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The Lady Eve

¹ In a prologue, Charles (Henry Fonda, later Hopsy) and his companion Muggsy (William Demarest) are accompanied to a paradisiacal water's edge, where they are taking their leave from a research team of naturalists after a year up the Amazon. Charles, an amateur ophiologist ("Snakes are my life"), makes a brief farewell speech praising the team's dedication to science, saying he wants nothing more from his life than to spend it with men of knowledge, such as those present. A river steamboat takes him and Muggsy far enough out to sea to intercept an ocean liner, which he is to board.

² At the railing of an upper deck of the liner, Jean (Barbara Stanwyck) says to her father, Harry (Charles Coburn), as they watch Charles begin to climb a ladder onto the ship, "I hope he's terribly rich." Harry replies, "He'd almost have to be to stop a ship." Jean observes that she is always the one having to con suckers into a card game with them, her father never stooping to steer a woman. She drops an edenic apple onto Charles's pith helmet as he mounts the ladder.

³ In the ship's dining room, abuzz with excitement about the new passenger, having already informed itself that he is the scion of Pike's Ale, Jean is looking through her viewfinder, or crystal ball—in other words, into her hand mirror—to see and interpret what is going on behind her as Charles enters the room and all eyes (especially women's eyes) are trying to attract the glance of the unwitting celebrity. "They're none of them good enough for him," Jean decides, as she puts her foot backward into the aisle Charles is marching along and trips him into a sprawl on the ground. She announces that this contretemps is Charles's fault and that since he's broken the heel off her shoe he'll simply have to take her to her stateroom to get another pair. They leave the dining room arm in arm to the consternation of all who failed to manage exactly that.

⁴ There follows a notable scene of shoe-selection and perfume-inhalation in her cabin, the upshot of which is that the man, who, because of his father's ale business, is nicknamed Hopsy, has fallen completely under her spell.

5 Jean and Harry invite Hopsy to play a three-handed game of cards, in which they bait the hook by letting him win a few hundred trivial dollars. They compliment him on his card playing, and to thank them, and explain his powers, he does a card trick for them. They are simply amazed by it.

6 The next morning, Muggsy does some checking and demands that the purser look into the background of Harry, Jean, and their partner Gerald (Melville Cooper). Charles tells Muggsy to stop worrying, that he himself does card tricks. Muggsy observes, sensibly, that they may know some tricks he hasn't seen.

7 Jean reports to Harry and Gerald that the young man is in love with her. Harry is not surprised, and is altogether delighted. "We're going to play some cards tonight, and I don't mean Old Maid." Jean says that this time it's different, that he's touched something in her, that maybe she's in love too, that she's going to go straight. Harry protests that Charles has some of their money. She concedes that they can get that much back. Harry adds, "And with a little interest." Jean tells Harry he doesn't get it, that she won't allow it ("I'm not your daughter for free you know"), and she snatches a fixed deck out of Gerald's hands as she turns on her heel.

8 Charles is not so lucky that night, but he is much luckier than he knows, since most of the time when Harry is about to make a killing, Jean, when she deals, thwarts his cheating. The game winds up with Charles owing them a thousand dollars, and when Jean leaves to get a wrap, she returns to discover that Harry has won \$32,000 from Charles playing double-or-nothing "to wipe out the foolish debt" that Charles, by now an intimate, has incurred. Jean pointedly asks Harry what he's going to do with Charles's check, and Harry, feigning that he always intended to do so, dramatically tears it up. Walking out, Charles says to Jean, "That was some lesson your father taught me." Jean and Hopsy go out on deck, where he makes an elaborate, sentimental speech to her about his feeling that he has known her since she was a little girl. She confesses a reciprocal feeling but says they must be sensible about the future ("They say a moonlit deck is a woman's business office").

9a The pair are strolling through the ship when Hopsy is surprised to discover that they have arrived at his cabin door. Jean mocks, but goes along with, his "surprise."

