

“He Isn’t Exactly My Brother”: Shakespearean Illogic in *The Palm Beach Story*

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Although Stanley Cavell disparaged *The Palm Beach Story*, this article argues that the film epitomizes a Cavellian comedy of remarriage. More than any of the screwball comedies in Cavell’s classic study, *The Palm Beach Story* borrows its madcap plot twists from Shakespearean comedies. While Preston Sturges pays homage to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Comedy of Errors*, he also exposes the illogic of plots built on interchangeable characters. Both Shakespeare and Sturges rely on impersonation and disguise, but while Shakespeare uses them to unite his men and women in matrimony, Sturges uses them to distinguish between the authentic experience and the performance of love.

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Forty years ago, Stanley Cavell made the academic study of screwball comedy respectable. In *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981), Cavell argued that seven movies made between 1934 and 1949 – *It Happened One Night*, *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Adam’s Rib* – represent both a pinnacle of Hollywood filmmaking and a reimagining “of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy” (Cavell 1981, 1). Cavell asserts that this reimagining takes the form of the comedy of remarriage, which he insists is a peculiarly American genre. These movies offer second chances, and America is the land of

second chances¹. Remarriage is the subject of *The Awful Truth*, for example, in which Cary Grant and Irene Dunne reunite seconds before their divorce is finalized, or *The Philadelphia Story*, in which Katharine Hepburn calls off her wedding to her fiancé only to remarry her ex-husband at the same ceremony. Cavell devoted less than one sentence to his book's most glaring omission: Preston Sturges's *The Palm Beach Story* (1942). The film, Cavell insisted, "multiplies remarriages beyond necessity, or credibility" (Cavell 1981, 225)². Cavell is referring to the movie's final shot in which the film's stars Claudette Colbert and Joel McCrea (twins A and B) are revealed to have identical twins (twins C and D) who are reluctantly enlisted to marry the siblings (Rudy Vallée and Mary Astor) who have earlier set their hearts on twins A and B in a double wedding ceremony. This 'unnecessary' and 'incredible' plot twist clearly borrows from such Shakespearean works as *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sturges is Shakespeare's heir. He serves up language – puns, allusions, malapropisms, double entendres – in rapid strokes and extended rallies.

This affinity has not gone unobserved. Some critics have called Sturges the "most 'American'" of all directors (Jaeckle 2015, 1).

¹ In fact, *The Palm Beach Story* offers us second chances to delight in the screwball comedy itself. *It Happened One Night* invented the genre. The film starts off with Colbert leaping off of a yacht in Florida, and the hero and heroine set off by bus and car to New York together. New York is the setting of almost every screwball comedy to follow. *The Palm Beach Story* takes the original screwball heroine (Claudette Colbert) and reverses her journey. She starts off in New York and makes her way by train and finally a yacht to Florida (see footnote 2 below). This in turn inspired the late screwball comedy *Some Like It Hot*. Marilyn Monroe sets off on a train from Chicago to Florida. On the beach she meets Tony Curtis putting on Cary Grant's accent to impersonate Rudy Vallée's John D. Hackensacker. Vallée brought Colbert to Palm Beach aboard his yacht; Curtis borrows a yacht to convince Monroe that he, a broke saxophone player, is, like Hackensacker, the heir to the Shell Oil fortune.

² Stuart Klawans notices Cavell's strange omission, but focusing on Claudette Colbert's career, makes a very different argument. See Klawans 2005.

Others have noted that his brilliant dialogue is the result of his unconventional upbringing:

In recounting the familiar story of Mary Desti dragging the young Preston back and forth from Paris to Chicago and New York, critic Richard Schickel contends that these experiences engendered in Sturges a “partial alienation [that] shaped his sensibility”. This alienation, he argues, is why Sturges was such a talented wordsmith, especially when it came to appreciating American colloquialisms. It also developed in him a sense of skepticism: the ability to observe without judging, to mock without criticizing. (12)³

This wordsmith has been compared to Ben Hecht, Billy Wilder, and Orson Welles, but also Voltaire, Racine, Swift, and Twain (13). I do not hesitate to read his words beside Shakespeare’s.

Nor do I hesitate to observe where Sturges makes his own idiosyncratic, arguably American use of Shakespeare’s plots and comic stratagems. Thus, I read the structure of *The Palm Beach Story* as the screenplay hints that we should, as a tennis racket with tightly woven, beautifully balanced strings surrounded by a frame. The interweaving of the firm, immobile warp and the looser, flexible woof threads creates the tension and release necessary to both tennis and screwball comedy. In Shakespearean comedy, identity, always in flux, could be represented by the woof. But Sturges’s hero, Tom Jeffers, exemplifies the warp. Sturges, I will argue, believes that marital happiness requires a steadfast, unwavering identity. Both Shakespeare and Sturges rely on impersonation and disguise, but while Shakespeare uses them to unite his men and women in matrimony, Sturges uses them to distinguish between the authentic experience and the performance of love. *The Palm Beach Story* intricately engages with the mechanics and actively opposes the logic of Shakespearean comedy, particularly its obsession with transformation and metamorphosis. It is particularly evocative of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But Sturges, as always, upends our expectations. His madcap movie

³ Jaeckle quotes Schickel 1985, 33.

with lightning-fast dialogue and constant movement celebrates stasis. Tom Jeffers, like such virginal heroines as the Sabrina of *Comus* or the Lizzie of "Goblin Market", is the fairy tale hero who must undergo tests and withstand temptations. All the forces of the film (including his wife) are working mightily to discombobulate him. He retains a core self. He refuses to change⁴.

