagination"—a tendency to suspect the worst, by uncharitably interpreting a spouse's behaviour.

Though Susan wishes to "teach Steve a lesson," it is she herself who the film will also find ways of schooling. Eventually, Susan will realise that she has known the truth of Steve's innocence all along. She rediscovers her innate impulse to look at him generously, lovingly, even—at times—indulgently. Across the film, Susan has been testing an intuition: her sense that Steve has very likely betrayed her with Isobel Grayson. What a relief to discover that she has been wrong! And that she can therefore return to the generous impulses that are more native to her disposition. (The particularities of Loy's comportment and face are crucial to this transformation, which makes full use of her ability to convey a haughty and self-consciously dignified detachment from the world, yet with a lingering suggestion that she would throw away

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 216.

such dignity for wild laughter or passion if given half a chance.²³) It is significant that Susan is also schooled on her sexual and romantic desires. As with almost all the other heroines in the films Cavell places in the genre, Susan toys with the idea of taking up with a completely different kind of man, one who represents—by virtue of his conventional masculinity, his lack of true appreciation of her, as well as his unintelligence and unwillingness for conversation—a serious regression. (It is telling that Willoughby is unable to recognize Steve under his costume until the very last moment.) Susan will eventually take herself to have been temporarily insane for having ever entertained the possibility that he could be a suitable partner. Maria Di Battista notes that one of the primary flaws of the analogous Ralph Bellamy character in *The Awful Truth* is that he can't distinguish between a guffaw and a laugh, and certainly can't appreciate one of the "grand laughs" that Irene Dunne and Cary Grant enjoy together.²⁴ Willoughby is also deaf to this distinction: he laughs in the wrong ways and at the wrong things. His comedic tastes are for simple mockery, as in the delight he takes in his childish impression of blubbering idiocy. (It means something very different, something far more sophisticated and ironic, when Steve returns the gesture in the final scene. The last laugh enjoyed by Steve is a world away from Willoughby's cruel snickers.) Willoughby also laughs mirthlessly at things he is unable to comprehend, as in his repeated response—"Say, you're kind of funny..."—in the face of what he understands as Susan's attempts at seduction. Susan's increasing impatience with Willoughby has much to do with his deficient sense of comedy and understanding. The smile that Myrna Loy works hard to repress during Steve's cross-dressing performance is the final lesson in what constitutes the right kind of laughter.

Love Crazy also finds ways of transforming Susan's excessive pride, along with a tendency to stand on her dignity. Myrna Loy played with her "unaffectedly regal" appearance masterfully across the course of her career, but does so in particularly ex-

23. For more on Loy's peculiar expressions and filmic demeanour, see Leider and DiBattista, who notes that "[a] laugh was always lurking in her eyes, the happy product of some distillation of high spirits. Such qualities make Loy the most *companionable* of modern women—witty, unaffectedly but unmistakably intelligent, and reliably good-humored" (136, italics in original).

24. DiBattista is particularly sharp on the threat that such a figure poses within these comedies: "Marriage to the 'wrong' man is the original sin of the comic world, because it is through marriage that comedy signals its commitment to a social future populated by happy, compatible, and, it is hoped, fruitful human beings. Comedies often flirt with the 'bad' marriage to show us the difference between irreversible moral collapse and the happy fall of comedy, by which young lovers lose a false pride in themselves to gain a true sense of what they are worth to each other" (21).

