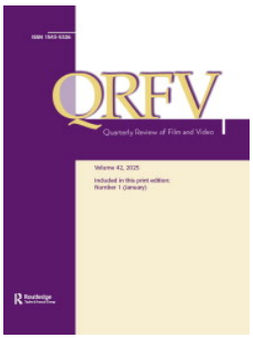

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"Sacred Intimacies": Sexual Ambiguity and Performance in *My Favorite Wife* (1940)

Kathrina Glitre

The concept of ambiguity is essential to understanding the Production Code's impact on classical Hollywood cinema. Writing in 1931, Colonel Jason S. Joy, Head of the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), suggested that movies could devise representational strategies "from which conclusions might be drawn by the sophisticated mind, but which would mean nothing to the unsophisticated and inexperienced" (quoted by Maltby 2003, 63). Such "mechanisms of denial" displaced responsibility for textual interpretation onto the spectator by expressing taboo content through indirect means, lending the films involved a high degree of textual instability (Jacobs 1995, 114; see also Vasey 1997, 107, 135, 207; Maltby 2003, 63, 472). Screwball comedy's anarchic disruption of social norms thus provides a vivid opportunity to analyze the relationships between industry self-regulation, ambiguity and interpretation.

Screwball comedy's emergence in 1934 is typically seen as a creative response to the establishment of the Production Code Administration (PCA), replacing sex and innuendo with physical slapstick and an "innocent" performance style (Greene 2011, 45; Halbout 2022, 135). However, in the late 1930s screwball style shifted, with films such as *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Too Many Husbands* (1940) and *Love Crazy* (1941) utilizing plots about married couples to foreground sexual intimacy more directly (Greene 2011, 46). *My Favorite Wife* is a prime example of this trend. Nick Arden (Cary Grant) petitions to have his first wife, Ellen (Irene Dunne), declared dead, then marries his second wife, Bianca (Gail Patrick) – the very same day that Ellen reappears, rescued from an island where she was shipwrecked with Stephen Burkett (Randolph Scott) seven years earlier. Faced with a honeymoon, potential adultery, bigamy and *two* love triangles, the PCA rejected the film's

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estimating script outright, finding the material "unacceptable under the provisions of the Production Code" because of "its general offensive sex suggestiveness."[1] A major concern was handling "the sacred intimacies of private life," particularly Bianca's desire to consummate her marriage and her reactions to Nick's failure to do so.

Ambiguity and Interpretation

There are (at least) three levels of sexual ambiguity at play here:

1. PCA euphemisms: "Sacred intimacies" is just one euphemism for marital sex found in PCA correspondence; others include "the intimacy of private life," "the marital act," "the desire to cohabit" and "the marital privilege."[2] Along with the vagueness of terms like "sex suggestiveness," such phrases lend the PCA correspondence itself a form of sexual ambiguity. A degree of "sophisticated" interpretation is sometimes needed to grasp what the underlying transgression might have been, prior to gauging how the material was re-written and represented on screen.
2. Plot action: *My Favorite Wife*'s sexual conflicts center on whether Nick will consummate his second marriage, whether Ellen committed adultery on the island, and whether Nick and Ellen will re-consummate their own marriage.[3] However, these questions cannot be directly asked, let alone answered. According to the Code's Particular Application on Sex,

> The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. […] *Adultery*, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively. […] the *triangle,* that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. […] *Seduction* [… is] never the proper subject for comedy. ("Motion Picture Production Code" 1937, 286-287)

Thus, the spectator's understanding of *My Favorite Wife*'s plot depends on their own level of sexual knowledge (affecting whether they recognize the questions exist) and their interpretation of the film's indirect representational strategies.

3. Characterization and star persona**:** Nick's seeming lack of interest in consummating his marriage to Bianca also raises questions about "sexual performance," gender and sexuality – most obviously when Dr Kohlmar (Pedro de Cordoba) witnesses Nick experimenting with dress and hat combinations. These moments potentially enable both queer and homophobic interpretations, particularly for viewers with knowledge of Cary Grant's star persona and his off-screen friendship with Randolph Scott. Thus, my title's focus on "performance" carries a double meaning,

incorporating both practical aspects of acting and thematic issues around sexuality; for the sake of clarity, I will use "performance" to refer to acting, and "sexual performance" when discussing the film's themes.

As Hoi Lun Law has argued, the presence of multiple meanings does not automatically involve ambiguity. Drawing on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Law describes puns as "concise" expressions lacking the kind of "puzzling" required to make their meaning ambiguous. He views "ambiguity as a value (as opposed to an 'objective' condition)" that depends on "the *relationship between* the different interpretations," creating uncertainty about meaning (2021, 2, my italics). As an esthetic concept, ambiguity depends on contextual evaluation, which Law links directly to the "interaction between screen and spectator" (2021, 5) as a "dynamic process of reading"(2021, 11).

Given the centrality of interpretation to understanding ambiguity, close textual analysis is an essential method. I am not suggesting that my reading of the film is the "only" possible interpretation – indeed, to do so would contradict the entire premise of my argument about ambiguity. My primary aim is to tease out the role played by performance in handling suggestive and taboo content, by comparing the PCA's recommendations to key moments in the shooting script and the finished film. As Lea Jacobs argues, industry self-regulation "provides an extraordinarily fruitful means of contextualizing film analysis" (1995, 25), by providing historical evidence and a systematic framework for evaluating representational strategies. The analysis is further contextualized by comparing *My Favorite Wife* to other screwball comedies and considering the PCA's wider response to this cycle of films.

Screwball Comedy and Performance

My approach builds on work by Jacobs, Richard Maltby, Ruth Vasey and Jane Greene: all four emphasize that the PCA worked *with* studio producers to avoid external censorship as part of the industry's self-regulation. Code administrators (both pre- and post-1934) often suggested solutions to problematic content, encouraging conventionalized forms of indirect representation, so that the Code paradoxically functioned "as an enabling mechanism at the same time as it was a repressive one" (Maltby 2003, 473). Jacobs notes that, under the PCA, "the treatment of potentially offensive action shifted in the direction of greater ambiguity": spectators could still "interpret scenes […] in sexual terms, but this interpretation [was] not confirmed, and [was] sometimes explicitly denied, through action or dialogue" (creating uncertainty about meaning) (1995, 113, 111). Performance style thus proves central to these strategies.

