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*The Philadelphia Story*


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1 The film opens upon a country scene containing a luxurious dwelling where, on a cut to its entrance, we observe C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) storming, in a silent rage, out of its front door, hat on for travel, carrying a suitcase and a bag of golf clubs to a car waiting under the porte cochère. He turns around to glare back at the entrance, in which Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn), in a negligee, is standing, in silent contempt, holding a putter, evidently left out of the bag Grant is holding. She snaps the putter in two over her upraised knee (in those graceful years putters had wooden shafts) and throws the fragments on the ground between her and Grant. He drops his baggage, storms back toward Hepburn, raises his arm to punch her, and instead shoves her back into the house and onto the floor.

2 A title card fills the screen with the line “Two Years Later.” Inside the same house, the three Lord women—the mother, Tracy, and her pre-adolescent sister Dinah—are discussing Tracy’s impending wedding. Tracy does not expect her father to attend the wedding because of his involvement with an entertainer called Tina Mara. Dinah, out of Tracy’s hearing, tells her mother she thinks that stinks. Her mother asks Dinah not to say “stinks,” but, if absolutely necessary, “smells”; but she admits that she agrees with Dinah’s view of the matter.

3 At the family’s stables, Tracy, Dinah, and their neighbor Uncle Willie (Roland Young) await Tracy’s fiancé George (John Howard), a rising, wooden man of the people, who upon his arrival displays with his new-bought outfit and his (lack of) horsemanship just how far out of his element he is.

4 In the headquarters of *Spy* magazine, its publisher, Sidney Kidd (Henry Daniell), assigns Macauley Connor, Mike to his friends (James Stewart), and Liz Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) to cover, respectively with words and photos, the wedding of Tracy Lord. Dexter is to get them into the Lord household, which is essentially closed to reporters, as friends of Tracy’s absent brother.

5 Dexter introduces Mike and Liz into the house, where they are shown to the south parlor. Mike shows his disapproval of the existence and the taste of the monstrously rich.

6 Mrs. Lord and daughters are in a sunroom in some other latitude of the house when a whistle from outside indicates that Dexter has returned. They remind him that there is a wedding at hand which calls for his absence, and he gets Tracy alone to tell her that he has arranged to have her wedding covered in *Spy* magazine in exchange for Sidney Kidd's agreement not to print a scandalous story about her father and Tina Mara.

7 Tracy puts on a show of welcoming the intruders and learns more about them than they about her.

8 Uncle Willie shows up, and Tracy introduces him to Mike and Liz as her father; then when her father himself unexpectedly arrives, she introduces him as Uncle Willie, blaming him (her father), surreptitiously, for the necessary deceptions.

9 At the town library (which we have learned Dexter's grandfather built), Mike discovers Tracy reading his book of short stories. She tells him she too knows quite a lot about hiding a poetic soul under a tough exterior.

10a Tracy and Mike walk through a large park (the Lord property) to the Lords' swimming pool, where, in adjoining dressing rooms, Tracy offers to let Mike use her summer house as a place to write and Mike refuses.

10b Dexter enters, sets a wrapped object on a table, and engages Tracy in a conversation whose intimacy Mike shrinks from. Asked by Tracy to stay, Mike hears Dexter dress down Tracy for her cold intactness and her intolerance of human frailty, as, for example, of his drinking ("my gorgeous thirst"). She says it made him unattractive; he replies she was no helpmeet there, but a scold.

10c Mike has left; Dexter leaves just before George arrives, as Tracy dives into the pool alone. George says they are late for the party, comes to the edge of the pool, sets down contemptuously the now unwrapped object Dexter brought, and is informed by Tracy that it is a model of the boat he designed and built for Tracy and Dexter's honeymoon. This seems to precipitate Tracy's crying out, in anguish, "Oh, to be useful in the world." George responds by saying he's going to build a castle for her and worship her from afar. "Like fun you are." George knows he's made a misstep, and he departs.