The Palm Beach Story begins with a frame narrative reminiscent of such comedies as *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the wordless sequence, a maid faints after seeing Claudette Colbert in a bridal gown. When she comes to, she finds another Claudette Colbert (gagged and bound in only a slip and heels) kicking her way out of a locked closet and faints again. These scenes are intercut with clips of one Joel McCrea in a tuxedo hailing a taxi and another Joel McCrea putting on a tuxedo in a different cab. One Joel McCrea and one Claudette Colbert manage to make it to the church in time to be wed. Embroidered words emerge on the screen telling us that "they lived happily ever after": "or did they?"⁵. Five years pass, and in

⁴ In Cavell's readings, love *is* performance. In *It Happened One Night*, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert fall in love by performing the roles of feuding spouses. In *His Girl Friday*, Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant rediscover their love for each other by playing innocent together after hiding a wanted murderer in a desk. In *The Awful Truth*, Irene Dunne wins Cary Grant back from his snobbish fiancé by pretending to be his vulgar sister. Cavell's couples love to reenact childhood together. In *Bringing Up Baby*, Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant slide down hills and wander into water as they go in search of bones and leopards. In *Adam's Rib*, Hepburn and Spencer Tracy delight in showing their guests home movies of themselves behaving like kids. Cavell makes much of the fact that Hepburn and Grant (in *The Philadelphia Story*) grew up together. They need to be reunited to recapture those childhood joys. Yet each of the performers Cavell discusses assumes his or her part *voluntarily*. Joel McCrea's Tom Jeffers is a rare example in screwball comedy of a coerced performer. Before he can utter a word, his wife introduces him to the Hackensackers (Vallée and Astor) as her brother, "Captain McGlue". Being the gentleman he is, Tom goes along with her ruse, but never easily or happily. Tom refuses to improvise. He refuses to retreat into childhood. Despite the fact that the Hackensackers are too self-involved to catch on, Tom remains a husband and a grown-up.

⁵ All the quotations from *The Palm Beach Story* are taken from Sturges 1942.

Act I (“New York”) we meet Colbert (Gerry Jeffers) living in a Park Avenue duplex which is being shown to prospective tenants because she and McCrea (Tom Jeffers) have failed to pay the rent. Hiding in a wrapper in her tub, she meets “the Wienie King”, who decides not to rent her apartment for himself, but to give her \$700 to pay the rent and other bills. That night Colbert tells McCrea that it’s time for them to split up because she’ll never make him a good wife as she can’t cook or sew, and he’ll never be able to save a dime with her around. McCrea wants them to stay together but agrees to spend the night on the couch. Unable to unhook her dress, Gerry sits in his lap while Tom tries to unzip it, and within seconds is kissing him and being carried off to bed by him. The next morning Gerry packs a bag and heads to Penn Station to get a quick divorce in Palm Beach. Running away from Tom, she loses her suitcase, but in Act II (“The Train”) gets a free ticket from a group of drunk hunters, the Ale and Quail Club. We do not appear to have entered Arden or the Athenian forest, but the comic arc is taking us from an economically and morally straightened urban environment to a more anarchic realm where chaos and questionable mores reign supreme. Meanwhile, the Wienie King has moved into Tom and Gerry’s building. He asks Tom why he doesn’t fly down to Palm Beach and meet Gerry when she arrives, then hands him enough cash for the flight. During the night, the Club starts shooting up the train. Gerry takes refuge in the bunk above John D. Hackensacker III, one of the richest men in the world. The next morning she finds that the hunters’ car has been disconnected from the train and that she now has no clothes or purse. Hackensacker takes her to a Jacksonville department store where he buys her an enormous wardrobe. Then, aboard his yacht, they sail into Act III (“Palm Beach”). Waiting for them are both Tom and Hackensacker’s much-married sister, Maud. Determined to snag Hackensacker as her next husband, Gerry introduces Tom as her brother Captain McGlue, and we learn that Maud calls her brother “Snoodles”. We are now in the enchanted realm promised us by Gerry’s meeting Hackensacker. Here, as in *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, partners may be switched and magical interventions may

take place. Gerry plots to have Hackensacker pay Tom for her divorce with the \$99,000 Tom needs to build his "most remarkable invention", an airport strung like a tennis racket to be built in the air over New York City. Maud falls for Captain McGlue, Hackensacker for Gerry. But that night Gerry once again cannot unhook her dress. She reluctantly asks Tom for help and within seconds has collapsed into his arms. The next morning, as they pack to leave, Gerry reveals the truth to Hackensacker and Maud: "He isn't exactly my brother [...]. He's my husband". The heartbroken Hackensacker wonders if Gerry has a sister.

GERRY

Only a twin sister.

HACKENSACKER

A twin sister?

GERRY

Oh, didn't you know about that? That's how we were married in the beginning both being twins.

TOM

Of course, that's another plot entirely.

And within seconds we cut to the final shot of Gerry and Tom serving as witnesses at the wedding of Hackensacker to Gerry's twin and Maud to Tom's twin. The dialogue here, as throughout *The Palm Beach Story*, is hilarious. Why would Vallée and Astor know that Colbert and McCrea met because they're both twins? Seconds earlier they believed them to be siblings. McCrea's "but that's another plot entirely" is doing more than breaking the fourth wall. If we suspected that we are seeing identical twins (and this is certainly not clear) in the opening minutes, we quickly forget about them as we try to keep up with the movie's series of madcap adventures and eccentric characters. But when the identical twins suddenly reappear, we may suspect that the entirely different plot to which Tom refers is that the Claudette Colbert who is gagged and locked in a closet has wanted to marry the Joel McCrea who marries her sister while the Joel McCrea who doesn't make it to the church on time has wanted to marry the Claudette Colbert who

marries his brother. We cannot know for sure if this is what Sturges had in mind, but if we follow the logic of Shakespearean comedy, this plot is neither ‘unnecessary’ nor ‘incredible’ but absolutely conventional. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia falls in love with Viola; when Viola’s twin Sebastian shows up, Olivia marries him immediately. In *The Comedy of Errors*, when Antipholus’s twin (also named Antipholus) begins to fall in love with his brother’s sister-in-law, she must rebuff him until she realizes that there are two brothers named Antipholus, and she is free to marry the one who isn’t married to her sister.