9b Upon entering the cabin Hopsy discovers another surprise, that the snake he is taking back with him from his year up the Amazon has got out of her cage. This time Jean lets out unfeigned screams of terror and runs out into

the corridor, continuing down several flights of stairs, Hopsy in hot pursuit, and when she arrives at her cabin demands that Hopsy look under her bed to see whether the snake is there.

10a The next morning, Jean wakes from a dream with another scream. Her father rushes in from his adjoining cabin, and they have an intimate moment in which she confesses her love for Charles. As her father, sitting on her bed, rather absent-mindedly practices a trick shuffle and deal, she says, "Harry, tell my fortune."

10b As Hopsy awaits Jean for breakfast, the purser appears and hands him an envelope that turns out to contain a photograph of Jean, Harry, and Gerald, with a caption identifying them as professional gamblers and con artists.

11 Jean appears in person, glowing with anticipation. When Charles hands her the photograph, crushing her spirits but causing her to say that she was only waiting to tell him until he knew her a little better, he tells her that he received the photograph his first day on the ship, that he has been, in effect, the one doing the conning.

12 As the passengers are assembled to disembark, Jean stares with hatred at Charles and wishes he hadn't got off scot-free. Her father shows her that in fact he had never torn up Charles's check, but palmed it.

13 At the races, Harry, Jean, and Gerald run into Curly (bald Eric Blore), an old member of their world of artistic cheating, who tells them of his life as a titled Englishman ("Sir Alfred McGlennon Keith at the moment") retired to a country house in rural Connecticut making a sweet living playing bridge for money with the rich and unsuspecting locals. Jean, recognizing the name of the town, asks if he knows the Pike family, of Pike's Ale. Curly replies that Horace, the father, is a regular at cards with him (and raises some question about the competence of his backward son). She arranges to visit Sir Alfred as his niece.

14 The Pikes throw a party for her at their mansion, where, surrounded by men, she is the life of the party, telling tales, in an elaborate British accent, about how hard it was for her to get to "Conneckticut." Charles makes several kinds of fool of himself, first by insisting that he knows the woman they are calling Lady Eve, then by believing implicitly Sir Alfred's deeply private revelation of his family's secret that Eve has a half sister who looks exactly like her, whose father was a groom on their estate, a handsome brute called Harry, and with each thunderbolt of news Charles contrives to trip over something or bump into something that each time forces him to go to his room and change

his soiled clothes. Muggsy is beside himself with suspicion; Charles tells him that he (Muggsy) doesn't understand psychology.

15 Eve, at Sir Alfred's house, tells him that Charles doesn't recognize her because on the boat they had this awful yen for each other which colored their perceptions. She also reveals her plan to extract a marriage proposal within weeks.

16 She and Charles, exploring his estate on horseback, are drawn to dismount by the beauty of the sunset. Charles launches into the same speech he made to Jean on the prow of the ship, about feeling he has known her for a lifetime. It is difficult to see how she could, even if she wanted to, ever take him seriously again.

17 We are given a montage of various segments of the kitchen staff of the Pike establishment engaged in wedding preparations, ending with a glance at the wedding itself.

18 Harry is complaining to Gerald about having had to keep away from his own daughter's wedding. The two of them discuss what Jean might mean by saying she's going to teach Charles a lesson.

19 In their honeymoon train compartment, as they prepare for bed, Jean decides to spin a yarn concerning some earlier marriage of hers, or rather near-marriage. Warming to her task, she goes into a list of former lovers that threatens to last as long as Scheherazade's stories, until Charles stops the train and jumps off in a driving rain, slipping down a muddy bank.

20 In Horace Pike's office at his brewery, his lawyers are gathered to arrange a divorce settlement. Reached by telephone, Eve/Jean tells Horace that she doesn't want money (to the uncomprehending chagrin of Harry and Gerald) but asks instead only that Charles come to her and ask her for his freedom. Charles refuses (to the uncomprehending chagrin of Horace's lawyers). Jean/Eve, learning from Horace that Charles is leaving in a few hours to take the same ship back to the Amazon, consults her wristwatch.