11 The family is gathering for drinks on the terrace. Tracy comes upon her father and mother together and openly accuses her father's philandering of letting them in for the intrusions of the world. Her father dresses her down,

saying that she lacks an understanding heart, that she might as well be made of bronze, and, moreover, that she sounds like a jealous woman. She hurriedly tosses down a defensive sequence of martinis.

**12** At the party, a glum George disapproves of a Tracy whose giddy behavior, earlier praised by Dexter, is new to him; Mike, also well on his way to giddiness, wants to dance with her; George disapproves further.

**13** Mike grabs a bottle of champagne and asks a chauffeur waiting among the limousines to drive him to C. K. Dexter Haven's house, where he awakens Dexter, tells him he (Dexter) doesn't understand Tracy, says "either I'm going to sock you or you're going to sock me," reveals that he knows a story that would ruin Kidd, and agrees to let Dexter use the story as counter-blackmail.

**14** Tracy shows up with Liz, who is pressed into service typing up the new story; Tracy drives off with Mike.

**15** Beyond the terrace, Tracy and Mike dance around the edge of a fountain, discuss the difference between champagne and whiskey, and run off to the pool.

**16** Dexter and Liz return to the Lord house after finishing the counter-blackmail letter.

**17a** At the pool, Tracy and Mike contest the difference between heart and mind, between lower and upper classes, and fall into an embrace that they will each have to interpret for themselves.

**17b** At the terrace Dexter is looking for Mike when George appears, still glum; Dexter sees evidence that Tracy and Mike are swimming and advises George to leave, but George declines.

**17c** Mike arrives singing "Over the Rainbow" and carrying Tracy in his arms like a child. Dexter assures himself that Tracy is not hurt.

**17d** After Mike returns from depositing Tracy in her bedroom, George demands an explanation, but Dexter pushes him out of the way and socks Mike (fulfilling Mike's prophecy). George marches away; Dexter and Mike have a friendly exchange; the camera moves up the ivy-covered column of the terrace to show that Dinah has witnessed the whole scene.

**18** Tracy, hung over, has, as Dexter has predicted on the basis of a past experience, "drawn a tidy blank" about the events before she fell asleep. Dexter asks her about last night, which starts "getting those eyes open"; Mike fairly completes the task by saying he's lost his watch and identifying as his the watch she found on her bedroom floor.

**19** She confesses to Dexter what she concludes must have been her transgression; he asks where he comes into it any longer and tells her to remember

George. She remembers George and phones to ask him to come over right away, before the wedding ceremony.

20 She receives a note from George, written earlier, and reads it aloud to her friends; in it George expresses his dismay at her conduct and suggests that if she has no explanation they had better call off the marriage. George arrives as she is finishing the letter. She confirms that she has no answer; Mike gives the answer, namely that two kisses had happened, and Tracy is moved to say, "I think men are wonderful." Whereupon it is announced that Sidney Kidd has arrived, saying he's licked, and George, appreciating the national importance Kidd lends the occasion, expands himself and proposes to go on with the wedding. Tracy bids him a fond farewell; again he departs.

21 We reach the climactic moment at which Mike asks Tracy to marry him. Tracy sees that that is not where her future lies, and accepts Dexter's suggestion to announce that the assembled guests will now be treated to the wedding ceremony they were deprived of two years earlier when the pair eloped. Except that Liz, asked by Tracy to be the maid of honor, corrects the title to matron of honor, and Dexter is not dressed properly for his role, as if nothing special is going on, or nothing whose importance others are, in his eyes, in a position to judge.

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I said of moral perfectionism—in the version I portray of it, and defend, which I call Emersonian perfectionism—that the issues it assesses are typically not front-page news, not, for example, issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, whistle-blowing, plagiarism, informing, bribery, greed, scapegoating, torture, treason, rape, spousal abuse, child neglect, genital mutilation, and so on. But not every fateful moral choice, every judgment of good and bad or right and wrong, is a matter for public debate. This may already seem contentious. Morality is what applies to all equally, to humans as humans. If abortion and euthanasia and capital punishment are wrong, they are wrong for everybody, for reasons everybody should recognize and accept. Some of these headline issues leave room, for some people, for crises of conscience, but this means that someone feels that he or she has reason, with fear and trembling, to go against a moral consensus of right and wrong, reason to feel that in *this* case, abortion or euthanasia or informing, say, is justified. Some issues do not leave this room, as rape, spousal abuse, and child neglect do not.