Broadly speaking, the first phase of screwball films, such as *It Happened One Night* (1934), *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), focused on an unmarried couple learning to have fun and falling in love.[4] Despite the prevalence of risqué situations and double entendre, these screwball performances were rarely suggestive, primarily because characters seem oblivious to the implications of their words and actions. Thus, Maltby argues that screwball comedies "achieved a particular 'innocence' by presenting a deadpan level of performance that acted as a foil to the secondary 'sophisticated' narrative constructed within the imagination of the viewer" (Maltby 2003, 474; Vasey 1997, 207). For example, when David Huxley (Cary Grant) talks of "losing his bone" in *Bringing Up Baby*, Grant delivers the line so ingenuously that any double meaning seems (almost) accidental. Instead, screwball comedies displace sex onto eccentric behavior and physical slapstick – such as David searching for his precious bone by chasing after George the dog on all fours, or the kerfuffle over bowler hats in *The Awful Truth*. However, as Greene demonstrates, *The Awful Truth* was "distinguished […] from the bulk of early screwballs" (and from *Bringing Up Baby*) by its more knowingly "suggestive ambiguity," since – as a married couple – Lucy and Jerry Warriner (Irene Dunne and Cary Grant) are morally allowed to have sex but this cannot be represented directly. The need for suggestive ambiguity also depended on the couple's mutual suspicions about marital infidelity: the Code's prohibitions against explicit treatment of adultery meant the truth (awful or otherwise) had to remain uncertain.

The Awful Truth's influence on later screwball comedies is striking – not least in *My Favorite Wife* re-pairing Dunne and Grant – and lies not only in the focus on a married couple but also performance style. Greene argues that in these later films, "slapstick antics were increasingly buttressed by a suggestive style of gagging" that was more obviously sexual (2011, 46, 54).[5] Greene identifies two main gag structures as "mechanisms of denial" in these films: "mutual interference gags" and "double-meaning gags" – the latter taking the forms of verbal double entendre and physical "screwy behavior (2011, 49, 54, 59)."[6] Mutual interference gags occur when characters experience the same situation or event as meaning *different* things, whereby

> the incongruity between the various points of view creates humor. […] Yet in order for the gag to work, viewers must understand how and why characters have misunderstood events – in other words, they must grasp the innocent truth *as well as* the not-so-innocent conclusions at which characters have arrived. (2011, 50, my italics)

This structure fits well with Law's conception of ambiguity since mutual interference gags depend on the viewer's dynamic reading of the *relationship*

between interpretations. In contrast, Greene argues that double-meaning gags "make two interpretations of characters' actions available to the audience […] but one interpretation (presumably grasped *only* by a sophisticated viewer) is risqué" (2011, 54, my italics). Double-meaning gags function more like puns in this respect: they are not automatically ambiguous (since the innocent and sophisticated meanings are independent, rather than *inter*-dependent), but the narrative context may create ambiguity – indeed, they may well occur in combination with mutual interference gags, as closer analysis of an example from *My Favorite Wife* reveals.

When Nick and Bianca register at their honeymoon hotel, the Clerk (Donald MacBride) mis-interprets events because he knows something the newlyweds do not: another woman (Ellen) is looking for Nick. The Clerk also knows that this other woman is not – or, as Ellen puts it, "not exactly" – Nick's wife. The phrase "not exactly" involves both a double-meaning and a mutual interference gag: Ellen is "not exactly" Nick's wife because she has been declared dead (the innocent explanation which we understand, but the Clerk cannot); but a lover might also be considered "not exactly" a wife (which is a reasonable assumption for the Clerk to make under the circumstances). As a mutual interference gag, our superior knowledge provides a safety valve for this sexually suggestive meaning, rendering the scene "innocent": we know exactly who Ellen is and why she is there, so we can laugh at the Clerk's misinterpretation. As double entendre, "not exactly" carries both innocent and sophisticated meanings – but in combination with the mutual interference gag it also expresses Ellen's (and Bianca's) ambiguous sexual status: who *is* Nick's wife (literally and symbolically)? The scene exemplifies the more openly suggestive style of later screwball comedies, using performance and sound to emphasize the "sophisticated" meanings on screen: as Ellen speaks, muted trumpets play an ironic snatch of "The Wedding March," and a reaction shot shows the Clerk's double take as he registers the line's potential meaning – a "ping" in the music timed perfectly to coincide with his raised eyebrows. His suspicions about Ellen's sexual status are later reinforced when she signals not to alert the newlyweds to her presence – the "ping" of the desk bell punctuating the delivery of his line, "Oh, nothing!"

At this point, it is worth noting an esthetic difference between the two gag structures: double-meaning gags are intrinsically about performance, hence the crucial difference between deadpan and suggestive delivery of double entendre; mutual interference gags, on the other hand, depend primarily on narrative sources of misunderstanding, but their humor may be accentuated through performance. Thus, the gag structures also motivate MacBride's performance of astonished stares, raised eyebrows, puzzled

frowns and head tilts: his more "suggestive" responses to double entendre are underpinned by his misunderstanding of the situation.

Sexual Ambiguity and the PCA: "I'm Waiting!"

PCA correspondence reveals that administrators were hyper-alert to the potential for double meanings. Grégoire Halbout notes that PCA scrutiny of scripts "exposed 'meanings,' 'suggestions,' and 'intentions' behind seemingly neutral words and phrases that contributed to the 'unacceptable' nature of certain stories" (2022, 163).Interpretation was a key part of the PCA's process, then, imagining how written words might be performed on screen and seeking to regulate the film's content *and* its "anticipated reception" (2022, 164). The PCA's approach itself depended on the administrators' dynamic reading of the ambiguous relationship between different interpretations of the written words. Where meanings were too direct or explicit, the PCA required elimination and re-writing. Rather than removing offending material entirely, however, filmmakers typically found ways to render sexual content acceptably "innocent" through indirect, ambiguous representation.

