

The Last Laugh:**Comedy and Gender in Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday***

The character Earl Williams may have his death sentence reprieved at the conclusion of Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940), but the jury is still out on whether Hildy Johnson, a spunky journalist played by Rosalind Russell, can be considered a feminist icon. Critics such as Marilyn Fabe are enamored by Russell's Hildy, and have been prompted to exclaim: "Hawks has pulled off a brilliant coup in *His Girl Friday*. He has created a strong, smart, talented, beautiful, and powerful woman, thus subverting the usual gender stereotypes in classical Hollywood films" (Fabe, 77). Others remain more skeptical about the extent to which Hildy subverts the power dynamic established between her and Cary Grant's inimitable editor Walter Burns. After all, the resolution of the film seemingly necessitates a return to traditional gender dynamics with Walter and Hildy – man and woman, husband and wife, editor and reporter – leaving for their honeymoon. In *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, for example, Wes D. Gehring argues that *His Girl Friday* is one of few "screwball comedies in which the male apparently is in a more commanding position", making the film "an unusual outing" in that the "heroine does not rule" (Gehring, 52/107). An attempt to reconcile these diametrically opposed readings of Hawks' film could be made by examining the way in which comedy is used to construct gender in both *His Girl Friday* and its predecessor, Lewis Milestone's *The Front Page* (1931).

It would be tempting to say that Hawks' provocative decision to reconfigure Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's originally male character Hildebrand Johnson as a woman is evidence enough of his feminist agenda. But merely seeing a woman cast as a successful reporter on the silver screen in 1940 would not have been deemed a "brilliant coup" given that the number of female front-page journalists in the US quadrupled between 1920 and 1950 (Cairns, xvi). Indeed, female empowerment has to be manifest through action and articulation, rather than presence alone. For that reason, it is useful to consider Milestone's film in relation to *His Girl Friday* to see how, if at all, the comedic agency bestowed on female characters evolves during the 1930s.

Meanwhile, the decision to use comedy as the mode through which to deconstruct gender dynamics in Milestone and Hawks' films stems from the fact that "comedies provide a means of envisioning potentially liberating forms of transgression" (Beach, 10). In *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, Christopher Beach explains that "because of the nature of comedy as a genre that is perceived as "lighter" and thus as less threatening to society, the kinds of transgression permitted ... tend to be greater than in other genres. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik suggest, comedy is often allowed a considerable latitude, since "subversion" and "transgression" are to at least some degree "institutionalized generic requirements" of comedy" (Beach, 10). In other words, comedy enables female characters to disrupt patriarchal norms and critique social structures within the safety afforded to them by the expectations of the genre. Referring specifically to the use of comedy by women as a form of empowerment, Beach invokes Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, which "suggests a way of reading film as a subversive and democratizing form that can incorporate marginalized or

repressed elements of society ... The carnivalesque mode of social discourse as it operates in either film or literature uses language to liberate the characters from the restraints imposed by good taste and etiquette, from all that represents the official culture” (Beach, 13). Given the liberating potential of comedy, critics would be hard-pressed to define as feminist a work that did not render its female characters as comic agents. Unfortunately, it is exactly in the location of comedic agency that Milestone and Hawks fail to empower women, albeit to varying degrees.

In *The Front Page*, none of the female characters can be considered comic agents; they do not initiate humorous scenarios, indulge in wordplay, deliver one-liners, retort sarcastically, or in any way transgress social boundaries or challenge the status quo. In fact, in a misogynist twist, women only participate in the film’s comedic elements when jokes are made at their expense. Female characters and indeed all things deemed feminine are laughed *at* – rather than with – by male characters within the world of the film as well as by the audience at large. This comedic territorialism is evident in the newsroom, which is established as a space of male jocularity where women are not allowed to trespass. In an early scene, for instance, Hildy Johnson as played by Pat O’Brien pulls a negligee out of his desk drawer. As the male reporters gathered around a central table laugh, they highlight the incongruity of anything feminine in this distinctly male workspace.

Moreover, at subsequent intervals throughout *The Front Page*, female characters are physically removed or laughed out of the newsroom. Molly Malloy’s first entrance into the space best encapsulates how humor is reserved for the male characters. As the reporters joke about convict Earl Williams’ last meal and gauchely misspell words, the camera cuts to the stairwell outside the newsroom where we see Molly silently skulking

near a pillar, eavesdropping on the men's jokes, cringing at their laughter, obviously hesitant to approach them. When she does enter the newsroom, most of the reporters mock her while one journalist gets up to pinch her cheek and harass her. Acknowledging that she can never 'get' the joke because she *is* the joke, Molly calls the reporters "wise guys", helplessly invites them to continue laughing at her, and derides them for making "a fool out of [her]" before bursting into tears and rushing out of the newsroom.