But the issues in moral perfectionism are not crises of conscience of this kind. The crises portrayed in the films we will consider are not caused by the temptation or demand to go against a standing moral consensus, but, on something like the contrary, are ones in which it is a question whether a moral issue is to be raised. Their central case is one in which a pair are deciding on divorce, on whether they wish to (continue to) be married. They are deciding on what kinds of lives they wish to live and whether they wish to live them together, to consent to each other, to say yes to their lives and their life together; nothing has happened between them that requires more than their mutual forgiveness. Of course one will feel that in each case of moral conflict, certainly in the moral crises that make the newspapers, persons are deciding what kind of life they wish to lead, what kind of person they mean to be. But that is the point. One might say that in our remarriage comedies and their derived melodramas, this is all that is being decided, that our interest in these relatively privileged couples is their pure enactment of the fact that in each moral decision our lives, our senses of ourselves, and of what, and whom, we are prepared to consent to, are at stake. Emerson will put such an idea variously, for example, in “Self-Reliance,” in a remark recorded to different effect (a characteristic potentiality of Emerson’s remarks) in the previous chapter, he says: “Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue and vice emit a breath every moment.”

The couples of our films all take for granted, accordingly, that divorce is a moral option for them—however careful its moral justification must be. And, I should add, now in the early years of the twenty-first century, they assume that marriage is itself a moral option, I mean a relationship to be ratified by state and, perhaps, by church, something that would have been questioned in an earlier period only by fairly unusual moral and political sensibilities. In my Introduction I said that marriage in these films may, to some arguable degree, be taken to stand for the idea of friendship. This is a matter more important in some moral theories of life than in others; in Plato’s *Republic* it is mostly implicit; in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* it is climactic. But the question of sealing or weaving together the life of romance and of friendship, while clearly taken in the films, almost without exception, as ideal, is rarely made explicit in the pair’s conversations to which we are made privy, though it should be seen as pervading them.

Obviously contesting the simple conclusion that the issues dealt with in the films are private is the plain fact that the antics of the pair typically make the newspapers. The very title of *The Philadelphia Story* is, within the film, the proposed title of the coverage of the pair's wedding in a news magazine, called—in a sense to its credit—*Spy*. Whether and why such a medium should have the right to make this material public is a point of argument within the plot of the film. The proposed bridegroom for Tracy Lord's new marriage is delighted with the idea of that publicity; he observes that it means their marriage is of "national importance." "Importance" is an important word for Tracy's former (and future) husband C. K. Dexter Haven, who applies it, to Tracy's chagrin, to the night she got drunk and danced naked on the roof of the house—it is her saying impatiently to him that he attached too much importance to that silly escapade that prompts him to say to her, "It was immensely important."

I pause to note that importance is also an important word in Wittgenstein's description of his own philosophizing in *Philosophical Investigations*, as when one of his interlocutors, real or imagined, causes him to ask: "Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything great and interesting?" (§118) His answer in effect is that it is precisely philosophy's business to question our interests as they stand (as philosophers from Plato to Montaigne and Rousseau and Thoreau have explicitly insisted); it is our distorted sense of what is important—call this our values—that is distorting our lives. That this questioning at first leaves us divested, or devastated, is accordingly inevitable. This is the background against which, in *The Philadelphia Story*, I see the Dexter character as playing the role of a kind of sage. (This role will in turn no doubt cause suspicion of itself.) Speaking of importance, I identify Philadelphia as the site of two of the biggest stories enacted on this continent, the site of the creation of the founding documents of the United States.

