Imagining Identity

From Molière to Howard Hawks*

Abstract

Comedy plays with the transcendent importance of identity. An awareness of dramatic performance is a starting point in the quest for happiness. On the basis of imagined identity, this article offers a comparative reading of Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*, Howard Hawks' *Twentieth Century* and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, which suggest that romantic conflicts can be understood or overcome by the imaginative responses of the characters. Identity transference is a feature of both traditional and modern relationships.

Keywords: comedy, identity, screwball comedy, classical cinema, Hollywood, film analysis, film genre

1. Introduction. Imagining identity: neoclassical comedy and screwball comedy

Unlike psychology, where the idea of identity could be the objective or goal of analysis, art can assume personal identity as a starting point for representation or interpretation. The psychological subject aspires to self-knowledge in order to resolve conflicts; the artistic subject is willing to don a disguise, to complicate foreseeable situations, in order to fulfill his or her desires or pursue happiness. Since *Don Quixote*, we should not be alarmed to find that in such cases we enter the slippery terrain of mental health. The human world is capable of embracing rather than excluding these dimensions of spiritual, therapeutic, and playful life. It is true that these facets of the personality can come into conflict, as shown in Cukor's *A Double Life* (1947), where the protagonist is an actor who goes mad with jealousy while playing Othello. However, Cukor was also the master of comedy when it came to inventing, imagining, or projecting a superimposed identity, as in *My Fair Lady* (1964). Perhaps this is why the split personality was such a productive motif in the history of classic comedy since the first talkies, when it soon found a home in the screwball comedy genre. This article does not attempt an exhaustive review of the films that have made the most effective use of this motif; instead, it focuses on the paradigmatic cases of Molière's comedy and the films by Howard Hawks and Frank Capra that launched the screwball genre: *Twentieth Century* and *It Happened One Night*, both released in 1934. Our interest here is not in the evolution of a genre, but in the fact that, in the hands of its creators, the comedic approach created the climate of freedom necessary for the expression and expansion of characters that could turn the stage (and the cinematic spaces conceived by screenwriters) into a safe space for reflection, allowing spectators to reevaluate the terms of their own lived experience. This was possible thanks to its engagement with audiences whose capacity for understanding made them active agents in the artistic exchange

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and, therefore, in the visible power of creation itself. Comedy brings the language of art closer to life than any realist strategy. This is the basis for our comparative analysis.

2. On the health of *Le malade imaginaire*

There is a certain kinship between Argan, Molière's imaginary patient, and Harpagon, the protagonist of *L'Avare*, not so much because *Le malade imaginaire* begins with Argan calculating how much his treatment is going to cost him, but because both characters hide things—and others hide things from them—and both are prone to a kind of exaggeration that Molière referred to as one of "the vices of my century". These are qualities that comedy shares with life itself, as the challenge is to approach life through art not by the shortest route, but by means of a detour. In *L'Avare*, Valère says of Harpagon: "To resist him boldly would simply spoil everything. There are certain people who are only to be managed by indirect means, temperaments averse from all resistance, restive natures whom truth causes to rear, who always kick when we would lead them on the right road of reason, and who can only be led by a way opposed to that by which you wish them to go" (Molière, 1889, p. 18).[1] In his characters, the author offers reflections of what nature has imprinted in us all. The stage becomes a school where the lessons are learned by a kind of inverted imitation, as we find ourselves unexpectedly imitated in embarrassing situations that are nevertheless amusing to an audience of which we form part. In Act IV of *L'Avare*, in a final monologue inspired by Plautus, Harpagon cries out: "What a crowd of people are assembled here! […] Ha! What are they speaking of there? Of him who stole my money? […] Is he hiding there among you? They all look at me and laugh" (Molière, 1889, p. 56). As spectators we laugh, acting for the audience, aware that a little hypocrisy is a reasonable price to pay to expand the possibilities for self-improvement. Like the characters, we emerge from the trial and feel the better for it, confident that all our mistakes are also opportunities to free ourselves from the oppressive selfishness of our own opinions. The comedy spectator spontaneously adopts a critical view of life through the free play of the imagination. The critic Ramon Fernandez suggests that reason in Molière is "above all negative. It demands that parents be more tolerant with their children, pedants with the sensible, men of faith with men of good faith, the wise with human nature" (Fernandez, 1962, p. 68).