While we may have forgotten about the twin brothers of *The Palm Beach Story*’s opening scene, the entire third act of the film hinges on the masquerade that Tom is Gerry’s brother.

TOM

Where’d you get the brother idea?

GERRY

Because you had your arms around me.

TOM

Oh, I suppose no one’s ever had his arms around you except your brother, only you haven’t got one. I don’t suppose Captain Hackensacker ever put his arms around you.

GERRY

Of course not.

[...]

Naturally, he will put his arms around me when and if we’re engaged.

This quintessentially screwball dialogue – a woman telling her husband that he needs to pose as her brother so that she can marry one of the world’s richest men who will (as part of her divorce settlement) pay her first husband off with enough money to build his airport – is picked up again later that evening when Tom and Gerry part to sleep in separate bedrooms.

TOM

Won’t you kiss your brother goodnight?

GERRY

I don't know. I never had a brother before.

TOM

You have one now.

GERRY

You fool.

(*They kiss*).

At this moment, Snoodles interrupts their kiss by assembling an eighteen-piece orchestra beneath Gerry's balcony. The naive and inexperienced Snoodles is delighted to see both Tom and Gerry appear on the balcony as he sings "Goodnight, Sweetheart". The song has its intended effect. Gerry falls hopelessly in love – with her husband – as Snoodles serenades her. The scene should evoke for us one of Shakespeare's "remarriage" plots. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio is duped into believing that Hero, standing at her chamber window, is toying with another man. The next day, during their aborted wedding, Claudio accuses Hero of knowing "the heat of a luxurious bed" (IV.i.41)⁶, but her father suggests that it is Claudio himself with whom she has had premarital relations:

CLAUDIO

I know what you would say. If I have known her,
You will say she did embrace me as a husband,
And so extenuate the forehead sin.

No, Leonato,

I never tempted her with word too large,

But as a brother to his sister showed

Bashful sincerity and comely love. (48-54)

"And seemed I ever otherwise to you?" (55), begs Hero. Despite the fact that Shakespeare revisits the scene of the woman falsely accused in *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, we should not overlook the oddity of this particular scene – Claudio accuses a wanton harlot of wanting to marry him when he has never behaved as anything but a brother to her. Does this sound like the behavior of fiancés? Is Claudio suggesting that their courtship has never

⁶ All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Shakespeare 2005.

even hinted at sexuality? Or is he saying that there is as much if not more sexual heat between sisters and brothers as there is between fiancés? Why, if she is so oversexed, is Hero interested in marrying a man who treats her as a sister? This is not the first time Shakespeare has hinted at unnaturally close brother/sister attachments. Olivia, for example, refuses Orsino's attentions because she insists on mourning her dead brother for seven years. After Claudio disgraces Hero, a friar (as in *Romeo and Juliet*) convinces Hero to play dead. Meanwhile, Dogberry and his buffoonish band capture Borachio who confesses to Don John's plot against the pure and virtuous Hero. When Claudio learns that he has killed his beloved because of what he took for 'ocular proof', he agrees to marry Hero's cousin, "[a]lmost the copy of" (V.i.281) Hero. At the second wedding, Claudio takes the hand of the masked Hero:

CLAUDIO

[...]

I am your husband if you like of me.

HERO (*unmasking*)

And when I lived I was your other wife;

And when you loved, you were my other husband.

CLAUDIO

Another Hero! (V.iv.59-62)

Again, I find Claudio's response here odd. Instead of exclaiming, "Hero, you're alive!", he appears to believe that Hero is dead and that by some great good fortune her cousin actually is "the copy of" Hero. This is not the same Hero he fell in love with. This is *another Hero* who can substitute for the first. This is why, by the logic of Shakespearean comedy, we should not be surprised that Snoodles moves immediately from desiring Gerry – "I'll never get over it as long as I live" – to pining for her sister. Another Gerry, like another Hero, will do just fine. Snoodles does not question this logic; Sturges, however, does. Over and over in Shakespeare's comedies, doubles and twins are used to elide differences between characters. While the female characters – Rosalind, Portia, Viola –

are memorable, the male characters (as in *The Comedy of Errors*) are often deliberately interchangeable. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander and Hermia are in love, but Egeus, Hermia's father, demands that she marry Demetrius, who is loved by Helena. Even Hermia, who runs off with Lysander, cannot explain to her father why she wants him, not Demetrius. When her father begs her to see that "Demetrius is a worthy gentleman" (I.i.52), all she can muster is: "So is Lysander" (53)⁷. Under the spell of a love potion, both Demetrius and Lysander turn against Hermia and fall madly in love with Helena. The play is resolved with Lysander marrying Hermia and Demetrius marrying Helena. Does it matter who marries whom? When Shakespeare uses twins, the audience is in on the joke. We understand that the plot can only be resolved when Viola and Sebastian or the two brothers Antipholus and the two brothers Dromio come face-to-face. Colbert's and McCrea's twins, whom we have likely forgotten, however, are offered up as *dei ex machina* in the film's final moments. This Shakespearean plot forms a frame around the main plot of *The Palm Beach Story*, but it is critical to understanding the marriage of Tom and Gerry. Gerry believes she can run off to Palm Beach and exchange Tom for a richer man. But the frame narrative should remind her that people are not exchangeable. Why is Gerry so anxious to marry Tom and not his twin brother? Why has she (presumably) bound and gagged her sister, and stolen her wedding dress so that she can get to Tom first? And why, after racing to the church, do Tom and Gerry instantly recognize each as the other's true love? If Olivia cannot have Viola, she is content to have his/her twin. No such arrangement works for Tom and Gerry. Rudy Vallée and Mary Astor are perfectly content to trade in their first choices for their second ones, but the twins themselves look shocked and bewildered to be matched up with the multi-millionaires.