Interestingly, all the female characters in the film enact similar exits: Hildy's fiancé Peggy Grant's mother is carried and chased out on two occasions while Jenny – an elderly cleaning lady who is tangential to the main plot – is toyed with until she manages to escape the newsroom. In fact, it is Hildy who rushes up to Jenny, kisses her against her will, prevents her from doing her work, and instead forces her to dance with him – with her broom tucked awkwardly under one arm – while other reporters laugh at the clumsy, slapstick performance. In this moment, women are literally reduced to playthings presented for the amusement of men.

At other points in the film, jokes about women become more insulting and malicious than playful. For example, one reporter – while on the telephone, presumably with his editor or a news source – makes wisecracks about angry wives who beat their husbands, a comical expression of disdain for dominant women. Another reporter named Mac McCue is later shown interviewing a woman on the telephone. "Is it true that you took the part of Lady Godiva for charity seven years ago? Hello? She cut off!" he exclaims. In a flash, yet another reporter retorts, "What? Her hair? Tell her I'll be right over." While bawdy humor and conversations that occur at cross-purposes are bound to make an audience laugh, such quips depend on a symbolic stripping and humiliation of

women. Humor in this vein that sexualizes women without their consent becomes more uncomfortable in light of the actual physical harassment enacted by the reporters on Molly, Jenny, and Mrs. Grant. It also does not help that the women who become the butt of the reporters' jokes are not given an opportunity to respond to those who mock them; they remain voiceless, faceless ghosts – convenient constructs at the other end of a telephone line who never make it into the frame.

Elsewhere, Adolphe Menjou's Walter Burns jokes about how his mother's death would not prevent him from working. He later makes amusing jibes at the mayor, saying that the politician would hang his own mother if it would help him win the upcoming election. While these statements are meant to be amusing exaggerations that are certainly enjoyed by the circle of reporters – Walter's proxy audience within the film – they enact increasingly sinister instances of verbal violence against women.

Of course, the removal of women from the comedic realm of *The Front Page* occurs most explicitly in the scene during which Hildy calls Peggy from the newsroom. Hildy asks his fiancé, "Hey, darling, what's the matter?", and in a comic interjection meant to undermine Hildy and Peggy's loving relationship, a reporter responds to the question and complains, "I distinctly said gluten," in reference to a botched sandwich order. Once again, the woman remains unrepresented on the wrong end of a telephone conversation. And while the conflation of parallel conversations is amusing, the implications in this moment for gender dynamics are no laughing matter. After all, the reporter's mindless quip silences and in fact overrides Peggy's complaint about Hildy's unloving and distracted behavior. Moreover, the nature of his mock complaint, mapped as it is onto the conversation between a man and his wife-to-be, relegates women to the

domestic realm by implying that the only thing worth discussing with them is the preparation of lunch. Finally, by cutting Peggy off to deliver his banal punch line, the reporter overtly privileges male buffoonery over female participation.

It is also worth noting that in the rare instances when the wisecracking reporters unleash their wit against other men, the male character being mocked is inevitably feminized. For example, after Williams' escape from prison, the reporters collectively mock Sheriff Hartman. In response, he throws an exaggerated temper tantrum before sniveling and simpering before the mayor and reminding him that he regards the mayor's wife Betty much like a sister. Through his invocation of the domestic and familial sphere as a way out of a scrape, Sheriff Hartman is cast as effeminate and is thus subject to further mockery. Later, when Williams receives his reprieve, the mayor instructs Sheriff Hartman to organize some celebratory parties, another task normally affiliated with women. Through these implicit gender role reversals, comedy as constructed by *The Front Page* is maintained as a masculine attribute that is expressed at the expense of women without offering them a language of recourse.

No doubt, casting Russell as Hildy in *His Girl Friday* complicates the location of comic agency and problematizes the binary that presents men as the makers of humor and women as the butt of all jokes. That said, Hildy is the only female character in Hawks' film that is allowed to participate in the comic realm. For their part, Helen Mack's Molly and Hildy's fiancé Bruce Baldwin's mother play much the same role as their counterparts in *The Front Page*. Molly is a melodramatic presence who is mocked by the reporters in the press room of the Criminal Courts Building while Mrs. Baldwin is reductively

presented as a comic device required to facilitate Grant-as-Walter's amusing shenanigans.

Furthermore, in another throwback to *The Front Page*, the male characters that become humorous subjects are first emasculated. Bruce, for instance, does not initiate comedy – he is not a wisecracking, punning prankster – but provides the audience with many laughs as he is repeatedly duped by Walter. Of course, Bruce's vulnerability to mockery stems from the fact that he allows women – both his mother and Hildy – to dominate him, control his actions, and put words in his mouth. In this regard, Bruce resembles the incorruptible governor's clerk Joe Pettibone, another male character who the audience laughs at, not with. Pettibone as played by Billy Gilbert is demasculinized: he is overweight and clumsy – one of few slapstick routines in the film revolves around him struggling with his umbrella in a doorway – incapable of reading between the lines, prone to expressing wide-eyed wonder and speaking in a high-pitched, sing-song manner that, as the mayor points out, makes him sound “like a child”. Through repetitive dialogue in which Pettibone refers to his wife as the main authority in his life, the film seems to argue that the character's bumbling behavior can be attributed to the fact that he is subservient to a woman. Along the same lines, the reporter Roy V. Bensinger – who provides a comic interlude when he is subjected to Walter's manipulative charms – is reconfigured as effeminate before the audience is permitted to laugh at him. Not only does Bensinger write and recite sentimental poetry about Williams, but he is also quick to assume a secondary position in relation to Walter by referring to him as “mon capitaine”. As such, the comedic routines of *His Girl Friday* maintain a more traditional gender

dynamic in which the men make merry while the women – or those men who defer to or in any way resemble them – are mocked.