In the final scene of *L'Avare*, the characters reveal their true identities. Molière uses this strategy to confuse Harpagon, who must give in and allow his two children, Cléante and Elise, to marry their respective love interests. The withholding of their true identities, which are associated with a high social position and considerable wealth, allows the characters to move more freely and to hide their true intentions. Harpagon is as cunning as Cléante when he realizes that his son *also* wants to marry Marianne. The starting assumption is that wealth ("*avoir du bien*") and the respect that children must show for their parents' will are the foundations of human relations. It is the prerequisite for a civilized society, but that does not render it immune to criticism. True wealth is the freedom to choose to marry for love, although this is a point that the young often have a firmer grasp on than their elders, perhaps because they are closer to nature. Convention thus raises a wall with which the passions of youth threaten to collide. In this context, stubborn rebellion is as counterproductive as desperate flight. Young and old are doomed to understand and misunderstand one another in quick succession. Cléante is about to have his beloved Marianne as a stepmother, while Elise is on the verge of marrying Anselme, her beloved Valère's father.[2] The comedy is a family affair on

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[1] Molière dramatizes this use of indirect means in *L'Amour Medecin (*III, vi): "CLITANDRE: But as one must flatter the imagination of patients, and what I've seen in her of alienation of the mind, and even were there not some peril in giving her prompt aid—I've taken her through her weakness and told her I've come to ask for her in marriage" (Molière, 2001, p. 19). Cf. with Béralde's conclusion in *Le malade imaginaire (*III, xiv): "But, niece, it is not making too much fun of him to fall in with his fancies. We may each of us take part in it ourselves, and thus perform the comedy for each other's amusement" (Molière, 1889, p. 463).

[2] In another parallel between life and comedy, Molière was known to come close to incest himself when he married Armande Béjart, the

which the good health of society ultimately depends. The young need their parents, as Cléante demonstrates when he asks his miserly father for a loan. The parents want security for their children and arrange for them to be married without delay. The generation gap cannot be bridged even by the comings and goings of servants like Maître Jacques or the mediation of Frosine. Harpagon is beyond saving, so the other characters push him to the limit, even to the point of death—or at least, of faking his death in order to discover how others act in his absence, because a comedy cannot end with murder. At most, it can admit sickness, but a sickness that can be cured. Laughter, more than weeping, is the remedy for the individual's ills. While the cathartic effect of tragedy depends on its distance from us on the stage, comedy brings all the opportunities to cure our imaginary evils delightfully close. Argan must play dead twice to find out what his wife and daughter really think of him. The shadow of death hovers over the comedy of his imaginary illness, as André Gide observes:

> And the secret contact with death in each scene gives such solemnity, such *Shaudern*. It plays with everything, we play with it; it is made to enter the dance; it is invited on three occasions, with little Louison, Argan himself with his wife, then with his daughter; one feels it lurking; one sees it "in the open"; it is challenged and mocked; even Molière's own death, which came finally to give this tragic farce a horrific end. And all this, in the bourgeois manner, achieves a grandeur that the theater has never surpassed. (Gide, 1993, pp. 82-83)

Béline and Angélique know that Argan is a hypochondriac, and the spectator knows they must know it. Will they continue to act as the imaginary patient expects them to? Béline, who views marriage as "a matter of mere interest", is exposed, while Angélique's pity for her father is beyond question. Argan is not fooled: The health of comedy depends on the characters not forgetting their own role or those that the other characters are capable of playing. For Argan, the new "ninety-year-old" doctor announced by his maid, Toinette, looks too much like her. It is not possible to stop acting in comedy. Offstage, we cease to be real. We wonder which is more reprehensible: Argan's hypochondria or his wife's wickedness. When does the "acting" of the imaginary invalid actually begin? Is he not demanding that the other characters believe in his ability to play himself or cure himself, if he so desires? Truth be told, his attitude is no more ridiculous than that of his "sensible" brother-in-law, Béralde, who denies that doctors are capable of curing us. What makes the exchange between these two comical is that we do not know whom to believe, as the intransigent Béralde seems no saner than the hypochondriac Argan. Béralde's recommendation that his brother-in-law attend a comedy by Molière could be interpreted as a prescription for his "illness": "Nature, when we leave her free, will herself gently recover from the disorder into which she has fallen... When a doctor speaks to you of assisting, succoring nature... he repeats to you the romance of physic... I should have liked, in order to deliver you from the error into which you had fallen, and in order to amuse you, to take you to see some of Molière's comedies on this subject" (Molière, 1889, pp. 447-448). In classical comedy, Aristophanes laughed at the philosopher, just as Molière laughs at the physician ("he has his reasons for not loving them"), suggesting that the poet is the best interpreter of nature. It is said that the young Poquelin, when studying with Gassendi, undertook a translation of Lucretius, recognizable in certain verses of *Le Misanthrope* (II, v). Boileau already pointed out in his time that Molière had captured ("*attrapé*") nature better than Corneille and Racine. Comedy restores to us the moderation we need to keep from falling for the extreme opinions that endanger the health of society.