In rejecting the estimating script for *My Favorite Wife*, Breen characterized the story as having "a definitely unacceptable flavor that is certain to be highly offensive to motion picture patrons everywhere."[7] He lists five main concerns, all with sexual implications: the action at the honeymoon hotel in Yosemite; the "many suggestive references" to Ellen and Stephen's relationship and their having spent seven years together on an island; the "numerous scenes" of the newly-wed Bianca waiting for Nick to come to "her marital bed"; a scene in which the children walk into Ellen's bedroom while Nick is there; and the "inescapable suggestion" in the final sequence that Nick wants to share Ellen's bed *before* his second marriage has been annulled.[8] As explanation, Breen directed RKO's representative, J.R. McDonough, to "that portion of the Code which makes it mandatory that 'the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld,' and the further provision that scenes of sex suggestiveness must never be treated 'as matter for comedy'."[9] The phrase "sex suggestiveness" is not used in the Code itself, but identifying the topics explicitly named as unfit for comedy helps pin down its potentially ambiguous implications: the Code specifies that "*impure love*, the love of man and woman forbidden by human and divine law" should "not be treated as matter for comedy"; adultery is "*never* a fit subject for *comedy*"; and seduction and rape are "never the proper subject for comedy" ("Motion Picture Production Code" 1937, 279, 277 and 287, orginal italics). "Impure love" thus involves illicit (and illegal) heterosexual behaviors; in contrast, "*Pure love*, the love of a man

for a woman permitted by the law of God and man, is the rightful subject of plots" – but the "passion arising from this love is not" (1930, 279, original italics). Thus, Breen also warned McDonough that some scenes in *My Favorite Wife* were "to be regarded as 'outside the limits of safe representation'. 'These,' states the Code, 'are the manifestations of passion and the sacred intimacies of private life.'"[10]

Four days later, on 28 November 1939, Breen met with McDonough and Garson Kanin, the film's director, for a story conference.[11] The following day, Breen again wrote to McDonough, "in accordance with the understanding reached" at that meeting – but without explicitly stating what their understanding involved.[12] The letter goes on to provide six pages of scene-by-scene details, pinpointing censorable material and making suggestions for changes and solutions. A degree of dynamic interpretation is necessary here, too, piecing together a sense of the filmmakers' overall approach to "offensive" content through comparison to the shooting script and the finished film. The only element that seems to have been dropped altogether is the scene of the children in their mother's bedroom; the shooting script still includes shots of them in the corridor *watching* their father enter and leave her room in the middle of the night but these are not in the finished film (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shots 144-147).[13] The other problem areas are all retained, in some form at least, so the question becomes how these elements achieved PCA approval.

The issues around the honeymoon hotel provide a particularly revealing example of sexual ambiguity in the PCA correspondence itself. Following the story conference, Breen told McDonough,

> It is in these [hotel] scenes that we begin to get the impression of the D.F., which we spoke about yesterday. The general reaction of enthusiasm and, later, disappointment on the part of Bianca, will, of course, be highly offensive. […] We also understand that it is your purpose not to enter into any discussion about Bianca wanting Nick to relax, or to "get into something comfortable," nor will there be any description in this script of the aforementioned D.F.[14]

What, one may ask, is "the D.F."? The abbreviation is not explained but the very fact it *is* abbreviated implies it stands in for something explicit.[15] From the context, we inevitably assume it has something to do with sex – and "we" in this case includes Barbara Hall (as the former Research Archivist at the Margaret Herrick Library) and Thomas Doherty (as an expert on Joseph Breen and the PCA) who kindly responded to my email query. Hall did suggest "Delayed Fuck" – but Doherty thought it unlikely that that particular F-word would have been used even behind closed doors; he suggested "De-Flowering" and "Delayed Fulfilment" as alternatives. Neither had seen the abbreviation used in other PCA files.

The use of an ambiguous abbreviation potentially indicates the underlying gender dynamics of the PCA office. According to Doherty, "the staff was a boy's club, woman's work being at the typewriter. […] The hypermasculinity of the PCA chief [Breen] and the rough language bandied about the office during negotiations with foul-mouthed producers made the men squeamish about having a woman within earshot" (2007, 83). Thus, while vulgarisms might be acceptable within the confines of a male-only conversation, in recording the discussion, female typists would need "protection" from such uncouth language. It would also fit with Breen's Victorian and Irish-Catholic attitudes to women, who were to be revered as "vessels of virginity or paragons of maternity" (2007, 94-95). This may help to explain why the PCA's reactions to *My Favorite Wife* and *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938) were so different, despite both films involving a sexually frustrated spouse. In Ernst Lubitsch's film, Nicole De Loiselle (Claudette Colbert) discovers on her wedding day that multi-millionaire, Michael Brandon (Gary Cooper), has been married seven times before, rewarding his ex-wives with a pre-marriage settlement of $50,000 a year for life upon divorce. To teach him a lesson, Nicole insists on $100,000 a year but then refuses to consummate the marriage, ultimately leading him to have a nervous breakdown. The PCA barely raised an eyebrow, describing the storyline as "acceptable" with "little that is reasonably censorable." While they warned, "Care must be taken […] to avoid the use of material, or a general flavor, which reflects unfavorably upon the institution of marriage," no mention is made of the film's treatment of marriage as a sex-for-money exchange, or Brandon's increasing sexual frustration.[16] While a newlywed woman's sexual desire for her "marital privilege" was offensive in the extreme, apparently a man's was not.