pert ways here. One senses that perhaps more than anything else, it is Susan's pride that has been wounded by what she suspects to be Steve's philandering. She has fallen in her own estimation (earlier, she has sought assurance from Steve that she is a not "the jealous type"), in part because her marriage is not on as firm a footing as she believed. She is also perhaps too attracted to predictability, as her love of repeating exactly the same wedding night rituals on every anniversary makes clear. She is enough of a good sport about many of Steve's ludicrous capers, including his suggestion to enact their evening in reverse, but is instinctively less spontaneous, less inclined to fun. Steve's corresponding weakness is an excessive flippancy, a tendency to treat others' emotions and reactions frivolously, and an often-misguided impulse to search for comic ways out of disagreements that are simply insoluble by such means (as during the hallway fracas, when he suggests that the five of them "room together all through school!"). He is perhaps also too attracted to spontaneity and improvisation, as his proposed reversal of the anniversary night ritual makes clear. These are not necessarily fatal flaws within a tragedy, but they are evidently fatal enough to the prospect of sustaining the "meet and happy conversation" that is their marriage.²⁵ Both Susan and Steve want the other to recognise and acknowledge their particular virtues and shortcomings. Finding a way back together will involve finding new ways of appreciating precisely these particularities.

The film is also eloquent on the dangers of complacency for a successful marriage, the learning of which comprises yet another important scene of instruction for the Irelands. This theme is heralded in the very first scene, in which Powell reprises a song from *The Great Ziegfeld*—"It's Delightful to be Married"—whose sentiment speaks to a perhaps unearned self-satisfaction, and an untroubled delight in an arrangement that takes its pleasures for granted, as something that can be eternally counted on. (The song's later lyrics rashly anticipate a child and a love that endures until old age, when "I will be a gay old party / You will be a grand old dame.") Such uxorious sentiments, the film suggests, while not entirely misplaced, run the risk of leading Steve into a position of complacency, and are thus in need of modification. Is it really delightful to "be" married? Is the state of being married an ever-desirable one? Or is

25. Cavell, "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager*," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1990): 216.

it only in the never-ending affirmation of marriage, in the continual *choosing* to be married (as Cavell says), that one might have a chance of discovering delight? One is a form of stasis, a static endpoint; the other is a perfectionist process, a becoming. Of course, it also matters that there is no narrative left once one has reached such an endpoint. Narrative is only possible if the couple continually discover on what grounds they might be said to “be” married. The film asks whether singing such a song wholeheartedly might be an admission of having been “embalmed” (as in Isabel’s haunting accusation) rather than being *married*. Would it be to consent to a life of inertia, rather than a dynamic and ever-shifting conversation? It is significant that all three times this song plays, something goes horribly, comically wrong—first the broken elevator, then the arrival of a meddlesome mother-in-law, and at last the unraveling of a false bosom. It is as if the film finds its purpose in undoing the song’s overconfidence, renouncing its hasty celebration of a state that requires real work to sustain. *Love Crazy* teaches that a successful marriage requires vigilance—a healthy fear and respect for all that might go awry—in ways that the song does not allow for. One suspects that Steve, having learned such a lesson, will have no further use for this particular tune—as has been prophesied by the footman in the opening scene.

V. Marriage and the Performance of Gender

Why does *Love Crazy* end on such an extended cross-dressing scene? Its sheer audacity and length are extraordinary: it goes well beyond the fleeting uses of such male-to-female performances in other films of the genre, as in Cary Grant’s brief moments wearing Susan Vance’s furred gown in *Bringing up Baby* or Adam Bonner’s portrayal of “womanly” tears in the final scene of *Adam’s Rib*. In full makeup and costume, Powell plays a woman for an astonishing seventeen-and-a-half minutes, in a performance so convincing that it fools Willoughby, Mrs. Cooper, and a roomful of police officers. Indeed, it is remarkable that the scene escaped censorship, since even in script form it struck the Production Code Authority as containing “[o]ffensive sex suggestiveness and perversion,” a suspicion that was later confirmed as unequivocally

“suggesting perversion.”²⁶ And what does it mean that Steve dresses as a Victorian matron, with the infamous sexual repression this era implies?²⁷ The first thing to note is that the ruse goes on for far longer than is strictly necessary: both spouses are clearly enjoying playing the game, both for the affordances of truth-telling it allows (as in Steve’s gleeful disapproval of the rug, and in rebutting Mrs. Cooper’s uncharitable claims against her “brother”) and for the experimental relation it situates them in with respect to each other. (This scene is the culmination of the logic of improvisation that they have both followed throughout.) It is also worth noting that since Mrs. Cooper is staying the night, Susan’s plan to take Miss Ireland back to Saskatchewan in the morning will surely entail further roleplay: they will presumably have to leave the apartment under Mrs. Cooper’s watchful eye, and make it out of the building without being detected.