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daughter (according to contemporaries) or "sister" (according to official records) of his lover Madeleine Béjart.

3. A duel of wits: *Twentieth Century* and *It Happened One Night*

Just as "Molière" is in *Le malade imaginaire* and Harpagon is in Argan, Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday* (1940) can be found in John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century* (1934). The comparison of Molière with Howard Hawks' brilliant screwball comedies is a way of suggesting that conversation between art forms can encourage an "acquaintance with the classics" (Thoreau, 1992, p. 72). Stanley Cavell (2004, pp.162-63) has made this point in his own way by comparing the remarriage comedy with the work of the writers of the American Renaissance:

> Am I claiming that Capra is as good as Whitman and Emerson?... Capra shares certain of the ambitions and the specific visions of Whitman and of Emerson, and he knows about working with film roughly what they know about working with words. If your fixed view is, however, that no film… could in principle bear up under any serious comparison with major writing, then our conversation may, if it has begun, be at an end; for I would take the fixed view, or attitude, as representative of a philistine intellectuality fully worthy of the philistine anti-intellectuality from which we more famously suffer.

At one point in *Twentieth Century*, Lily Garland (Carole Lombard) laughs as she recalls Oscar Jaffe saying he was going to be "her Svengali", the master hypnotist John Barrymore had played in Archie Mayo's 1931 film [cf. the stills in Figure 1].

Figure 1: Left: John Barrymore as Svengali. Right: by Oscar Jaffe in *Twentieth Century.*

The characters migrate from one comedy to another and turn the world on its head. Owen O'Malley (Roscoe Karns), Jaffe's press agent, calls him an "earthquake maker." Before moving to the train, the story kicks off on a stage covered by the chalk lines that plot the theater director's brain maze [see Fig.2, next page]. The train, the *Twentieth Century Limited*, is—the "kind of vehicle" for—the "comedy of life" (Cavell, 2004, p. 160), which was the title the film was released with in Spain. It is on this train that Broadway director Oscar Jaffe, returning from a disastrous failure in Chicago, and Lily Garland, the young actress-turned-Hollywood-star whom Jaffe had taught to act, meet again by chance. In reality, Jaffe taught her how to scream on stage, and her stage name conceals her true identity as Mildred Plotka, like Jaffe's stage manager, Max Jacobs (Charles Lane), whose real name is Max Mandlebaum. The change of identity signaled by the name change is a strategy in comedy and provides an opportunity for personal growth, albeit only imagined. Those of us who do not want to be condemned to live within our limitations learn to edit a role and play it. The use of the motif of identity switching intensified and reached its peak with the arrival of *talkies*.

Howard Hawks was not the only filmmaker to incorporate this motif into his films. Another was Rouben Mamoulian, who was one of the directors of the new generation to make the most of the aesthetic and narrative potential of sound. His theatrical and operatic training gave him a different perspective on fiction and its representation on screen. In *Love Me Tonight* (1932), released two years before Hawks' *Twentieth Century*, the comedy revolves around the new identity assumed by its protagonist, Maurice (Maurice Chevalier). In contrast with Molière's *L'Avare*, in Mamoulian's film a commoner poses as a nobleman to win the heart of a princess. Maurice is a Parisian tailor who goes to the viscount's castle to collect some bills and is taken for a baron; his new status allows him to seduce Jeanette (Jeanette MacDonald), a bored princess living in the castle. In the sequence in which Maurice reveals his true identity to Jeanette, Mamoulian escapes the literalness of sound by replacing the outraged cries of the princess' aunts descending the stairs shrieking "a tailor, a tailor" with the sound of dogs barking [see Fig. 3].[3]

Figure 2: Jaffe's brain maze: chalk marks on the floor. Twentieth Century (Howard Hawks, 1934).