Sturges had already made a film about attempting to exchange one human being for another. In *The Lady Eve*, there is only one

⁷ See Emma Smith's chapter on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *This Is Shakespeare* (Smith 2019).

Barbara Stanwyck, but she convinces Henry Fonda that there are actually two of her, one (Jean) a cardsharp, the other (Eve) a member of the British aristocracy. Fonda is in love with Jean but, in a catastrophic move, settles for Eve instead. In the film's final moments, Fonda is reunited with Jean, and the two run ecstatically down flights of stairs to begin married life in her stateroom. In a sense, *The Palm Beach Story* picks up from this moment five years later when Gerry allows Tom to carry her up the stairs to bed even as she repeatedly insists that they don't love each other anymore, that "there's nothing left but admiration and respect": "We're just habits, bad habits", "nothing but a habit, a bad habit". The next morning Gerry, overlooking everything she knew on her wedding day, sets off to trade in Tom for a richer model. And she does this as so many Shakespearean heroines beginning their adventures did before her, by trading in one "habit" for another. When the first of Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines, Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, decides to pursue Proteus, her maid Lucetta asks:

LUCETTA

But in what *habit* will you go along?

JULIA

Not like a woman, for I would prevent

The loose encounters of lascivious men.

Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds

As may beseem some well-reputed page. (II.vii.39-43, emphasis mine)

And when Portia decides to save Antonio's life by posing as the lawyer Balthazar, she tells Nerissa that: "We'll see our husbands / Before they think of us [...], but in such a *habit* / That they shall think we are accomplishèd / With that we lack" (III.iv.58-62, emphasis mine).

If Gerry has brushed up on her Shakespeare, then she believes that she can change her habits as easily as she changes her clothes. For doesn't Rosalind make Orlando believe that she is Ganymede even when she plays Ganymede playing Rosalind? Doesn't Viola, by putting on her brother's clothes, convince Olivia, who has sworn off all men, to instantly fall in love? Doesn't Portia, by donning male

clothes, win the case against Shylock? Doesn't Margaret, simply by donning Hero's clothes, convince Claudio that his beloved is a whore? In Shakespeare, disguises are donned easily and seamlessly. Almost all costume changes occur off-stage or, as in the case of *Much Ado*, are only reported, not staged. Viola tells us she will appear as a man; she appears as a man. Cross-dressing and changing identity are all too easy. But Gerry's costume changes are always difficult. Twice she needs Tom to unhook dresses she is stuck in. Attempting to keep her from running away from him, Tom manages to spill the contents of Gerry's suitcase on the sidewalk. Awakening on the train with nothing but men's pajamas, Gerry tries on dozens of other passengers' clothes before tying the pajama bottoms around her head and a Pullman blanket around her waist in order to enter the dining car. Marrying Tom in a wedding dress requires her to first gag and lock up her sister. Getting out of her marriage looks easier when Snoodles buys her an entire wardrobe, but the new clothes do not help her fall in love with Hackensacker.

If Gerry has trouble getting out of clothes, Tom is falling out of his. Racing to stop Gerry from leaving him, he tumbles down a flight of stairs and loses his pajama bottoms. Wrapping himself in a blanket, he races down the hall and ends up exposing his 'bottom' to an elevator full of people. This comic moment is not the only hint that Sturges has *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on his mind. Snoodles's yacht is named *The Erl King* – the King of the Fairies. His sister, the Princess Centimillia, is actual royalty, a Titania who falls instantly for Bottom. *The Palm Beach Story* reproduces the dreamlike quality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Wienie King, Snoodles, Maud, the cabbie, and even the Ale and Quail Club are enchanted figures who continually grant Tom and Gerry's spoken and unspoken wishes. The film takes place over seventy-two hours, and Gerry meets nearly every other character as she wakes up or goes to bed.

Gerry owes her charmed encounter with Hackensacker to the Ale and Quail Club, who, impatient to begin hunting, cannot wait to reach their hunting grounds in Savannah. They begin by

shooting at crackers and proceed to shoot out windows. Realizing that a terrified Gerry has escaped into another car, they gather together a hunting party with seven hounds to pursue her. The metaphor of the hunt is used frequently in the comedies. Attempting to comfort the lovesick Orsino, his servant asks: "Will you go hunt, my lord?" (I.i.16). Orsino responds that the first time he saw Olivia he was "turned into a hart / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds / E'er since pursue me" (20-22). When Rosalind learns that Orlando has entered the forest of Arden "furnished like a hunter" (III.ii.240), she insists that "[h]e comes to kill my heart" (241). But Orlando has already claimed that Rosalind is herself one of Diana's company: "thrice crownèd queen of night survey / With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above, / Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway" (2-4). But the language of hunting is particularly pertinent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Demetrius accuses Helena of stalking him. She rebuts his sadism with masochism.

DEMETRIUS

I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.

Where is Lysander, and fair Hermia?

The one I'll slay, the other slayeth me.

[...]

I'll run from thee, and hide me in the brakes,

And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts. (II.i.188-90, 227-28)

Helena tells him that she is his "spaniel" (203):

HELENA

The more you beat me I will fawn on you.

Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,

Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,

Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

What worser place can I beg in your love –

And yet a place of high respect with me –

Than to be usèd as you use your dog? (204-10)

When Theseus brings Hippolyta to the forest to hunt stag, they reminisce about earlier hunting trips.

THESEUS

My love shall hear the music of my hounds.

[...]

We will, fair Queen, up to the mountain's top,
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

HIPPOLYTA

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear
With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seemed all one mutual cry. I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

THESEUS

My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,

[...]

Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells
Each under each. A cry more tuneable
Was never holla'd to nor cheered with horn
In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.

Judge when you hear. (IV.i.105, 108-18, 122-26)

While Theseus only boasts about the musicality of his dogs, the Ale and Quail Club builds musical sequences around theirs. Once the Club boards the train, the seven dogs accompany the piano playing in the bar. When they serenade Gerry to sleep with "Sweet Adeline", the dogs chime in again, and when they form a posse to find the lost Gerry, the dogs fully participate in a rousing rendition of "A-Hunting We Will Go".

At the time of its release, *The Palm Beach Story* was panned by the *New York Times's* Bosley Crowther. He limited his praise to the Ale and Quail Club. Today an audience will likely be entranced by every scene of the film except for the lengthy Ale and Quail Club sequence. It is not merely that "so musical a discord" can wear on

the nerves but that the black bartender is such a shocking stereotype, who, rather than disobeying the drunken hunters or fleeing the scene, continues to throw up crackers for them to shoot and, like an overgrown infant, pounds on the bar screaming, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, gentlemens". Although completely conventional for its time, the scene is unbearably offensive⁸. But Sturges clearly found the Ale and Quail Club central to the plot, the vision, the language, and the soundtrack of his movie. Rossini's opera *William Tell* involves scenes of hunting and archery, and Sturges begins his film with variations on the "*William Tell Overture*" and weaves elements of the overture throughout the film. Long before we meet the quail hunters, we have heard plenty about birds. The Wienie King is deaf and mistakes the opera singer in Gerry's apartment building for a canary. "I love birds", he tells the building manager. When he finds Gerry standing in the bathtub, he compliments the design (a G clef and a bird) on her wrapper. Once again, he tells her how much he loves birds and that his wife is being "egged on" by the "varmint" of a building manager. Bird song (from Rossini's overture) marks the segue from Tom and Gerry landing in Palm Beach to moving in to Maud and Snoodles's home. When Gerry announces that she is returning to her husband, Maud is thrilled that she and Snoodles and "Mac" "will be as busy as bird dogs" working on his airport. When Tom tries to sneak past his landlord who is demanding his unpaid rent, he asks the doorman to "[t]ake a gander inside". When he catches

⁸ Many well-meaning attempts have been made to explain away the racism of "The Train" section of the film. See, for example, Gabbard 2015. In particular, critics have praised the performance and improvisation of the train porter (Charles R. Moore) who tells Tom that his wife is "the young lady who lose all her clothes". As well-intentioned as these defenses may be, I find them as cringe-worthy as the scenes themselves. How can they justify Sturges's script requiring Moore to pronounce "yacht" as "yatchet"? It is possible to admire *The Palm Beach Story* while lamenting the fact that it does nothing to advance the cause of civil rights. The treatment of the black characters is particularly disappointing because Sturges began filming *The Palm Beach Story* just months after completing *Sullivan's Travels*, which includes an exceptionally moving scene in a black church.

up to Gerry in Penn Station, he cautions her that she's running around "like a chicken with its head cut off", and tells the cop trying to throw him out that he's a "dumb cluck". Although Gerry twice steps on Snoodles's face and twice breaks his glasses, he claims she's "as light as a feather". While Gerry insists that she needs to marry Snoodles so that he can build Tom's airport, Tom snaps that he "wouldn't let him build [him] a chicken coop". The members of the Ale and Quail Club include Hitchcock, McKeewie, and Featherwax. When they're too drunk to count the members of the club, one accuses the conductor of being "cockeyed". But their dogs are just as imbricated in the language of the screenplay. The only hunting dogs allowed to hunt both above and below ground are dachshunds or "wienie" dogs. (Sturges must have been fond of wienie dogs; one figures prominently in his directorial debut, *The Great McGinty*). The cab driver who agrees to drive Gerry to Penn Station for free recommends Palm Beach as the best place for a divorce because "you've got the [dog] track, you've got the ocean, you've got palm trees". And when one conductor sees the Ale and Quail club boarding, he exclaims: "Hot dog!". Maud greets Tom with Bumblepuppy, and Snoodles assures him that his sister's "bark is worse than her bite". Gerry tells her "brother" and her new boyfriend that she feels "like a bone between two dogs". As preposterous as the film's plot appears, its three acts – "New York", "The Train", and "Palm Beach" – are as interwoven as the strings of a tennis racket or as interrelated as the multiple plots of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

If Shakespeare turns Bottom into an ass, Sturges toys with various animal identities for each of his characters. The Wienie King is a dog who loves birds while the hunters and their canine companions doggedly dog Gerry and hate birds. Rudy Vallée is a professional songbird while Mary Astor plays an active hunter. She complains that "there's a law against shooting" the caged bird in her bedroom. She is such a sexual predator that she invites Gerry to go husband hunting with her even though she's still in the process of divorcing her fifth husband. Minutes later she meets Tom and begins cheerfully pursuing him even as her current lover

whom she has named “Toto” follows her everywhere like Dorothy Gale’s loyal black Cairn Terrier. Toto (who enters one scene carrying a tennis racket and balls) even acts as a witness as Maud marries Tom’s twin. Snoodles would like to destroy Gerry’s husband but is intimidated by the mere thought of him: “I suppose he’s large. [...] That’s one of the tragedies of this life, that the men who are most in need of a beating up are always enormous”.