When handling "the sacred intimacies" of married life, Breen's scene-by-scene response to *My Favorite Wife*'s script directly mentions aspects of performance, costume and sets, as well as action and dialogue.[17] He stresses that the bellboys should not "smirk" as they leave Nick and Bianca's honeymoon suite, and that there should be "no 'romantic smiling' by the waiter, no 'intriguing eyeing' of Bianca, and no staring or showing of astonishment," presumably because such gestures would be too sexually suggestive (rather than deadpan). In addition to the warning about Bianca encouraging Nick to "get into something comfortable," Breen advises, "Bianca will not be 'impatient', nor attired in a negligée." He also reminds McDonough that the hotel scenes should take place in the suites' sitting rooms, *not* in the bedrooms; no hotel beds should be shown on screen and even the dialogue's emphasis on the word "beds" should be removed.[18] The requirements around beds and bedrooms are met but the other aspects still linger in the finished film, albeit in toned down ways. The Clerk certainly

Figure 1. Bianca waits for Nick in their honeymoon suite.

stares and shows astonishment but his looks are directed at Nick (not Bianca); Bianca's gift of a matching robe visually implies a sentiment similar to "get into something comfortable"; and, although Bianca does wear a negligée, decorum (if not taste) is maintained by her own leopard print robe (Figure 1).

The creative compromises involved in regulating sexual meanings are demonstrated by Bianca's "impatience." The PCA correspondence mentions this as a concern multiple times, in relation to scenes of Bianca "waiting for her husband to come to her marital bed": "any suggestion of 'impatience' on the part of Bianca will be rewritten"; Nick and Bianca's conversations "should not be played in a bedroom and Bianca will not be 'impatient'" here either.[19] In each case, "impatient" is placed in inverted commas, signaling its euphemistic function – an innocent word standing in for a sophisticated meaning. Nonetheless, the film seemingly retains direct signs of Bianca's "impatience" – including her repeated line, "Nick, I'm waiting!" when he hangs back to talk to Ellen on their first night home. The first time, Bianca simply states the fact with a stern tone; the second, her voice is louder, with a sharp edge, frustration getting the better of her. However, the filmed scene is significantly less "sex suggestive" than the shooting script:

> Bianca: (*tenderly*) Nick, are you coming up, darling?"
>
> Nick: In just a minute.
>
> […]
>
> Bianca: (*now a little sharper*) Nick, are you coming up?

Nick: Coming right up!

[…]

Bianca: (*completely out of patience*). Nick, I'm waiting!

Ellen: She's waiting.

Nick: I'm coming. (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shots 126-129)

The parenthetical directions indicate that Bianca is initially seductive in her approach, escalating her "impatience" with each line. The double entendre of "coming up" is exactly the kind of phrase the PCA would consider objectionable in this context; Breen's letter states that these scenes (including Nick and Bianca's conversation in the bedroom) should be entirely re-written "along the lines we discussed yesterday" (during the story conference).[20] The difference between Bianca's "impatience" in the script and onscreen is ultimately about characterization and performance. The script indicates Bianca is *sexually* impatient (tenderly calling him "Darling"); on screen, Gail Patrick's performance is far from seductive, switching between ill-tempered hauteur to comical wailing over Nick's unworn robe. Bianca becomes an unsympathetic character, remaining – quite literally – Nick's "kissless bride" (as the PCA Analysis chart describes her character).[21] Even their wedding ceremony ends before the Judge asks if Nick will "take this woman."

Sexual Performance: "What's the Matter with You?"

Bianca's reactions to Nick's physical and emotional distance are underpinned by mutual interference gags. Most obviously, Bianca does not know that Ellen is Nick's first wife, and she therefore seeks alternative explanations for why Nick is ignoring her. Initially, she takes it personally, demanding to know, "What's *wrong* with me?," but his inability to answer the question – and his rapid escape at the sound of the doorbell – leads her to other conclusions. Greene suggests that audiences could interpret Nick's avoidance of Bianca in two ways: "he is afraid to tell her the truth because she will be upset" (an innocent reading) or "because he does not want to consummate the marriage" (the more risqué possibility) (2011, 59) – but, from Bianca's perspective, there is also the possibility that Nick is *incapable* of consummating the relationship. The "coming up" pun may have been too close to the bone for a bedtime scene, but it does slip into the film during the phone booth mix-up at the hotel, when Nick declares, "Something's come up!" and Bianca replies, "Why don't *you* come up?"[22] The script contains other gags about sexual performance, which the PCA insisted should be eliminated from the film itself: for example, Ma Arden (Ann Shoemaker) tells Bianca, "Nick's very peculiar" (to explain why he has not told the children Bianca is

their new mother), to which Bianca replies, "Yes, I found that out"; and the scene with Dr Kohlmar begins with a shot of books titled "Conquest of Timidity" and "Marriage in One Volume" (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shots 117 and 210).[23] Since, under the Code, sexual problems could not be directly represented, the PCA's advice was to "change the flavor of these scenes to indicate that Bianca is of the opinion that her husband is insane."[24] In other words, the PCA actively encouraged the displacement of sex onto "crazy" screwball behavior as part of the "mechanisms of denial."

The scene with Dr Kohlmar is, then, a particularly complex example of how screwball double-meaning gags and mutual interference gags work together as a way of regulating sexually suggestive content through ambiguity. Dr Kohlmar is not explicitly described as a psychiatrist but his European accent, beard and spectacles conventionally signal his occupation for those familiar with Freud. Moreover, the dialogue remains exceptionally vague about a diagnosis: when Bianca asks, "What do you think it could be?" he replies, "It is not at all unusual. […] There are hundreds of such cases." Just as he is about to explain a particular case (which might indicate the nature of the problem), Nick arrives home to get "some clothes for a friend of mine … he's downstairs in the car" (the clothes are for Ellen, who fell in a swimming pool; the person downstairs is Burkett). Bianca introduces Dr Kohlmar to Nick, saying, "It's all right. He knows." Nick/Grant does a frowning double take, peering intently at them: "He knows *what*?" We too are potentially baffled, needing to interpret the scene through indirect means and our own frame of reference. While Bianca declares that she feels like *she* is going "stark, staring mad," Dr Kohlmar's attitude is that Nick's behavior is "not at all unusual. The mood and pose is characteristic of the frustrated individual." We might read this entirely innocently: Nick is just frustrated and Dr Kohlmar does not even think he is insane. However, the PCA requested that lines about being "frustrated" should be deleted, presumably because of the association with sexual frustration – which could equally apply to Bianca. Consequently, it is essential that Dr Kohlmar is looking off-screen in Nick's direction when he speaks about frustration. A "sophisticated" interpretation could be that Dr Kohlmar is talking about male sexual dysfunction as "not unusual" – but this could be a physical condition, rather than a sign of "insanity." Alternatively, he could be talking about Nick's sexuality as an explanation of his apparent lack of interest in Bianca – as a neurotic condition, but also potentially as homosexuality. In effect, to meet the PCA's approval, the scene's representation of Nick's "condition" becomes so oblique that its ambiguity creates space for a much wider range of sexual interpretations (Figure 1).