Figure 3: Sequence of *Love Me Tonight* in which Maurice confesses his true identity.

Mamoulian would not only employ sound for satirical purposes, but also to condense the plot of the film in the song "Isn't It Romantic." The song ties together a long opening sequence that foreshadows the story, turning the sound, in the words of Cousins (2020, p. 122), into a "metaphor for the journey" that his protagonist undertakes: the tailor sings the song to one of his customers, who hums the tune after he leaves his shop; a passerby who overhears him turns out to be a composer who writes the notes down as he travels; some soldiers then hear the composer whistling it on the train and turn it into a military march; a violinist hears a battalion chanting it and plays it to the people; eventually, passing from one character to another, it reaches the ears of the princess, who hears it from the very room where the tailor will later confess his true identity. Mamoulian filmed the musical numbers before shooting began, an operatic practice that the director imported to the film medium and which allowed him to adapt the actors' movements to the music played during the shots.

It is well known that the arrival of sound gave rise to the screwball comedy. This new genre was a feminized form of comedy with faster dialogue and more natural performances.

[3] While in this scene the comedy is the result of dubbing, at the beginning of the film it will be precisely the literalness of the symphony of everyday sounds as Paris awakes that gives it an identity distinct from other cities.

Howard Hawks told Lombard that if she acted in the train compartment scene he would fire her: "She talked so fast that sometimes [John Barrymore] didn't know what to do. It was so fast that even I didn't know what to do" (qtd. in McBride, 1982, p. 65). Speed and chaos enter the scene, with brazen women stepping on the men's dialogue. (In *Twentieth Century*, the shadows on the train seem to project the characteristic speed of their dialogue, in an effect reminiscent of Molière's "*entrain endiablé*".) Realism is accelerated in the acting: "Whenever a scene doesn't look too good, the solution is to make it faster," argued Hawks (qtd. in McBride, 1982, p. 65). The screwball comedy always posits a clash of egos: the genre is based on the perverse idea that love can only increase through aggravation (Sikov, 1989), so the dialogues are biting, irreverent, witty.[4] Hawks' obsession with interchangeability or "reversal-patterns" has been noted by various critics, including Robin Wood (1981, pp. 183-186). Children and adults reverse roles in several of his comedies, such as *Monkey Business* (1952), although the main reversal pattern is between male and female: men dress in female attire in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953); and women wear uniforms or work clothes and play men's roles in *His Girl Friday, The Thing From Another World* (1951) and *Hatari!* (1962). Hawks even quotes himself in an intertextual nod to *Bringing up Baby* in *Monkey Business*: the scene in which Dr. Barnaby (Cary Grant), dressed in Edwina's (Ginger Rogers) coat, asks his mother-in-law to shut up, recalls the moment when Grant shushes Susan's (Katherine Hepburn) aunt, after confessing to her that he is dressed in a women's bathrobe because he "just went gay all of a sudden!" [cf. the stills in Figure 4]. These inversions or imagined identities are "manifestations of the chaos that civilized order suppresses... and are treated ambivalently, with good humor and positive connotations" (Wood, 1981, p. 185).[5]

Figure 4: Left: inversions or imagined identities in Hawk's intertextual quotes. Cary Grant with women clothes in *Bringing up Baby* (right) and *Monkey Bussines* (left).