Tom and Gerry are named for the animated Hanna-Barbera cat and mouse. While the cat pursues the mouse with any number of weapons (hammers, firecrackers...), the mouse always outwits him and retaliates in more gruesome ways (decapitation, electrocution...). In the first act of *The Palm Beach Story*, Tom tries to be the dog pursuing his fugitive bird. He then takes wing himself and flies down to meet her train in Palm Beach. On the train Gerry quails in fear in an upper bunk while the dogs on her scent attack Snoodles below her. But once she is on Snoodles’s yacht, she hatches a plan to snare him and his \$99,000 for Tom. Gerry is not the practiced hunter that Maud is and cannot figure out how to pursue Snoodles while she is still jealous of any woman who looks at Tom. Although Tom greets Gerry on the Palm Beach dock by insisting that she’s “making an ass of herself”, he is much more closely linked to Bottom.

When Shakespeare’s Bottom awakes from his dream, he utters these famous lines:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t’expound this dream. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called “Bottom’s Dream”, because it hath no bottom. (IV.i. 202-215)

Critics have argued that Bottom’s nonsensical speech captures perfectly the synesthetic experience of dreaming. In Sturges’s film,

nearly everyone experiences a confusion of senses. The Wienie King is deaf. Snoodles is blind. The hounds can smell some trace of Gerry but have no ability to find her. Maud's sidekick, Toto, may or may not be speaking an actual language: "his tongue [is not able] to conceive". Snoodles believes Gerry will have all the homely virtues of cooking and sewing ("and weav[ing]", she remarks sarcastically), but Tom knows the truth. We can practically taste what he's describing here:

GERRY

I can't sew. I can't cook.

TOM

You certainly can't.

[...]

I remember that pot roast you tried.

After exploring various forms of sensory deprivation, Sturges reunites his married couple by conjuring up a night of acute sensations. Gerry is already resisting the sound of tree toads, the smell of night flowers, and the taste of champagne when the sound of Snoodles's orchestra and the feeling of sitting in Tom's lap overwhelm her.

Like Bottom, Tom has had "a most rare vision", an airport strung like a tennis racket and suspended over a city. One critic compares Bottom's bottomless dream to the scene in *King Lear* in which "Edgar, the good son, conjures up a dizzying vista of bottomlessness in the mind of his blinded father Gloucester" as he pretends to stand at the top of the Dover cliff. In fact, he is standing on the comparatively firm terrain of *Dover Beach* (Rosenbaum 2006, 20). Tom, on the other hand, imagines that he can create the firm(ish) terrain of *Dover Beach* when he has in fact invented Edgar's terrifying vision: "How fearful and dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low" (IV.v.11-12). Like the Wienie King, Bottom loves birds. In fact, some critics have noted that the song he sings to awaken

Titania echoes in context and content the song of Epops, in Aristophanes's *The Birds*⁹:

BOTTOM

[...]

(Sings)

The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill;
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill.

TITANIA (*awakening*)

What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

BOTTOM (*sings*)

The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plainsong cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer "Nay" –

for indeed, who would set his wit to so foolish a bird? Who would give a bird the lie, though he cry "Cuckoo" never so? (III.i.118-29)

Bottom, once a man, now an ass, evokes Epops, once a man, now a hoopoe. Epops calls out to mountain birds, marsh birds, and sea birds. They come immediately and form a chorus which leads to the establishment of their city, Cloud Cuckoo Land, a city in the sky, formed by birds as a point of communication between men on earth and the gods on Olympus. Although it is Tom who needs funding for his Cloud Cuckoo Land, all of the characters in *The Palm Beach Story* behave as if living in such a fantastical world. Only Maud happily admits to being a cuckoo: "I'm crazy. I'd marry anyone". But it is, of course, Tom who spends most of the film preparing himself to be made a cuckoo, another word for "cuckold".

Lest we forget, cuckoldry is also intimately linked to hunting. For the stag that so many of Shakespeare's hunters stalk has lost its horns and its mate to the superior stag. Snoodles is determined to

⁹ For an overview of the relationship between *The Birds* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Showerman 2015.

see Gerry's husband as a monstrous hunting dog, and Gerry is averse to disabusing him of his prejudice:

SNOODLES

Did he beat you?

GERRY

Not often.

SNOODLES

The hound.

GERRY

Oh, a man's a man, I suppose. They're all tarred with the same brush.

Does Snoodles's reference to dogs provoke Gerry's to birds? Does she invite Snoodles to imagine Tom tarred and feathered? Or is this another reminder of the pastoral? Shepherds tarred their flocks with the same brush to distinguish them from other flocks. Gerry, however, renders her husband unrecognizable. In Shakespeare, men continually slander innocent women; here Gerry unfairly smears the innocent Tom. By agreeing that Tom's a "hound", she allows Snoodles to imagine him as an adulterous brute. Of course, Tom is not a hound but a lapdog. He is loyal and affectionate, not hunting for something better. It is Gerry who aspires to be a hound, who longs to sniff out choicer prey.

This particular exchange hints at the sexual violence that is often just beneath the surface of this light comedy. The men in this movie are all tarred with the same brush in that they are always contemplating violence. The hunters can't let go of their guns on a train. The other men are always threatening to use their fists, and even the aged Wienie King threatens Tom with his cane. Gerry's attempts to help Tom in his business ventures are always thwarted because instead of allowing her to flirt (or more) with wealthy investors, Tom always threatens to punch them in the nose.

When Tom sees the ruby-encrusted bracelet Snoodles has bought Gerry, he is ready to punch Snoodles until Snoodles admits that he punched the first man who ever gave Maud a bracelet. How seriously should we take these threats of violence? Tom plays along with Gerry's deceit. He impersonates Gerry's brother; he keeps his

fists away from Snoodles's nose. But gradually, as they banter about why Gerry has given him the name "Captain McGlue":

GERRY

Couldn't you have been a captain in the last war?