These potential interpretations are then pushed in a more particular direction by seeing Nick modeling women's clothes in front of a mirror. The scene's humor and risqué meanings depend on both a mutual interference

gag and "screwy behavior" (as a double-meaning gag). At the level of plot, as Greene explains, "the viewer knows why Nick is avoiding Bianca and why he is trying on women's clothes. We also understand why Bianca has misunderstood his behavior and how his actions confirm her assumption that he is going crazy" (2011, 59-60). But we also know more than *Nick*, since we understand why Dr Kohlmar is observing him while Nick does not, and this has an important impact on Grant's performance of Nick's screwy behavior. The scene is certainly played for laughs, accompanied by comic non-diegetic music. Looking down, Grant waddles to the mirror, holds up a dress and hat, gauges the effect and plonks the hat on his head. Throughout, he frowns and winces, as if uncertain, then tries the hat at a different angle; with a slight headshake of disapproval at the effect, he returns to the closet to try again. The scene cuts to Dr Kohlmar observing him: stepping forward, Kohlmar *changes his glasses*, as if inspecting an unusual specimen that requires heightened vision. A viewpoint shot shows Nick from Dr Kohlmar's position: Nick is initially unaware of Kohlmar's presence, and continues a mirror "conversation" with himself, giving a little nod and mouthing an affirmative in response to the second dress and hat combination. Grant now stands at an angle to the mirror, squinting sideways at himself, testing out different views by placing his left hand behind and then in front – almost (but not quite) putting his hand on his hip as in a cheesecake pose – before spotting Dr Kohlmar. Grant's reaction is particularly striking: catching a breath, he pauses but does not look remotely embarrassed or flustered. Instead, he jiggles the dress at Kohlmar and in a deadpan, matter-of-fact way asks, "Y'think it matches?" (Figure 2).

Figure 2. "Y'think it matches?"

At the time when *My Favorite Wife* was made, the idea of cross-dressing would inevitably be linked to "homosexuality." The PCA correspondence implies as much, saying that "there should of course, be nothing that is suggestive of any misunderstanding on the part of the doctor" in relation to Nick modeling women's clothing.[25] Under the Code, "Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden" ("Motion Picture Production Code" 1937, 287).[26] While the Code itself does not explain what behaviors count as "sex perversion," PCA correspondence indicates that it covers both homosexual and heterosexual practices, including unorthodox sexual positions.[27] Olga J. Martin's *Hollywood's Moviemaking Commandments* (written in 1937) directly links "sex perversion" to gendered performance: "The characterization of a man as effeminate, or a woman as grossly masculine would be absolutely forbidden for screen portrayal. This means, too, that no comedy character may be introduced into a screenplay pantomiming a pervert" (1937, 180). Because the Code characterizes non-straight gender and sexuality as a "perversion," PCA correspondence paradoxically requires screenplays to remove homophobic language, at the same time as using such language itself. For example, Breen suggested eliminating Bianca's scripted line "I believe in fairies" from *My Favorite Wife*, and insisted that, in *Bluebeard's Eight Wife*, "there must be no suggestion of a 'pansy' gag" in the scene between Brandon and his private detective, Pepinard (Herman Bing).[28] Performance style was central to handling such moments, as the PCA's response to cross-dressing in *Love Crazy* indicates: the protagonist's "impersonation of a woman wherein he uses two balls of yarn to build up his breasts is highly questionable and will depend for its acceptability on *the way in which it is played* throughout these scenes."[29]

Grant's deadpan delivery of "Y'think it matches?" is, then, an essential part of the scene's representational strategies. If his performance was overtly camp or if he reacted in a way that suggested Nick realized what he was doing was taboo, the risqué inferences would be too overt and unacceptable by Code standards. Thus, deadpan performance paradoxically creates an innocent but *potentially* queer space where cross-dressing becomes "acceptable," creating comedy through the incongruity of Nick's screwy behavior and Dr Kohlmar's reactions. First, Dr Kohlmar agrees that the outfit matches and describes the effect as "very becoming." De Cordoba's performance indicates that the doctor is humoring his "patient," particularly in the patronizing way he says, "*Oh* … I see," in response to Nick's refutation, "It's for a *friend* of mine – he's waiting downstairs." Grant says this in a slightly cross and impatient way, as if Dr Kohlmar is an idiot for misunderstanding the situation, reinstating the mutual interference gag (the clothes are not for Nick) but also reinforcing the confusion about gender (the friend is a man). As far as Nick is concerned, it is the

doctor who seems "screwy": turning away, Nick frowns and shakes his head in exasperation, muttering under his breath (in trademark Grant style), "What's the *matter* with you?" The complex interweaving of the mutual interference gag and "screwy behavior" renders this scene open to multiple interpretations: while I find it potentially queer, others might read it as homophobic in its joking treatment of cross-dressing and stereotyping of Dr Kohlmar as comparatively effeminate himself (his "Europeanness," for example, as well as his visual interest in looking more closely at Nick).