The reversal pattern is in constant contact with the very texture of love entanglement: in *Twentieth Century*, Mildred/Lily keeps the pin that Jaffe used to stab her with as a kind of fetish. In Oscar and Lily's journey, acting or overacting is their way of protecting themselves—and their love—from the threat of success or failure: for Lily Garland, from success, as despite

[4] Contemporary screenwriters such as Aaron Sorkin have often acknowledged the way they deliberately imitate the musicality of the fast-paced dialogues of classical Hollywood in their films and TV series: "When I'm writing, the way the words sound is as important to me as what they mean" (Aaron Sorkin, qtd. in Jeff Daniels, 2012, par. 18). Examples include the famous "walk and talk" dialogues of *The West Wing (*NBC, 1999-2006), the conversations in *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-2014)—a series inspired by Hawks' *His Girl* Friday—and the sharp-tongued dialogues in *Charlie Wilson's War* (Mike Nichols, 2007), *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), and *Steve Jobs* (Danny Boyle, 2015). Sorkin also borrows from screwball and remarriage comedy plots as fertile sources for verbal confrontations (Sánchez Baró, 2016, pp. 368-369).

[5] Beyond Hawks, the motif of imagined identity appears, among other films, in Preston Sturges' meta-cinematic *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), whose plot revolves around the decision of a film director who, tired of making comedies, tries to "make a picture about human suffering" and ends up admitting that "there's a lot to be said for making people laugh."

her Hollywood stardom she cannot forget Jaffe; for Jaffe (who shouted "Oblivion!" when he learned that Lily was leaving him), from the failure with which he sought to justify his aspiration to the title of genius. The early closure of his production of *Joan of Arc* prompts him to leave Chicago in disguise to escape his creditors. On the train, the bearded faces of the immigrants who want to work with him suddenly gives Jaffe the idea of staging a production of *The Passion* with Lily in the role of Mary Magdalene. This offer would allow Lily to "repent" of the step she had taken in leaving Jaffe to find success, equated with the luxury that Mary Magdalene would have once enjoyed. The climax of this improvised repentance comedy is provided by the intervention of Matthew J. Clark (Etienne Girardot), who poses as a wealthy businessman prepared to sponsor the contract that Jaffe offers Lily. Clark is actually an escapee from an asylum who has been peppering the train with posters warning of a coming apocalypse. Jaffe even ends up faking his own death, as a last resort to convince Lily to sign the "marriage" contract. (As if quoting Molière, Jaffe laments his fate to die in the middle of nowhere, saying that he would have liked to end his life on the stage.) However, this scene conveys the impression (reinforced by the expressions of Jaffe's "witnesses") that Lily is giving an even more convincing performance than Oscar is, and that she is aware of his ruse to win her back and consents to it anyway. Her amused laughter in reaction to Jaffe's outlandish description of his plan for staging *The Passion* leaves no room for doubt. The time for historical dramas has passed. To breathe new life into the comedy, the director and actress need to rediscover how to work together. The film's final scene repeats its first, with the difference that this time Lily listens to Jaffe's same speech about his absolute commitment to the theater with evident disbelief.[6]

Thomas Diafoirus, the suitor chosen by Argan for Angélique in *Le malade imaginaire*, recites a memorized speech to her, and then repeats it to her stepmother. "See what it is to study, and how one learns to say fine things," observes Toinette mockingly. Thomas's scholasticism sounds ridiculous, even in an age closer to that when Beatrice had embodied theology for Dante. Modern comedy no longer depends on belief, like Greek tragedy or Christian divine comedy, but on custom. Among the ancients, as Diafoirus recalls, custom dictated that the husband carry off his betrothed to separate her forcibly from her parents. Angélique retorts that they are not ancients, but moderns, as if the change in customs implied a reform of pious obligations. The moderns need a comedy that represents them faithfully. In Antiquity, all family matters were subject to the duty to the ancestors, as the presence of the dead was as real a fact as the conduct of the living: nothing could be more contrary to such a worldview as the tactic of feigning one's own death merely to observe how others react.[7] In modernity, traditional ties have given way to individual interests. Molière refers to "our august monarch" in the prologue of *Le malade imaginaire*. The king's authority is a last resort that will be unnecessary if Argan accepts a marriage in keeping with his daughter's will. And this is what happens, but with the condition that her fiancé must become a doctor, and with Argan himself being symbolically made a physician in the festive closing of the comedy. The servants are the appropriate mediators in a context in which the terms of parental authority and children's obligation are redefined, as they occupy an intermediate position between private