TOM

Sure. I was eleven years old at the finish.

This mild-mannered civilian turns into the warrior Othello: "Do you know what it feels like to be strangled with bare hands?"

Whether actual or perceived, cuckoldry in Cavell's movies of remarriage is always consequential. No woman can afford to make light of it, and no man can fail to be hurt by it. In *The Philadelphia Story*, an engagement is broken. In *The Awful Truth*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Adam's Rib*, divorce proceedings are instigated. But when Tom begins to turn into Othello, Gerry barely blinks. "Oh, now wait a minute, darling. I've always been on the level with you", she assures him as she tells him to put a sculpture of Renaissance "[l]ovebirds" on the mantelpiece. As long as they stay there, he'll have proof that he has nothing to worry about. In most screwball comedies, the heroines are as spotless as Desdemona. But Gerry models herself on Emilia:

DESDEMONA

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA

Why, would not you?

DESDEMONA

No, by this heavenly light!

EMILIA

Nor I neither, by this heavenly light. I might do't as well i'th' dark.

DESDEMONA

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA

The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice.

[...]

[W]ho would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?

(IV.iii.62-68, 74-75)

In *The Palm Beach Story*, the *Wienie King*, the *Princess Centimillia* and the captain of the *Erl King* are all beckoning Tom and Gerry to join their magical monarchy. Tom will have his airport; Gerry will sport the Hope diamond. All that is required is the smallest of vices. But unlike Claudio who can exchange his bride for "another Hero", or Olivia who can wed another Cesario, or Demetrius who can content himself with another Hermia, Gerry knows that there is only one Tom Jeffers. Gerry throws away the chance to make Tom a king and herself a queen not because of sexual morality, but because she loves only one man, and nothing and nobody can take his place.

Poor Emilia with her spirit and humor turns out to be as naïve as Desdemona, for in the multiplicities of Shakespearean experience men are all tarred with the same brush. They all value one virtue in women above any other – purity. Sturges holds no such prejudice. His Maud is as lovable as she is promiscuous, and she and Gerry instantly adore each other. She wants her brother to marry Gerry and has no illusions that anyone would want Snoodles for anything but his cash. When she learns that Gerry is returning to her husband, she is simultaneously incredulous and sympathetic – "Oh, you poor, dumb thing. [...] I bet he's a knockout". In Emilia's formulation, sex is a little thing that helps you gain "all the world". In Maud's, sexual happiness (not sexual fidelity) is the only thing huge enough to make you forsake all the world.

Chastity is what matters in Shakespeare's comedies; but sexual indiscretion is as likely to be rewarded as punished in Sturges's oeuvre. When Trudy Kockenlocker in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* takes the boys out for their last night of fun before being shipped off to the Army, she winds up pregnant and (possibly) married, but to whom? The small town scandal becomes worldwide news when she gives birth to six boys on Christmas. Because of her contribution to the war effort, her promiscuity is metamorphosed into the virgin birth and her long-suffering, celibate boyfriend into Saint Joseph. The only man who's ever actually cuckolded in a Sturges film is, funnily enough, Rudy Vallée. In *Unfaithfully Yours*,

Rex Harrison asks him off-handedly to look after his wife (Linda Darnell) while he's away, and Vallée takes this to mean that he should order a private detective to follow her. The detective catches Darnell leaving the room of Harrison's assistant. Although Harrison and Darnell are clearly madly in love, Harrison spends most of the movie having a psychotic breakdown in which he imagines ways of murdering his wife and her "lover". Throughout the film, Vallée's wife (Darnell's sister) bickers with him about his inattentiveness. The movie's punchline comes at the expense of the stuffy, suspicious Vallée and with the audience's wholehearted approval, for it is Vallée's wife who is cuckolding him with Harrison's assistant. In Sturges's films, the husbands of sexually happy women have nothing to fear or regret.

More than *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, or *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is probably Shakespeare's most metatheatrical play. The play was written to double- or triple-cast Shakespeare's original company, so the actor playing Theseus would also have played Oberon, the actor playing Titania would also have played Hippolyta. The actor playing Bottom would have also played Pyramus and Peaseblossom. As if this weren't enough, Bottom offers to play Thisbe and the lion as well. Sturges's Bottom is averse to assuming various roles yet within a few hours of arriving in Palm Beach is renamed "Captain McGlue", "Mac", and the "human bacterium". Sturges is probably classic Hollywood's most metacinematic director. He upheld Shakespeare's legacy by continually reminding his audience that he was directing actors who were performing roles in a constructed work of cinematic imagination. (See, for example, *Sullivan's Travels*, a movie about the experience of making movies, or *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, in which the tale of Norval and Trudy is being narrated to Brian Donlevy and Akim Tamiroff reprising their roles in *The Great McGinty*). While Sturges is as self-conscious and self-reflective an artist as Shakespeare, he is not simply suggesting that "all the world's a stage". His "men and women" are not "merely players". While all perform, many do so unwillingly.