(I want to bracket off the likely objection that Powell’s performance is inherently disrespectful—that it mocks queer or transgender identities. The same performance in a 2020 film might justifiably be read this way, but it would be anachronistic to read such hostility or deliberate offence back into this film. I will leave a queer reading of this scene to others, and try instead to interpret it on its own terms, as a wildly inventive solution to the problem of how to draw a number of complex plot strands together.²⁸)

Is this final cross-dressing scene an argument for seeing gender itself as being nothing more than a kind of a performance, along Butlerian lines? Is it a suggestion that we are forever doomed to dramatize social conventions and expectations of those constrictive mannerisms, speech types, and behaviours that supposedly ought to characterize being a man or woman? This would be one possibility, but Steve’s performance also serves to remind both of them that they are in fact freer in these gender roles than they have previously realised. Elizabeth Kraft is right to posit the creation of a “new man” in these remarriage comedies, alongside the “new woman” heralded

26. For a detailed account of the PCA response to this film, and the negotiations and compromises with the filmmakers, see Jane M. Greene, “A Proper Dash of Spice: Screwball Comedy and the Production Code,” *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 3 (2011): 45-63.

27. Leider points out that Myrna Loy as Nora Charles disguised herself as a man to search a warehouse in a scene that was cut from *The Thin Man*, but there is no such experimentation with gender (in the figures of either Loy or Powell) in this series.

28. Lee Wallace’s recently published *Reattachment Theory: Queer Cinema of Remarriage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020) offers a fascinating account of queer films in light of Cavell’s remarriage themes that may very well offer a productive template for this kind of reading.

by Cavell, and this scene seems in part to be a means for Steve to discover what such an identity will consist in.²⁹ Part of what he signals is a willingness to sacrifice aspects of his masculinity—traditionally understood—for the right kind of woman. As in the Woolf epigraph, he aims to show Susan that one can indeed be a “woman-manly, or a man-womanly.” Clearly, Steve has become at least temporarily more like a woman, with what has traditionally been taken (and which Mrs. Cooper herself understands) as feminine emotions, speech, and behavioural stylizations, as well as patriarchally embedded beliefs, such as the duty to defend men’s honour (in this case her “brother”).³⁰ Likewise, Susan might be said to have been taught by the film’s narrative to become more like her husband’s version of masculinity, with a fondness for hi-jinks and games, and a willingness to laugh in the face of authority—not least of which is the oppressive authority of a mother. And there is yet another aspect of education in these scenes, since surely parts of Steve’s performance will linger on: he has played at being a woman, with all the physical difficulties and unwieldy accoutrements such a social position entails, and will surely bring some of that knowledge into his understanding of his own masculinity and marriage. The couple also acquire knowledge about the nature of trust: there may be “no such thing as marriage based on deceit,” as Susan has said to Steve, but this particular deception saves the marriage, since it is part of what allows Susan to realise the depth of Steve’s devotion and her own unconscious replication of behaviors that the culture takes to be inherently feminine. She has been given a distorted funhouse-mirror image of both her mother and herself, which has stunned her into deeper self-recognition.

The performance also lets Susan realise some further differences between her own gender possibilities and those available to Mrs. Cooper, and it is significant that in *Love Crazy* the new woman comes into the world right under the nose of an overbearing and uncomprehending mother. By burlesquing Victorian matronly disapproval, with its readiness to pronounce rash moral and character judgments, Steve allows Susan to see her mother’s profound shortcomings. “You have more influence over Susan than you realize,” Miss Ireland warns, adding, significantly, that Susan may equally be “more influenced that she realizes as well.” (Revealingly, Steve mi-

29. Elizabeth Kraft, *Restoration Stage Comedies and Hollywood Remarriage Films: In Conversation with Stanley Cavell* (London: Routledge, 2016).