21 Charles, strolling through the ship's dining room, trips over some obstacle. Hearing Jean's voice and seeing her standing over him, he discovers that the old obstacle has miraculously asserted itself again. This time he is instantly thrilled, no sooner arises than embraces Jean, orders unending bottles of champagne for the Colonel (Harry), and decisively takes Jean out of the room.

22 In her cabin, he starts to explain to her that he is married, but that it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't looked so exactly like her; and as Jean

replies, “You still don’t understand,” and he replies in turn that he doesn’t want to, she confesses that she is married too, and gently closes the door in our face.

23 The camera, still steady on the closed door, watches it slowly open wide enough for Muggsy furtively to slip out and close it behind him. He observes, quite undeniably, “Positively the same dame.”

A summary of a film comedy written and directed by Preston Sturges suffers most in missing the continuous, virtuosic precision and intelligence of his dialogue, in no case more than in that of *The Lady Eve*. Sturges is one of the most remarkable minds to have found expression in Hollywood. Not until after the end of the Second World War, with the reception in America of the outburst of filmmaking in Europe—including films of Truffaut, Godard, Fellini, Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman—did an American audience become accustomed to finding a film written and directed by the same person. And Sturges’s tight corpus of comparatively small-scale films occupies a treasured place in the hearts of those who care about the world and art of film; for example, beyond *The Lady Eve*, there are *Sullivan’s Travels* and *The Palm Beach Story* and *Hail the Conquering Hero*. An instance of this particular esteem is recorded in the title of the Coen brothers’ recent film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (with George Clooney and John Turturro), one of the most notable films of the past few years. It is worth taking a minute to say how that title inscribes a Sturges film.

The hero of *Sullivan’s Travels* (played by Joel McRea, who is also the male lead in the remarriage comedy *The Palm Beach Story*, an interesting actor of considerable range, but less well known than the male stars, his natural competitors, of the remarriage comedies of the period discussed in this book) is a filmmaker whose great success is based on making thrillers with little intellectual or political content, and who wishes to make a film about something true and important, about suffering. The travels of the film’s title are those taken by this director, who escapes the world of Hollywood escape in order to experience the suffering of, after all, most people in the world, in preparation for making his important film of witness. The narrative takes him to the bottom of the world, in the form of being falsely convicted of murder and sentenced to a southern chain gang, where he discovers that the laughter provided by a Hollywood cartoon may provide the only rare moments of

respite in a stretch of fully desperate existence. He contrives to be recognized in this place of anonymity, and returns to Hollywood to apply his hard-won insight, which means leaving unrealized his film of suffering.

The title of his projected work was to be *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* The Coen film, which opens in a southern chain gang, realizes this unrealized work by, as it announces, adapting (or more accurately, silently remembering names, and imagining sequences to realize them, from) episodes of the *Odyssey* (the Sirens, the Cyclops), taking as the overall adventure the return of an extraordinarily resourceful, or resilient, man to his native town to reclaim his sought-after wife (and children). The challenge the Coens take up, or depart from, in Sturges's fantasy of witnessing suffering, and which they seem to declare as part of their film (indeed of their corpus of fascinating films), is neither to record nor to distract from suffering. It is rather to witness, on the part of people who recognize, despite all, that life may still hold adventure, say hold out a perfectionist aspiration, but that to sustain a desire to meet the fantastic, unpredictable episodes of everyday modern existence, one must, and one can, rationally and practically, imagine that one will, at need, discover in oneself, in the register of passion, the resourceful persistence of Odysseus, and the mixed, but preponderant, favor of the Gods, call it fortune.