[6] See the biographical sketch of Howard Hawks and the sharp critique of *Twentieth Century* by Eduardo Torres-Dulce (2016, pp. 126-135, 202-205), as well as the article by Ignacio Gutiérrez-Solana, "Howard Hawks. El dinamismo de la incertidumbre", in Carlos F. Heredero (2016, pp. 177-183). A particularly insightful perspective on Howard Hawks is offered by David Thomson, who remarks: "The clue to Hawks's greatness is that this somber lining [the "sense of destruction" in his comedies] is cut against the cloth of the genre in which he is operating... The 'style' of Hawks rests in this commenting astuteness; no other director so bridges the contrived plots of genre and the responses of a mature spectator... The point is that his actors played to and with him, as he sat on one side of the camera that recorded them. His method involved the creation of a performance in rehearsal for which the script was merely an impetus.... Because he is no unassuming innovator, so natural an entertainer, his work has still not been surpassed" (Thomson, 2006, pp. 613-616).

[7] As Fustel de Coulanges (1889, p. 221) observes: "One would have a false idea of human nature to believe that this ancient religion was an imposture and, so to speak, a comedy".

life and public life through which emotional reactions can be regulated when the pursuit of happiness has become a question of individual rights.

In the remarriage comedy, the mediator or provocateur would be the journalist, as is the case in George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) or, more explicitly, in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). The starting point in Capra's film is again the paternal veto of a marriage, in this case already celebrated but not yet consummated.[8] Peter Warne (Clark Gable) adopts the uncomfortable role of "chaperone" and educator to the spoiled and capricious Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert). Walter Connolly, an excellent supporting actor in the role of Jaffe's producer in *Twentieth Century*, plays Ellie's father here. Peter and Ellie pose as a married couple by night in order to continue their journey to New York by day, no longer by train but by bus and hitchhiking. Cavell offers the following analysis of the "transcendental mood" linking "the night before" to the "early gray morning" when the couple try hitchhiking [Fig. 5]:

> I have reported my initial, persistent sense of "nothingness" of this shot (remarking the spareness of its imagery, the conventionality of its words, the apparent offhandedness of the characters' manners), and confessed at the same time my sense of the transcendental mood of the night before continued in this early gray morning. But my next response was to feel: Certainly the mood continues. This just means that the powerful, expressionistically enforced mood of the night before persists, for us and for them. How could it not, given that the sequence of the night before had climaxed with an extreme close-up of the pair resisting an embrace; they are, on the road, unreleased. But then again I felt: No. I mean the mood persists not just as in the memory but as present, continued by, expressed in, the new setting at dawn. The spareness, the conventionality, the offhandedness are somehow to be understood with the same expressionistic fervor of the moonlight scene. (Cavell, 2004, p. 158)

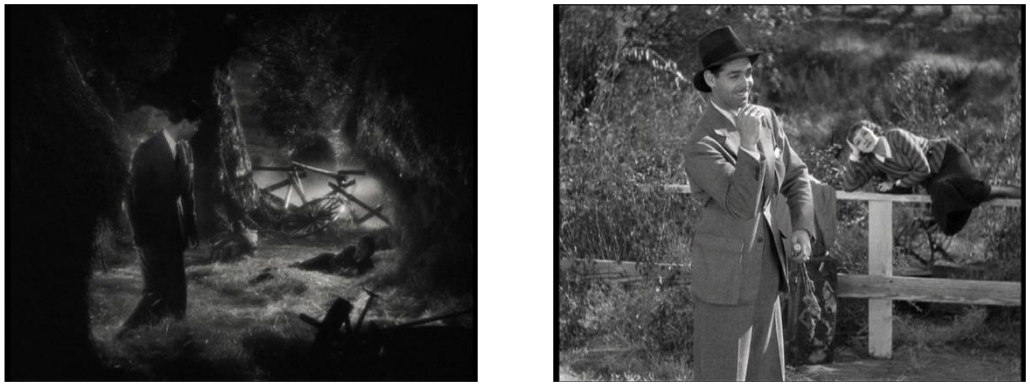

Figure 5: *It Happened One Night*. Moments with a "transcendental mood" according to Cavell.