The topic of what is essentially public and what is essentially private is established at the beginning of the film as an issue within it. First, at the stables, Tracy picks up Uncle Willie's copy of *Spy* magazine and gives a recitation of its "disgusting" story, written in "that corkscrew English" (a clear enough reference to the prose of *Time* magazine of that period) about a day in the life of a congressman's wife. In the next sequence, which takes place in the offices of *Spy* magazine, Mike and Liz identify Dexter as having broken the cameras of photographers attempting to cover his and Tracy's

honeymoon. Nothing short of blackmail would force Tracy to open her house to the invasion of newshounds; and these sympathetic hounds are shown to be kept from following their vocations as writer and painter by the corkscrew demands of bringing back their bones of news. Are we, then, to ask what the relation is of journalism to serious art—for example, ask whether serious art does not itself make public matters private?

Does this film have anything worth saying about such a topic? If nothing, why does virtually every remarriage comedy have moments, and why do some have an entire setting, that features the newspaper? At some point we are bound to consider that these films are asking us to compare our enjoyment of them with our enjoyment of gossip and spying on the particularly lucky or unlucky. Mike says that taking the assignment of getting the story is degrading. How is our getting the results of the story, in the form of a film, less degrading? Liz says they do it “to keep a roof over our heads.” Where is the profit for us? And if it is perhaps a degrading pastime, why do we not take the time to think about it?

I call attention to a moment in *The Philadelphia Story* in which the film calls attention to, and questions, the condition of its existence as a film—namely in its two closing images. First, at the click of Sidney Kidd’s camera, the image of Mike, Dexter, and Tracy standing together in front of the wedding’s official celebrant freezes, as if the three are getting married (it is a kind of wedding photo). Second, that view is then replaced, as an album leaf is turned, by a still of just Dexter and Tracy embracing. The motion picture camera has declared its relation to still photography, hence to the work Liz and Sidney Kidd are doing, one reluctantly, one greedily—questioning what it is we have been doing as witnesses to this work, having passed an hour and a half of our life investing in it. It might suggest that film—as some kind of art, some site of the transmutation of public and private into and out of each other—is peculiarly fit to capture lives as they pass by, without time or space to examine themselves, to examine the magnitude of concepts and forces that are determining them: life passing itself by.

For the moment, let’s consider the form the issue of questioning takes in the narrative of *The Philadelphia Story*, or questioning the right to question. Any moral theory will require of itself that it seek the ground of rationality in moral argument, the thing that makes conduct criticizable by reason. Utilitarianism seeks rationality in the maximization of value (it is irrational to achieve less pleasure for fewer persons if you have the choice to achieve



more for more). Kantianism seeks rationality in the universality of the principle on which one acts (it is against reason to exempt oneself from the judgment of one's principles). Kantianism focuses on the disruption of principle by the infection of inclination; for example, the value of charity is lessened if it is given out of either a feeling of pity or a swell of benevolence or for the acclaim it will command (in other words, if the left hand knows what the right hand is doing). Perfectionism also focuses on the one acting, but detects irrationality in failing to act on one's desire, or acting in the absence of sufficient desire, in the case where an act has value (positive or negative) essentially as a function of whether one desires it. Dexter says to Tracy about her proposed marriage to George that "it doesn't even make sense"; and when Mike tells her "You can't marry that guy," it turns out that he too means not that it is provably bad or wrong but that it just doesn't fit. Tracy accuses them both of snobbery. What they are both doing is appealing to her to recognize that she does not desire what she protests she desires. They are trying, as Dexter will put it, "to get those eyes open."