The sexual ambiguity of this sequence is heightened by intertextual and extratextual knowledge. Anyone who has seen *Bringing Up Baby* is likely to recall David's screwball leap whilst wearing a woman's feathery peignoir: "I just went gay all of a sudden!"[30] Star gossip also plays a part: as Mark Glancy notes, some biographers claim that casting Randolph Scott was "an in-joke acknowledging Cary and Randy's sexual relationship" (2020, 205; Glancy provides a firm rebuttal). Grant and Scott shared an apartment from 1932-1934 and a beach house from 1935-1942, attracting homophobic gossip from some fan magazine writers, particularly after Paramount's publicity department arranged photo-shoots of the bachelors at home for articles such as "Batching It" (*Modern Screen*, September 1937). As Glancy points out, while a "sexual frisson" is certainly present (particularly in the beach house shots, where Grant and Scott exercise on the beach and hang out by the pool wearing bathing trunks), Paramount *selected* the images they wanted published (2020, 142-143, see also 106-108). These were not candid shots of two gay men: they were artfully staged publicity shots aimed at the female readership of fan magazines. Nonetheless, the extratextual discourse around Grant enhances the cross-dressing scene's ambiguity through the interaction of Nick's "sexual performance" and Grant's "performance" and star image. The film flirts with queer possibilities. Nick's reactions to Burkett's physical prowess on the diving board are a prime example: poolside, Grant performs wide-eyed disbelief, mopping his brow, and shaking his head ruefully at discovering this Johnny Weissmuller-Tarzan-type is the man with whom Ellen spent seven years on an island. His later hallucinations replaying Burkett's acrobatics express a comic fixation on the male body but, ultimately, both moments are framed as expressing Nick's anxiety about Ellen's possible adultery through the contrast between two types of masculinity – the outdoors adventurer (Burkett) compared to the urbane, office-bound lawyer (Nick).[31]

Romantic Certainty: "That's All I Wanted to Know"

While Nick and Bianca's relationship is rife with sexual ambiguity, there is a significant difference in how *My Favorite Wife* handles Nick and Ellen's

relationship. While Bianca remains a "kissless bride," Nick and Ellen kiss multiple times (including once in front of Bianca). The PCA correspondence does not mention these moments, presumably because they are (in some sense) within the bounds of acceptable representation of the "pure love" between a husband and wife. Indeed, many of these marital screwball comedies include passionate kissing (in contrast to the earlier screwball films) as part of the rise in sexually suggestive content. For example, in *I Love You Again* (1940), George Carey/Larry Wilson (William Powell) reignites Kay Wilson's (Myrna Loy) love with a 14-second kiss (presumably allowed because his back blocks the camera's view), followed by a close-up of her dazed look and disheveled hair; and in *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), after unzipping her dress and nuzzling her back, Tom (Joel McCrea) and Gerry (Claudette Colbert) share a sizzling kiss.

I am particularly interested in Nick and Ellen's reunion in this respect, which is played straight – in every sense – using conventionally romantic rhetoric. The scene begins with a long shot of Ellen, restless and fidgeting, sitting in the hotel bar. Something catches her eye offscreen: visibly excited, she straightens in her seat, then – without breaking her gaze – stands and steps forward. The scene cuts to a close-up on Nick's face, accompanied by the non-diegetic swell of the film's lush string leitmotif. Shallow focus isolates Nick from the world around him, the look on his face serious: Grant briefly clenches his jaw, signaling Nick's intense emotions. An eyeline-match cuts to a similarly shallow-focus close-up of Ellen, beaming at Nick before taking a deep breath in (as if sighing with relief, but also anticipation). The intimate close-ups imply physical proximity – but the following medium long shot reveals Nick is further away than we realized. He walks forward (without breaking his gaze) and the camera pans with his movement until he stops. This shot consistently frames Nick screen-right (rather than centred), leaving a space which Ellen will fill – but not immediately; Nick stands still for nearly three seconds before Ellen enters screen left, heightening our anticipation. The measured pace signals the depth of their emotions but also the "sacredness" of their (re)union, as they gaze into each other's eyes throughout. As Dunne finally steps close enough to touch, Grant dips his knees and grasps her upper arms; in a hushed, reverent tone, he speaks her name, then enfolds her in his arms – a warm embrace which Dunne reciprocates, giving a light laugh to indicate Ellen's joy (and relief) but also her good humor about the situation. Nick and Ellen's kiss is gentle, passionate and deeply romantic, ending with an over-the-shoulder reaction shot of Ellen's glowing face, eyes half-closed in ecstasy, as she declares, "That's all I wanted to know."

Ending with the close-up of Ellen renders this moment unusual for a screwball comedy. As I have argued elsewhere, screwball kisses typically

favor egalitarian framing, so that "the couple face each other, not the camera, creating a balanced division of frame space; […] the screwball embrace is rarely seen in anything closer than a medium shot" (Glitre 2006, 61). While aspects of Nick and Ellen's kiss conform to this sense of balance – particularly the two-shot and Grant's knee-dip to de-emphasize their height difference – the use of romantic music, shallow focus and shot/reverse shot close-ups do not. Indeed, the overall effect fits more closely with Virginia Wright Wexman's description of movie kisses as "a privileged moment of romantic bonding, the prelude to which is designed to foreground the emotional expressivity of the actor's face. Customarily this moment is designed to highlight the expression of romantic fulfillment on the face of the woman" (1993, 18).

The shooting script treats the reunion differently: when Nick first enters the lobby, he spots "a woman with her back toward the camera […] reading a magazine"; he walks toward her and says "Ellen" – but it is someone else; his mistake is potentially witnessed by Ellen, since the next scene begins with her seated in the bar booth, "watching him, smiling" (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shots 50-53). (The rest of the written scene matches the finished film.) Nick's comic misrecognition of the wrong woman would have undermined the romantic power of the couple's reunion onscreen. Removing these shots reinforces our sense that Nick and Ellen are still in love and (legally or not) still "married." Conversely, the shooting script implies Nick and Bianca's relationship is *more* romantic than we see on screen. Nick and Bianca smile at each other as they enter the hotel: the script suggests that "the effect is romantic" (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shot 35), but the film undercuts this moment by playing another comically discordant blast of "The Wedding March". As soon as they are alone in Suite C, Bianca puts her arms around Nick and he responds "[*warmly*] Hello –" (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shot 44); onscreen, Nick does not speak and looks distinctly uncomfortable, although he does eventually return the embrace.