30. It is also significant that William Powell had to shave off his trademark moustache for this role.

mics Mrs. Cooper's patrician pronunciation of Susan's name—as "*Syou-san*"—while in character.) For the marriage to resume, Susan must first acknowledge and then free herself from her meddling mother's hold over her own imagination.³¹ That Steve can so easily parody and pass for such a woman speaks volumes on how stilted, affected, contrived, and conventional the Old Woman really is. A New Woman would not be so easy to play.

In an earlier scene in Dr. Wuthering's office, Susan was well and truly justified in complaining that the rules governing the relation between the genders are "too one-sided." But how might one go about correcting them? One solution offered by the film is to have a husband feel, even briefly, what it means to be taken for a woman, and to have to behave *as* a woman. Steve's willingness to play this role is the culmination of a string of alternately virtuosic and hammy performances across the film: he has already played at being a Native American, a Roman senator, a teapot, and Abraham Lincoln, among others, as well as the performance of insanity that has duped medical professionals. Steve has also already demonstrated that he can dial his masculinity up or down as required, as in the opening apartment scene where he responds in an exaggeratedly deep voice. His earlier suggestion that he and Susan turn everything on its head is here fulfilled in a vaudevillian parody of gender conventions.

It is also worth noting again that the camera becomes much more obviously on the Irelands' side during these final scenes. In the scene in which Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper are bitterly chronicling all of Steve's failures, as a man and husband, the camera takes no part in their complaints, and like us, is far more interested in the fun that the married pair is having while concealing their shared deception. The camera lingers appreciatively on the couple's ruse and is clearly on their side in the dress-unraveling sequences. (There is a visual echo, in these moments, of the way in which the camera lets us in on the ploy used by Irene Dunne to win custody of Asta in *The Awful Truth*.) And one feels the camera's joy even more acutely in the final moments, when during a long two-shot, Susan takes her mother firmly by the shoulders and switches positions with her. In this strange sequence, the both women make a 180-degree about-face, such that Susan moves from being on the left of screen to being on

31. Cavell notes that the father figure in remarriage comedies is always on the side of the daughter's happiness, so it is significant here that no father is present (or even mentioned) and that Susan's mother is either knowingly or unknowingly against her daughter's happiness.

the right. Prosaically, this shift occurs because Susan wants to cut off the possibility of her mother walking in on Steve undressing from his costume, but it also works as a powerful visual metaphor for the New Woman quite literally replacing the Old. She corrects their positions before the camera's eye, such that they correspond to the universal placement of "Before" and "After." The advances in female consciousness and understanding that Cavell and others have traced throughout the 1930s is here made concrete, and our delight at this switch is one of the most purely pleasurable moments in the film. Susan is no longer "confused"—she has shed her allegiance and devotion to her mother's anachronistic worldview, and is ready to reaffirm a new way of life with her husband.

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In responding to *Love Crazy* throughout this essay, I have been trying to follow an intuition that the film has much to tell us about marriage. It seems to know particular things about the married state, doing its thinking from within the medium of an early-1940s Hollywood comedy. For all of the reasons I have given, I take this film to deserve a place within Cavell's canon of the very best comedies of remarriage, since it is equally capable—alongside *Adam's Rib*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, *The Awful Truth*, and *Bringing up Baby*—of revealing philosophical, cultural, and matrimonial knowledge. *Love Crazy*, like the other films of this genre interpreted by Cavell, attempts a "feat of philosophical imagination" that has gone woefully underappreciated.³² We err gravely in our habitual assumptions that such films are mere frivolous confections, or else noxious vehicles of patriarchal or capitalist ideology. This film is far from "froth." As crazy as the claim will doubtless seem to some, *Love Crazy* is endlessly insightful on the delights and difficulties of marriage.

32. James Conant, "An Interview with Stanley Cavell," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 68–69.