This is the aim of moral reasoning in perfectionism, not to assess pluses and minuses of advantage, nor to assess whether the act is recommendable universally, but yet to see to what those two standard theories wish to accomplish, namely that the one in question make himself intelligible, to others and to himself. Perfectionism concentrates on this moment. First, it recognizes difficulties in the moral life that arise not from an ignorance of your duties, or a conflict of duties, but from a confusion over your desires, your attractions and aversions, over whether, for example, you want the duties associated with marriage at all, whether you can bear the sense of failure in another divorce, whether your inability to act on your self-confessed longing to be useful in the world is based on anything more than fear or your vanity in wanting to be perfect, intact, without the need of human company. Second, it proposes that such muddles essentially stand in need of the perception of a friend. Third, it underscores that for one to confront another with her confusion, especially when she has not asked for advice, requires the justification of one's moral standing with her. To whom are reasons owed? Dexter asks Tracy, when she begins to confess to him that she doesn't know what happened between her and Mike, "Why [are you saying this] to me, Red? Where do I come into it any longer?"—not as rhetorical questions, but to get those eyes open to the fact that she continues to regard him as her helpmeet.

The moment of encounter, or challenge, does not exist in utilitarianism, in which, as Rawls remarkably observes, the individual does not exist. Nor does it exist essentially in Kant, where the challenge comes from the moral law alone. (We shall see in Chapter 7 that a condition of the appearance to you of the law, which Kant articulates in his categorical imperative, is that you are, in your life, and your present intention, “stopped,” brought to take thought, to think whether you can, let us say, want a world characterized by an act such as you propose. What, among the nests and webs of actions and intentions and distractions in which your life is invested, has, in this instance, here and now, stopped you?)

The general cause of intervention in the films of remarriage comedy—given that the fact of these marriages means that the pair are in conversation—is to educate; to begin with, to respond to the woman’s sense of her lack of education, her demand to know something that will change her dissatisfaction with the way things are, or reveal her role in it, or her, after all, greater satisfaction with this way than any other. In *Adam’s Rib*, the Hepburn character will not place this demand explicitly until the next-to-last line of the film, in which, as the pair are about to get into bed together, she asks her husband, evidently in all comic seriousness (as it were, as a test of whether to get into bed with him again), what the difference is, or means, if anything much, between men and women. In *The Philadelphia Story*, the demand, to my ear, is placed in that outcry of Tracy’s to George, “Oh, to be useful in the world!”

Tracy has, like Portia, three men to choose from; in her case the choice lies in determining who can help her answer that demand, which means, finding whom she can talk to, whom she believes. George on the spot rules himself out by failing to take her demand seriously; one question of the comic plot is to figure out how this news, of the foundering of an engagement to marry, is to break. To believe Dexter is to believe him when, for example, he says, an hour or so earlier, that Tracy was no helpmeet, she was a scold; their conversation had run aground; has it started again? Mike seems to have reached her, after a passionate exchange ending in a kiss, but the result of their reenacting a favorite scene from her earlier life with Dexter—having a midnight swim together after a party—is that she links up again with her desires, as Dexter keeps hoping for and holding up to her, but this time the immediate result is the scene with her and all three men, as Mike is carrying her from the swimming pool to her bedroom. Here she sings out in full giddiness that

*The Philadelphia Story*

she has feet of clay, meaning roughly that she is subject to desire. It is here that she describes her condition, in response to Dexter's expression of concern, as that of being "not wounded, Sire, but dead." (This provided a signal moment of confirmation for me in working out the characteristics of remarriage comedy against Northrop Frye's characterization of New and Old Comedy. Frye remarks of Old Comedy that in it the woman undergoes something like death and resurrection and holds the key to the plot.)

The playful dig in Tracy's in effect addressing Dexter as "Sire" is good enough in itself, but it is obvious that Tracy is quoting something. It is only within the past year that, after desultory spurts of unsuccessful rummaging in Kipling and Browning, I am able to report, with some pleasure and relief, that the source is Robert Browning's "Incident at the French Camp," as follows:

"You're wounded." "Nay," the soldier's pride  
Touched to the quick, he said:  
"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside  
Smiling the boy fell dead.

Of course Tracy Lord would know Robert (and Elizabeth Barrett) Browning. I note that, having re-found her playfulness in response to Dexter's concern, a quality in her he has told her he relished (I am remembering her having described Dexter, to George, as "my lord and master"), and, leaving aside the question of who is the chief who is present "beside" her (it could be George, but the idea that her pride in battle is touched rather suggests that it is Mike), I note further that what has died is specified in Tracy's allusion to herself, via Browning's poem, as a boy, hence she is in effect acknowledging that the "garçonne" quality associated with Katharine Hepburn (fully recognized on film in her playing a boy in *Sylvia Scarlett*, directed by George Cukor in the mid-1930s) is part of why she requires resurrection as a grown woman.