To give a taste of Sturges's writing, I am going to quote at some length from the extended exchange between Jean and Charles the second time they discover themselves quite alone in her cabin. Their exchange is a satire of ideals, proposing the film more largely as such a satire (as Ibsen composes melodramas of ideals), perhaps attempting to move beyond this vision by satirizing its own suspicions. The exchange begins after the woman has recovered herself from having run screaming from his cabin down to her own (suddenly hearing of an escaped snake), pursued by the man, whom she orders to search for the snake in and under her bed. She manages things so that they somehow trip each other, with the result that she is lying back comfortably on her chaise lounge and he is sitting on the floor awkwardly alongside her, whereupon they begin talking earnestly together as she plays absent-mindedly with his hair. She asks whether he has ever thought of getting married, and he replies, dreamily, that snakes are his life ("What a life" she remarks to no one in particular), and that he has told his father that he isn't interested in the ale business. When she wonders whether there is any difference between ale and beer, Hopsy replies energetically that his father would

have a fit if he heard that, explaining that one of them is brewed from the top and the other from the bottom, or the other way around, and concluding, "Why, there's no similarity at all between them."

Differences between similar things will considerably ramify as a theme of the film: differences, of course, between men and women; but also differences among women (Jean tells Hopsy, "the good ones aren't as good as you think, and the bad ones aren't as bad"); differences between sincerity and theater; and differences, as we might put it, of each human being from itself, torn from itself, repaired by itself, comically or tragically, as perfectionism persists in reminding us. Here is the part of the exchange I have in mind:

She: "So you say that's *why* you never married?" [namely because of the absolute difference between beer and ale].

He: "Oh, no, it's just that I never met her. I suppose she's around somewhere in the world."

She: "It would be too bad if you never bumped into each other."

He: "Well . . ."

She: "I suppose you know what she looks like, and everything?"

He: "I think so."

She: "I'll bet she looks like Marguerite in *Faust*."

He: "No. She isn't as . . . bulky as an opera singer."

She: "Oh. How are her teeth?"

He: "Huh?"

She: "Oh, you should always go out with good teeth; it saves expense later."

He: "Now you're kidding me."

She: "Not badly. You have a right to have an ideal. I guess we all have one."

He: "What does yours look like?"

She: "He's a little short guy with lots of money."

He: "Why short?"

She: "What does it matter if he's rich? It's so he'll look up to me, so that I'll be *his* ideal."

He: "That's a funny kind of reason."

She: "Look who's reasoning. And when he takes me out to dinner he'll never add up the check or smoke greasy cigars or use grease on his hair. Oh yes, and he won't do card tricks."

He: "Oh."

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She: “Oh, it’s not that I mind *your* doing card tricks, Hopsy. But naturally you wouldn’t want your ideal to do card tricks.”

He: “I shouldn’t think that kind of ideal would be so difficult to find.”

She: “Oh he isn’t. That’s why he’s my ideal. What’s the sense of having one if you can’t ever find him? Mine is a practical ideal, one you can find two or three of in every barber shop, getting the works.”

He: “Why don’t you marry one of them?”

She: “Why should I marry anyone that looked like that? When I marry, it’s going to be somebody I’ve never seen before. I won’t know what he looks like or where he comes from or what he’ll be. I want him to sort of—take me by surprise.”

He: (dreamily) “Like a burglar.”

Jean has become increasingly relaxed as her combination of needling and contradiction and seductiveness has played itself out, while Charles, with increasing pain and absorption in the woman’s words, after his year up the Amazon, by that last line has become so wrapped up in the woman’s aroma and in the sound of her voice and her spell of images that he virtually finishes her thought for her.

Let’s note two or three turns in the exchange that bear on our particular preoccupations. It is most obviously, as noted, an exchange about what Jean calls ideals, especially about the fact that we all have them and that we are all confused about them. This is most strongly and fundamentally theorized, or based on fundamental theory, among our texts, in Freud’s commentary on *Gratidia*. The persistence, and persistent confusion, in what Freud calls ego-ideals prompts, to my mind, some of the most memorable and useful commentary I know in Lacan’s developments out of Freud. (Those of you who have time and inclination may be surprised by the lucidity and usefulness of Lacan’s early Seminar entitled *Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*.) More specifically, utilitarianism as a way of life seems pretty clearly mocked in Jean’s advice to marry someone with good teeth because it saves money later. While Jean concedes she’s kidding, she qualifies this by saying “not badly,” meaning I suppose that she is merely exaggerating—after all we’ve been shown a world, recognizable as our world, in which the attention of large numbers of people is attracted by a man solely on the ground that he is rich (and perhaps single). And then Kantianism may be being mocked in the idea that you wouldn’t want your ideal to do card tricks, with its suggestion that

fundamental choices about one's life with others are inevitably and validly made with some irreducible element of what we may call moral taste, going beyond the judgment accomplished through universalizable principles.