In effect, the script is more ambiguous about the status of the love triangles.[32] The finished film differentiates Nick's relationships with Ellen and Bianca consistently through performance style and other representational strategies, as comparison of the two check-in sequences confirms. In the first, the interplay between Nick and the Clerk is suitably screwball in tone. When the Clerk spins the rotating register for Nick to check-in, Grant gives an unexpected whinny and thrusts his bottom backwards to avoid being hit in the stomach. Nick's stuttering request for a different suite seems "screwy" to the Clerk, rejecting Suite A (the best in the hotel), in favor of Suite C. The scene ends with one of Grant's signature double-takes: a wide-eyed Nick spots Ellen in the lobby, then lurches slowly

sideways as the elevator door closes, accompanied by a comic trombone slide. In contrast, the intimacy of Nick and Ellen's reunion carries through to their check-in: Grant's voice is softer and gentler; he does not hesitate when asking for another room (in contrast to the script, where Nick initially fluffs the request: "I wonder if you can give Mrs. Ard … Miss … uh … Wagstaff a room?" (Spewack and Spewack 2006, shot 57)); he handles the rotating register effortlessly; and he shows no sign of embarrassment when asking if Suite A is available, smiling fondly at Ellen when she concurs, "Yes, Suite A!" There is no music at all, so the scene's comedy lies purely in the Clerk's reactions to events: at the request for another room, he responds with a sharp "Hmm?" raises his eyebrows at Nick, turns his head to look toward Ellen, frowns, then lifts his head and eyes as if looking at Bianca upstairs, before flicking his eyes back toward Nick and Ellen with a suspicious look. MacBride's well-defined movements signal the Clerk's thought-processes – as if adding two plus one to get a love triangle – reinvigorating the mutual interference gag about Ellen "not exactly" being Nick's wife. Nick and Ellen, however, seem oblivious to his curiosity, ignoring his loaded query about her name, "Miss er … ?" They know the truth, as do we. While Nick's relationship to Bianca brings his sexuality into question, his relationship to Ellen confirms his heterosexuality, partly through romantic rhetoric and partly through the Clerk's suggestive reactions: as Nick and Ellen approach the elevator, the Clerk turns to his coworker and, with a wry shake of his head, concludes, "What a man!"

The Screwball Climax

While the film's range of risqué meanings provide comic pleasure for the "sophisticated" audience, the romantic performance of "true love" also functions as a "mechanism of denial," upholding the sanctity of marriage and magically seeming to guarantee the central couple's fidelity. It is only the *legal* status of Nick and Ellen's marriage which remains uncertain.

Having taken Ellen and the children to their mountain house to avoid gossip, Nick is supposed to leave for a 60-day cruise to "think things through." He reached this decision in the preceding courtroom sequence, indirectly leading the Judge (Granville Bates) to adjourn the case rather than annulling Nick's marriage to Bianca (as he had been on the verge of doing). Resolving the situation legally in the courtroom would be the most straightforward way to address the PCA's concerns about Nick trying to share Ellen's bed *before* his second marriage is annulled; instead, their marital status is left in limbo for comedic purposes. Conniving to stay the night, Nick tells Ellen there has been a landslide, that telephone wires are down and the road is blocked. Instantly, the telephone rings and Ellen answers: it is Nick's mother,

letting her know that the Judge has now ruled, so "You and Nicky are husband and wife again. You can just pick up where you left off." However, Ellen does *not* pass this news on to Nick, instead telling him, "They just phoned to say, um … the *road* is open." Dunne delicately raises her eyebrows on "open," then purses her lips in a knowing way as she raises them again. The PCA do not seem to have spotted the double entendre, or the fact that Nick does not know about the annulment; it is apparently sufficient that Ellen and the audience know she is, once again, Nick's legal wife.

The final sequence is clearly modeled on *The Awful Truth*'s teasing to-ing and fro-ing, but lacks the earlier film's subtlety, taking a more overtly "sex suggestive" treatment. As Ellen sits in bed, Nick ricochets between the attic and her room. The "innocent" explanation is that the attic bed is creaky and uncomfortable but Nick's sexual intentions are signaled through symbolic conventions: a toy canon going pop-pop-pop; Nick asking if Ellen is "hungry"; Nick patting the mattress. Nick also declares his love more directly than Jerry Warriner managed: "I was always mad about you and I always will be." Dunne's arch performance signals that Ellen is teasing when she suggests Nick should still go on the cruise and return in time for Christmas. PCA correspondence advised, "Because of the nature of this 'build-up,' it will be necessary for you to exercise the greatest possible care, in order that the scene, and the scenes which are likely to follow, are not offensively suggestive."[33] Nonetheless, when the non-diegetic sound of "Jingle Bells" implies that Christmas has come early, and Nick reenters the room dressed as Santa Claus, Grant widens his eyes in a suggestive leer; Ellen laughs and lies back on the bed enticingly. In the final shot, Nick (still with wide eyes) dips forward and moves off-screen, directly toward her. While there is no kiss or embrace, it is difficult to find an "innocent" way to interpret this ending, given the lack of deadpan performance as a mechanism of denial.

In conclusion, *My Favorite Wife*'s handling of suggestive and taboo content combines a range of representational strategies and styles of performance in addition to the gag structures discussed by Greene. The innocent "deadpan" performance style described by Maltby is still present, particularly when dealing with "impure" love and "sex perversion," encouraging ambiguity and dynamic reading in ways that enable "sophisticated" (and queer) interpretations of key sequences – typically in combination with physical "screwy behavior" as part of the gag structure. Other parts of the film do push toward a more overtly "suggestive" style of performance, though, to emphasize sexual innuendo and double entendre; such moments are carefully handled through mutual interference gags to ensure an "innocent" interpretation remains possible. Thus, the representation of "impatience" is central to handling Bianca's sexual desire, eliminating seductive elements in favor of unsympathetic characterization. I would

argue that the *lynchpin* to the film's mechanisms of denial and successful accommodation of the Code, however, is the use of romantic rhetoric and "straight" performance, sanctifying Nick and Ellen's union in the eyes of God, the law and the PCA, and permitting the "sacred intimacies" of marriage to be shown in a more sex suggestive way.

Coda: "And They Lived Happily Ever after?"