Or is this worth noting? Can this little radiation from Browning's poem have been intended? By whom? These are questions I know will, even should, arise often. My advice is not to ignore them, but also not to let them prevent your imagination from being released by an imaginative work. To deflect the question of intention you have to say something to yourself about how, for example, just this poem by just this poet is alluded to just here in this work. So if you tell yourself it is an accident, then take that idea seriously.

What is the accident? That it is this poem by this poet? That it is said just this way by just this actress playing just this role in the presence of just this set of characters at just this moment in this plot in just this notable posture (the unique time in the film a character says anything while being carried)? This is a conjunction of seven or eight accidents, to go no further. Is it more satisfying intellectually, or as a point of common sense, to attribute this conjunction of events to a set of accidents than to suppose that it was intended that Tracy Lord allude, with understanding, to Browning's line? Why resist it? (I am asking this in all seriousness. Is intention dismissed, or resisted, less in response to the traditional arts than in response to film? Of course the concept of intention is in need of analysis. There is hardly a concept more in philosophical need.)

It may help in the present case to recall that the play from which this screenplay was adapted was written by Philip Barry, a considerable playwright of the period; and that the screenplay was adapted by Donald Ogden Stewart; and that the two writers studied together in a legendary class in playwriting given by George Baker just after the First World War, first at Harvard, then moving with Baker to Yale. It is not as if I am asking you to recognize in-jokes in the film/play, such as that George Kittredge (the very George that Tracy is engaged to as our story opens), bears the same name as the most famous Shakespearean scholar at Harvard at the time Philip Barry and Donald Ogden Stewart would have been there; or such as that, among other allusions to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Uncle Willie, characterized by pinching bottoms, says of himself, the morning after the engagement festival, that his head just fell off, the fate more or less suffered by Shakespeare's Bottom as he awakens from his dream of festival; which in turn suggests that you may take Uncle Willie as sharing Shakespeare's given name, especially since it is explicitly and momentarily shifted from one person to another in the course of the film. Here it may perhaps help to note that the director of the film, George Cukor, had before coming to Hollywood directed a fair sample of the corpus of Shakespeare's plays in and around New York.

The period in American culture in which the sensibilities and education were formed of those responsible for such a film as *The Philadelphia Story*, specifically the confidence with which sophisticated exchange and allusion were expected to be understood by a considerable proportion of one's fellow citizens, was, I suppose, not matched before or since. Don't make me seem to say more than I mean. These people were not intellectuals in a European

mold; Philip Barry is not Bertolt Brecht; George Cukor is not Jean Cocteau. There are limitations on both sides. I am talking about a culture in which Broadway musical theater was thriving, and the *New Yorker* magazine was in stride, and jazz, still segregated, was meant for everyone who had ears to hear, and Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Dos Passos and Willa Cather were writing bestsellers.

But we were talking about Tracy Lord's education (Katharine Hepburn's education is explicitly referred to in *Adam's Rib*, where Spencer Tracy will poke admiring fun at her "Bryn Mawr accent"). And the genre of remarriage is talking about the woman's demand to be educated, and to educate, that is, to be listened to. Tracy receives lectures from all the men in her life, from Dexter and Mike and her father and George. George's idea is always to constrict her behavior, as when he responds to her wish to be useful by saying that instead he is going to build her an ivory tower; and as when at the party, in response to her tipsy gaiety, he disapprovingly insists that it's time for them to leave. He in effect takes himself out of the running; how the plot manages this is fun to see. (Whether in old or in new comedy, the renewed community at the end is formed at the price of ridding itself of a character of gloom, cursed with an intractable lack of sociability—think of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, or, as we shall see, Muggsy in *The Lady Eve*. If the character is unsociable not because of gloom but because of an ungovernable appetite for life, as in Falstaff's case, the society feels lessened that has to refuse him acknowledgment.)