But beyond and before any such specifics, there is the intimacy gained in the sheer fact of a conversation in which the mind is moved, challenged, educated, elated. Hopsy declares explicitly enough that the encounter, fully including the exchange of words, has aroused him. Jean teases him about this ("Why, Hopsy!"). It may be that this is the point to which she has generally led and teased men before conning them in offering nothing more, or rather before leaving them with less than they had. But this time something has happened to her that wasn't in the cards.

A way of putting what has happened is to consider that she sees a step more deeply than the film's audience on an early viewing, into Sturges's demonically clever device of having Charles repeat to Eve the identical prelude to a declaration of love that he produced (I suppose invented) for Jean. I have called it the most difficult moment of the film to watch, since it seems to undermine Charles's seriousness so decisively as to threaten to make his fate uninteresting to us. But Eve/Jean recognizes the fact that trumps the insincerity of this fact, namely that it is, despite all, to *her* that he repeats the words, that he has never loved anyone *else*. Granted he "thinks" he knows she is not the same woman. But he has had to get himself into mental contortions and to swallow an incredibly tall stack of tales in order to convince himself of this—that is to say, in order to make love to the one woman he loves. So I am taking it that when Eve turns solemn on the train, after Charles jumps off and slips on a bank of mud, she is not simply feeling guilty for her treatment of this mug, and not even simply realizing that she has deprived herself of someone she has had genuine feeling for, but recognizing before all that his protestations to her of love have been, however deviously arrived at, helplessly sincere. This is confirmed for her when he tells her at the end, "It wouldn't have happened except that she looked so exactly like you"; so *exactly* (a critical point of Lacan's analysis of the ego-ideal); it is you; positively the same dame. (The same aroma; the same body; the same face and hair; the same yen. Just not the same voice. How important this is is perhaps measured in his being unable to assess the lying narrative of uninteresting promiscuousness she feeds him on the train.)

What is more, Charles/Hopsy's repetition of his fantasy of seeing Eve/Jean as a little girl is a comically blatant version of a fundamental feature of the

genre of remarriage comedy, namely that the principal pair feel they have known each other forever, that they in effect began life as brother and sister. Then romance takes the form of divorcing from that incestuous intimacy into the discovered intimacy of strangers. Another pure version of a feature of our comic genre is the notation, in Eve's conversation with Horace about the divorce, concerning her rejection of a settlement by money, that what is between the pair is incomprehensible to the rest of the world.

There is a variation in *The Lady Eve* from the genre's tendency to end with enlightenment in the green world of Connecticut—as we saw in *Adam's Rib* and will see in *The Awful Truth*, and saw compensated for in *It Happened One Night* (where enlightenment is compensated for by continued adventure) and in *The Philadelphia Story* (where the green world is the world of national adventure) and will see compensated for in *His Girl Friday* (where the green world is replaced by a black world, known to the pair to be in need of their efforts of repair). The variation in *The Lady Eve* is that the film ends where it begins (as is required by the companion melodrama of the unknown woman), and that Connecticut is displaced to occupy most of the second half of the film. One might conjecture that the explanation, or compensation, is produced by the melodramatic elements of the comic narrative which require their own resolving. But I am inclined to put more weight on the fact that in this film Connecticut is taken over by an impostor who, for ample reason, uses it to achieve darkness rather than light (or causes only her own, isolating enlightenment).