Their imagined identity allows them to act as the marred couple they do not want to become, giving free rein to their desires. There is a similarity here with the scene in *La malade imaginaire* where Cleantes poses as Angélique's substitute music-master and performs the story of a shepherd who, while "paying every attention to the beauties of a play," is interrupted by the sight of a scoundrel troubling a young shepherdess. He rushes to the girl's aid, and on seeing her he wonders, "can anyone be capable of insulting such charms?" (Molière, *Dramatic* 430-431). Angélique, who recognizes Cleantes, is forced to improvise in the presence of her father so as not to give him away. Improvisation, which Cavell associates in the comedy of matrimonial entanglement with restraint and conventionality, allows the elopers to fool the

[8] In this regard, although not technically a screwball comedy, Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* also uses class differences as a narrative device, as noted above. Screwball comedies that also use this trope include *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story* and *Monkey Business*, the female protagonists are wealthy women; the males, working men who harbor prejudices against the upper classes.

detectives hired by Ellie's father in *It Happened One Night*. Comedy organizes its own system of checks and balances to give free rein to individual rights to the extent that nature allows. In Capra's film, the choice of husband is conditioned by the father's objective to punish his daughter and redirect her desires, something that in Molière's comedy would involve giving or receiving spankings: in fact, Peter tells Mr. Andrews that Ellie should be spanked, whether she deserves it or not.[9]

4. Conclusions: "acquaintance with the classics"

Robin Wood (1981, p.187) suggests that Hawks' classicism is a "means of containing the chaos to which his work points, and which the comedies ambivalently celebrate". Classicism is understood here not only in formal terms (his use of symmetry, linear structure, or the invisible technique typical of the institutional mode of representation of classical Hollywood), but also for the way that his comedies represent an attitude towards life, an affirmation of the natural fact that happiness must be pursued in a predictably adverse context. On the other hand, the connection between American comedies and Molière should perhaps not be asserted too hastily; consider, for example, Molière's emphasis on the miser and the hypochondriac rather than on Cleantes and Angélique, respectively. The comedy should not be read as a foretaste of the triumph of romantic love. In parallel with the role of guaranteeing or restoring justice played by the king in traditional society, the paternal figure's authority over the family is incontestable. Conversely, screwball comedy, as a cinematic genre of democracy, shifts the focus to the fiancés, relegating the father to the background. This seems to recall the transcendental challenge Thoreau expressed in relation to what youth can achieve without the advice of elders: "One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living" (Thoreau, 1992, p. 5). The Enlightenment motto *Sapere aude* could be read in the United States as a constitutional amendment for the betterment of its citizens. We may doubt whether Molière points toward the path of progress that will lead to such a scenario. Walden Pond was the place where *Walden* had to be written, the setting for Thoreau's performance or emancipation, like Hawks' train or Capra's highway in American comedy. Otherwise, literature remains essentially conservative in the value it places on "good-naturedness and reciprocity" in the family, the community or the public. Molière might have been surprised to see himself transformed into a precursor of modern individualism.[10] By making his work an object of "bookish" study, it may end up being misunderstood. Above all, the comedy was intended to be seen *and* heard. However, from this perspective, cinema may be the art that helps us understand Molière as he understood himself: "We have perhaps most poignantly in films, something we have in any art, the opportunity to find, but always the freedom to lose, the significance of the nothing and the nowhere" (Cavell, 2004, p.162). Cavell's words evoke Emerson's advice: "Since our office is with moments, let us husband them" (qtd. in Cavell, 2004, p.162). Molière would have agreed. Comedies can be valued as tributes to the moment (as Emerson would say, to "days" as opposed to "works") (Emerson, 1870, p.139), however much we may flatter ourselves with the idea that the conquests of humanism are reflected in the history of art. The festive ingredient of comedy reminds us of the inherent fleetingness of artistic ambitions.

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[9] Molière, *Le Médecin malgré lui*: "SGANERELLE: And five or six strokes of a cudgel only serve to refresh the tenderness folks have for each other"; "MARTINE: The doctor's madness is even greater than you can imagine; for at times you must even have recourse to blows before you can make him acknowledge his ability" Molière, 1894, pp. 7, 9).

[10] "There is nothing meticulous in his work to suggest the solitary author in his study. A true poet of drama, his works are onstage, in action; he does not write them, so to speak, but acts them out" (Sainte-Beuve, 1836, p. 136).

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