The effect of each of the other three men is to humble or chasten this woman. Early, Dexter tells her she was no helpmeet and is chaste and virginal and will never be a "first-class human being" until she has some regard for human frailty. Before the party, her father accuses her of being as good as made of bronze and tells her she sounds like a jealous woman. After the party, Mike shows her she has feet of clay. What is the fruit of their instruction? It is summarized at almost the last moment, as they are to enter the replaced wedding ceremony which, Tracy announces to the awaiting guests, was denied them the first time around (there is no marriage without remarriage). Tracy's father says to her that she looks like a goddess; Tracy responds that she feels like a human being. She has come down to earth ("very down to earth" is how Dexter describes Mike's collection of short stories; Tracy regards them as poetry). But how does she arrive there?

Calling it off with George on the ground of his impoverished imagination, and seeing that he wouldn't be (and that she has no wish to try to make

him) happy, Tracy has also had to see that Mike is not for her. Not for her, partly because, as she says, “Liz wouldn’t like it,” but partly too because of Liz’s knowledge of Mike, expressed by whatever exactly she means in saying that he’s not ready for marriage, that “he still has things to learn and I don’t want to get in his way.” I think of this as Mike’s version of being innocent, virginal. (Liz’s insistence on being “matron” not “maid” of honor in the wedding ceremony is in contrast both with Tracy’s perception of her and with Mike’s difference from her, in a sense his ignorance of her.)

I have elsewhere described the thought of Mike’s not being ready to put aside his intactness by recurring to the moment—the detour—in Genesis where, just before God creates woman as a helpmeet for the single man, he allows Adam to give names to the animals. (The passage in Genesis about creating a helpmeet will come up emphatically again for us, since it is the classical theological justification, for both Christians and Jews, of marriage, and is featured as such in John Milton’s tract on divorce, central to my account of remarriage comedy. Not for nothing do two of the definitive comedies of remarriage feature the names Adam and Eve in their titles.) My midrash on this Adam’s (Mike’s) “detour” (Freud might call this moment in the development of the human being the period of latency) is that it accomplishes two things: (1) it creates time for the man, a sense of the reality of life as irreversible, consequential, time to come into his own words (Mike is said to be a writer), giving himself language, his names for things, making the shared world his; (2) it allows him to survey the world of living things and to learn that none but the woman will make him feel other than alone in the world, will be a companion, reciprocal. His “not being ready” accordingly means that he is not ready to recognize Liz as his other, not Liz as opposed to all others, but as another to his separateness, to what Emerson calls “the recognition that he exists,” the fact Emerson identifies as the Fall of Man (in the wonderful essay “Experience,” which will also come up again).

Hence Tracy learns, or has learned, that Dexter is ready, that he is her company, that they exist. It is what she expresses to her father by declaring her feeling that she is a human being. Has she thereupon become what Dexter calls “a first-class human being”? Dexter here is on dangerous moral ground. One way to describe this is to put the remark next to the several remarks in the film on upper and lower classes (“Mac the night watchman is a prince among men; Uncle Willie is a pincher. What has class got to do with it?”). If we are to take Dexter seriously, he cannot mean that being first class

means you deserve to command a greater share of the world's goods than others do. (Similarly, the film puts Tracy at risk when, in her first interview with Mike, she responds to his speaking of his early "lack of wherewithal" by saying "But that shouldn't be." Does she know whether she means that this shouldn't be because Mike is talented, or because no one should lack wherewithal?) We would like to take Dexter to mean by "a first class human being" something like being one who makes serious moral demands upon her/himself. (Tracy's mother has said that Tracy sets exceptionally high standards for herself. They evidently do not satisfy Dexter, as though they amount to making an exception of herself.) What counts as serious demands upon oneself, genuine caring for the self, is what perfectionism concerns itself with, after rational calculations have been made and standing obligations have been assessed and met, or found unworthy.