Another variation of this film from what I take to be the canonical form of the genre is that the principal man's mother and father are present, a variation the film shares with *Adam's Rib*. But in *Adam's Rib* this variation accents the quality of fatherly authority in the temperament of Spencer Tracy, whereas in *The Lady Eve* it emphasizes the quality of Henry Fonda as innocent, vulnerable (his dominant temperament famously in the earlier *The Grapes of Wrath*), specifically as needing to assert his independence of his father, not from his tyranny, which Horace seems to lack, but from something like his disdainful indulgence of his son. Fonda's authoritative side (evident in *My Darling Clementine*) leaps into the film with his reappearance at the conclusion in the ship's dining room and his ecstatic refinding of Jean, or refalling for her.

As literally as in Freud's study of *Gradiva*, *The Lady Eve* materializes Freud's tracing of human sexuality as epitomized in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in the formulation: "The finding of an object [of love] is

in fact a refinding of it.” Then what shall we say has become of Eve? The man evidently neither seeks nor refinds her; so shall we say he never found her? (Found what?—Eve’s apparent refinement without what Jean’s father calls Jean’s ribaldry?) Freud’s epitomizing formulation serves to turn the investigation around, so that we ask who the ones are who do the finding and refinding, here most obviously asking after the relation between Charles and Hopsy. This suggests asking what the relation is in human character between innocence and experience, or vulnerability and authority, or acceptance and rejection, learning to say yes and to say no, ideally a never-ending learning. May we conclude that the finding of the self is a refinding of it, the re-creation of it? Something of the sort is what perfectionism proposes, that no state of the self achieves its full expression, that the fate of finitude is to want, that human desire projects an idea of an unending beyond.

I close this reintroduction of Sturges’s film by adducing a wonderfully illuminating text through which to view the issues of Jean/Eve’s and Hopsy/Charles’s parallel splitting, namely Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*. Sturges’s sound track uses the opening strain of the Overture to *Tannhäuser*, revealed in the ensuing opera as The Pilgrim’s Chorus. (This is one of the tags from classical music so absolutely famous as to serve as comic commentary in a thousand animated cartoons. The various and profound relation of the medium of film to that of opera is a great subject in itself.)

Tannhäuser is about two women who are opposite aspects of a woman’s powers of love, call them the profane and the sacred, where each is lethal and each promises redemption. *The Lady Eve* is about one woman who plays two opposite women, each of whom pretends, and cons the man into believing, that she is someone she is not. Tannhäuser sings a song to the “wrong” woman, that is, he repeats the very song he associates with Venus, the Goddess of Love, to the virginal Elizabeth. It is a transgression that precipitates his banishment from respectable society to seek redemption in Rome, on the intercession of Elizabeth. In *The Lady Eve*, the man’s faux pas, so to speak, in repeating his aria-like declaration of sentimental love, with equal sincerity, to a “second” woman also precipitates the man’s banishment. And he is again redeemed, let’s say brought to his senses (if not yet to his intelligence), by the intercession of the very woman to whom he had been apparently unfaithful in sentiment.

If, as in a convincing Bayreuth production of *Tannhäuser* in the late 1970s (a video of which is commercially available), the roles of Venus and Elizabeth

are sung by the same woman (Gwyneth Jones), the relation between the Wagner and the Sturges is underscored, each further illuminated. You recognize in the Wagner an explicit bar against taking Tannhäuser simply to have singled out the wrong woman for his song of love; and you are helped to consider with respect to *The Lady Eve* that, while it is next to impossible to imagine that the man does not recognize the second woman as the first, since she has not materially changed her looks, it is equally impossible to suppose that the man does not perceive that she has, however, distinctly changed her tune. So we are forced to ask how big a change that is. And ask further whether the gaze or the voice is the more essential in marking the object of desire.

I have elsewhere described film as our opera, taking the violent depths of its concerns into the heart of the culture's views of itself after opera, while masterpieces continued to be composed through the twentieth century, had lost the magnificence of the position it held among the arts when Wagner and Verdi were alive. It seems to me reasonable to consider that film's relation to opera is a key to film's achieving artistic and popular heights so soon after its (silent) technology was perfected.