The later cycle of screwball cycles certainly provided a distinctive approach to representing the "sacred intimacies" of marital love, but these strategies led to a backlash. The Legion of Decency gave *My Favorite Wife* and *Too Many Husbands* "B" Ratings: "more than half the Legion's B classifications in 1940 resulted from what it termed the pictures' 'light treatment of marriage' or divorce" (Walsh 1997, 169). Consequently, in responding to *The Palm Beach Story* script, the PCA warned that "civic and religious groups 'have let it be known that stories centering around the theme of a light treatment of marriage and divorce … have been a source of serious complaint.'"[34] This, of course, did not phase Preston Sturges, who framed the film with comic wedding ceremonies and the ironic question, "And they lived happily ever after?" Things came to a head when the Legion gave *Two-Faced Woman* (1942) a "C" Rating, condemning the film "for its immoral and un-Christian attitude toward marriage and its obligations; impudently suggestive scenes, dialogue, and situations; [and] suggestive costumes" (Doherty 2007, 144). They lowered their rating to a "B" only after MGM re-edited the film and issued a public statement confirming that "the industry had authorized the PCA to turn down any future screenplays dealing with marital intimacies" (Walsh 1997, 173). Screwball comedy faded away, replaced by more conventionally *romantic* comedies.

Notes

1. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 24 November 1939.
2. Ibid. and *Love Crazy* PCA File, Breen to Mayer, 21 January 1941 and Breen to Mayer, 14 March 1941.
3. Owing to limited space, this article focuses on the Nick-Ellen-Bianca love triangle.
4. Although, couples sometimes *pretended* to be married (e.g., *It Happened One Night*), married part way through (e.g., *Libeled Lady* (1936)), or started out divorced then reunited (as in *The Ex-Mrs Bradford* (1936)).
5. For example, the PCA's response to *The Awful Truth* asked for lines such as "But he wanted to give me the wrong end" and "You can stick it in your arsenal" to be modified. *Bringing Up Baby*'s more "innocent" tone is indicated by the PCA correspondence's brevity: there is no mention of bones, or going "gay all of a sudden," but Susan's dress ripping was considered "borderline business" that might be deleted by US and UK censor boards. *The Awful Truth* PCA File, Breen to Lewis,

20 April 1937; *Bringing Up Baby* PCA File, Letter accompanying PCA Certificate of Approval, 24 January 1938.

6. Greene takes the term "mutual interference gag" from Noël Carrol's *Theorizing the Moving Image*.
7. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 24 November 1939. The letter (and estimating script) refers to Nick's first wife as "Ann" but I use "Ellen" to avoid confusion.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 24 November 1939.
11. Kanin was announced as director in October (*Motion Picture Daily*, 30 October 1939); when Leo McCarey nearly died in a car accident, Kanin also took over as *producer* until McCarey recovered (*Variety*, 6 December 1939).
12. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 29 November 1939.
13. Unfortunately, the digitized copy of the shooting script I am using omits page numbers and amendment dates. Each shot is numbered: while these numbers do not always match up with the "scene" numbers used by the PCA, in most cases it is possible to gauge which shot they are describing from the content.
14. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 29 November 1939.
15. The D.F. became an in-joke between Breen and Kanin. In a letter to Breen, Kanin writes, "I wish you wouldn't mention the D.F. so much in your letters. It reminds me of my life." In his reply, Breen signs off, "Yours for bigger and better D.F's and more prolonged." Breen's phrasing makes it unlikely that "F" stood for "Female". *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Kanin to Breen, 1 December 1939; Breen to Kanin, 2 December 1939.
16. *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* PCA File, Breen to Hammell, 22 March 1937 and 28 August 1937. The "Lubitsch touch" also played a part: "sharing the universal regard for Lubitsch's virtuosity, Breen granted the director the special dispensation due to a genius […]. Breen knew Lubitsch was untouchable" (Doherty 2007, 109).
17. Jacobs suggests that, under Breen's leadership, the PCA paid more attention to "nonverbal aspects" such as set design, performance and tone than the SRC had done (1995, 112).
18. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 29 November 1939. On the PCA's attitude to beds, see: Martin (1937, 159); Vasey (1997, 146); and Doherty (2007, 94).
19. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 24 and 29 November 1939.
20. Ibid., 29 November 1939.
21. Ibid., Analysis Chart, 20 April 1940.
22. The *Motion Picture Herald* reviewer cites "I want him to come right up" and "Isn't he up yet?" as examples of the film's "frequent lines of double meaning" (4 May 1940); according to the reviewer, these lines were spoken by Bianca and the Hotel Clerk in the film's preview screening but they are not in the shooting script, or the film as released.
23. See *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 29 November 1939.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. The homophobic attitudes expressed in the Code and PCA correspondence are the product of a period when homosexuality was considered a crime against human law and the "natural law" of Christianity.

27. For example, Breen advised that *Love Crazy* needed to omit dialogue about a married couple doing "everything backwards" because it intimated "sex perversion". *Love Crazy* PCA File, Letter from Breen to Mayer, 21 January 1941.
28. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 29 November 1939 and 21 December 1939; *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* PCA File, Breen to Hammell, 22 March 1937.
29. *Love Crazy* PCA File, Letter from Breen to Mayer, 21 January 1941 (my italics).
30. In 1938, most would not associate the word "gay" with "homosexual": although a slang term within homosexual circles since the 1920s, it only gained wider use in the late 1940s.
31. *Too Many Husbands* also contrasts an office-bound professional, Henry (Melvyn Douglas), to an outdoors adventurer, Bill (Fred MacMurray), but takes the queer potential further: the film ends with Vicky (Jean Arthur) still toying with the idea of "dancing" (literally and symbolically) with both partners – meaning the men end up dancing together, too.
32. This also applies to the Nick-Ellen-Burkett love triangle. An earlier draft included dialogue the PCA wanted eliminated: Burkett asks Ellen if he is "too vital for you … too alive … too electric? […] You want a man who can dominate you," to which Ellen replies, "There's something in that." Quoted by Halbout (2022, 179).
33. *My Favorite Wife* PCA File, Breen to McDonough, 21 December 1939.
34. *The Palm Beach Story* PCA File quoted by Jacobs (1995, 113).

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