All of Sturges's movies involve disguise, deceit and impersonation. In *The Lady Eve*, Barbara Stanwyck's Jean Harrington poses as an English aristocrat, the Lady Eve Sidwich. In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, Eddie Bracken's Norval Jones pretends to be Ignatz Ratzkiwatzki to legitimize his girlfriend's pregnancy. Norval, who repeatedly fails the Army's entrance exam, borrows a doughboy's uniform in which to marry Trudy. In *Sullivan's Travels*, Joel McCrea's John Sullivan dresses as a hobo in order to learn enough about the common people to make *O Brother Where Art Thou?* All three of these characters voluntarily assume disguises and new identities. But unlike the cross-dressing heroines of the comedies, these characters are not enlarged by their performances. Jean believes she will enjoy tricking Charles into marrying her. Instead, she is bereft after marrying and alienating him. Norval manages to stumble through his wedding vows as Ignatz Ratzkiwatzki only to be arrested for signing the marriage registry as Norval Jones. And after John Sullivan escapes from a chain gang, his studio finally agrees to let their director of silly comedies make *O Brother Where Art Thou?* But Sullivan announces that he's unqualified to make such a film because he hasn't "suffered enough" (Sturges 1941). Portia, Rosalind, and Viola use their disguises to reinvent themselves, to liberate themselves, to advance themselves. They are not punished or defeated by their performances. But Sturges's characters are never comfortable in their borrowed robes. Sullivan is dissatisfied with the silly movies he makes until he travels into hell and discovers the value of making people laugh. Jean's elaborate plan to get back at Charles for breaking off their engagement turns ugly and cruel. She begins her impersonation believing she'll talk like a cockeyed duchess for the rest of her life and ends by hating the accent and impersonation she has created. And Norval, envious of the soldiers Trudy parties with, proves himself a better man than the thoughtless soldier who impregnates and abandons Trudy.

Nobody in *The Palm Beach Story* voluntarily plays a part. Instead, different characters attempt to assign other characters alternative identities. They always face pushback. When Tom introduces Gerry

to a New York City cop (“This is my wife, Mrs. Jeffers. Mr. Mulligan”), the policeman barks back: “The name happens to be O’Donnell, if it’s all the same to you”. A member of the Ale and Quail Club addresses a member of the train crew as “officer”. He’s insulted, and responds, “I’m not an officer. I’m the conductor on this train”. When the doorman tells Tom “[y]our wife” paid the rent, the incredulous Tom asks, “My wife?”. “Well, I’m sure it wasn’t mine”, the doorman replies. When Gerry cannot understand why Snoodles is showering her with presents, she asks if he’s a burglar: “Oh, no. That was my grandfather”. When she worries that two men with butterfly nets are about to sneak up behind him and drag him off to a loony bin, he remarks, “You’re thinking of my uncle”.

In order to love Shakespeare’s comedies, we must continually suspend our disbelief so that we can fully appreciate boys dressed as girls dressed as boys or love at first sight or soliloquies that can’t be overheard on stage, but Sturges asks the opposite of us. He asks us to notice that people are always willing to believe anything, always eager to create their own reality, always ready to form opinions of us based on nothing at all. He asks us to notice that most of us are living in Cloud Cuckoo Land, and in Cloud Cuckoo Land people will always see what isn’t there. When Gerry introduces the Hackensackers to her “brother”, first Maud then Snoodles exclaims, “You look exactly alike”. We are constantly performing or being asked to perform to meet others’ uninformed expectations, but what a relief when we can finally be ourselves. More than any other character Sturges created, Tom Jeffers epitomizes the point he reiterates in every one of his films – identity is not something we simply put on and take off. Tom wins Gerry back because, despite his numerous aliases, he remains absolutely himself. When Snoodles offers “Mac” (“You don’t mind if I call you Mac, do you?”) \$99,000 to build his airport, he (Captain McGlue) tells him that Gerry’s husband (the “human bacterium”) is his partner, so he won’t be able to accept the money. Speaking of himself in the third person, he says: “I knew he [Tom] was a failure and a dreamer, I guess, but I didn’t know he was a skunk”. Gerry is enraged: “Don’t

you ever get tired of being *noble*?" (emphasis mine). Apparently, he doesn't.

This essay has focused on moments of impermanence in Shakespeare – when Demetrius and Lysander suddenly fall in love with Helena, when Bottom becomes an ass, when Hero is temporarily dead, when Rosalind, Viola, Portia, and Julia pretend to be men. On Tom and Gerry's enchanted journey, we are warned of life's impermanence. The ancient Wienie King tells Gerry, "Cold are the hands of time that creep along relentlessly destroying slowly but without pity that which yesterday was young. [...] That's hard to say with false teeth". And Maud, encouraging her brother to marry and soon divorce Gerry tells him that "[n]othing is permanent in this world except Roosevelt, dear". One could easily believe that Sturges, with his lightning-fast dialogue, values impermanence, but he values nothing more than joy. When Tom greets his rival the morning after he has won Gerry back – "Hello there, Snoodles. How's every little thing?" – he expresses a confidence and a delight we have seen nowhere else in the film. Tom deserves and has earned this moment because he has never wavered, because his love for Gerry has remained as firm as a tightly strung tennis racket. Because Sturges plays games so well, one would think that his movies celebrate game-playing. They don't. Yes, he admits, the world's a stage and men and women are always performing, but true happiness comes when the curtain comes down, when the final act is over, when the authentic self has the chance to emerge. When Sturges speaks of "nobility", he uses the word as Shakespeare does, as a quality unchanged by time and circumstance. In *The Winter's Tale* (the remarriage play upon which Cavell's thesis rests), the newborn Princess Perdita is ordered murdered by her insanely jealous father. Instead, she is raised by a shepherd. Sixteen years later, Polixenes (in disguise), terrified that his son is falling in love with a shepherdess, visits Perdita. But neither disguise nor upbringing can hide Perdita's unassailable identity: "Nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too *noble* for this place" (IV.iv.157-59, emphasis mine). To make his wife happy, Tom goes along with

Gerry's ruse, but when it requires him to take Snoodles's \$99,000, he cannot help but tell the truth. Why, his angry wife asks him, can't he learn to lie like a politician? Because, he unapologetically tells the woman who loves him, "the way you are is the way you have to be".

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