In this context, Hildy initially stands out as a comic heroine, a wielder of innumerable one-liners who is capable of making the audience laugh *with* her, *at*, for the most part, Walter. From one of her earliest lines in the film, in which she sarcastically refers to Burns as “the lord of the universe”, Hildy incites laughter. During their first on-screen conversation, Hildy does not hesitate to mock Walter and not only imitates the way in which he says “anytime, anyplace, anywhere” but also babbles incoherently to parody the speed at which he speaks. Later, in a series of sarcastic asides, Hildy jokes that Walter seems charming because “his grandfather was a snake” and ridicules his physique when instructing Bruce to prepare an insurance policy for him:

Hildy Johnson [to Bruce Baldwin]: “Get him examined, that old carcass.”

Walter Burns: “I’m better than I ever was.”

Hildy Johnson: “That’s nothing to brag about.”

As if not content with merely deflating Walter’s masculine ego, Hildy goes on to critique the inconsiderate manner in which her former husband treats women. “He’ll make some girl quite happy,” she seemingly concedes, before muttering a poignant punch line to herself – “slap happy”.

At other moments in the film, Hildy provokes laughter that is not directed at her by performing verbal slapstick, which Alan Dale defines as “dialogue performed at a breakneck clip” (Dale, 5). Soon after she realizes that Walter has orchestrated the arrest of her fiancé, Hildy calls him from the press room to berate him: “Now get this, you double-crossing chimpanzee ... If I ever lay my two eyes on you again, I’m gonna walk right up to you and hammer on that monkeyed skull of yours ‘til it rings like a Chinese

gong!”¹ Dale argues that such verbal acrobatics are funny because they “adopt the pace we’d converse at if we all thought of our brightest remarks in time.” He adds that comedy can “be achieved just by having [characters] trample each other’s lines – they don’t have to be listening to each other, or even to be intelligible, for us to respond to the humor” (Dale, 6).

That said, it would be premature to declare Hildy a comic heroine who is liberated through her use of language to subvert the dominant social structure. On closer examination, it becomes apparent that Hildy is only given comic agency in relation to Walter – her jokes are about him, are responses to comments he makes, and are often directed towards him. Without Walter, in other words, Hildy would not be very funny. By making her subversive power as it is encapsulated in spoken language indirectly dependent on Walter, Hawks undermines Hildy’s comedic agency and puts his own feminist project in peril.

The fact that Hildy’s comic license is thus constrained becomes explicit when we realize that she cannot participate in the jocular environment of the press room in the Criminal Courts Building, a space primarily inhabited by male reporters. Unlike *The Front Page*, where women are entirely excluded from this realm, Hildy is welcome to work in the shared space. But as soon as the reporters engage in witty banter, Hildy is sidelined and visually constructed by Hawks as a diegetic yet passive audience member

¹ In an interesting reversal of phone conversations from *The Front Page*, the audience of *His Girl Friday* is allowed to see and hear Hildy at this moment while Walter remains a silent presence at the other end of the telephone line. Of course, unlike the women who are telephoned in Milestone’s film, Walter later enters Hawks’ frame and is allowed to respond to Hildy’s jibes.

who can appreciate the humor of the male reporters but not respond to or complement it. For example, soon after Williams' escape, all the reporters gathered in the newsroom call their editors and coin absurd scenarios describing police efforts to recapture Williams in an attempt to highlight official incompetence and inefficiency. While one reporter is shown fabricating a story about a police official who examined the body of a "pickaninny" to determine whether or not it was Williams, the camera cuts to a shot of Hildy standing by her desk and laughing, but not engaging in a similar practice.

Hildy's status as a detached, inactive observer is further articulated when the reporters crowd around the mayor and sheriff at the doorway to the press room and relentlessly mock them for letting Williams escape. In this instance, Hawks crams six wisecracking men into his shot, leaving no space for Hildy's participation. Instead, he cuts to a shot of two more male reporters who seem to be at the fringe of the initial circle of mockery. Hildy is only visible in the background of this shot, standing akimbo, hand on hip, with a wry smile on her face, obviously appreciating her colleagues' witty humiliation of the authority figures. Through such framing, Hawks overtly marginalizes Hildy even after giving her access to the male, comedic space.

Interestingly, Hildy is also prevented from engaging in any political humor, even though the male reporters in *His Girl Friday* are encouraged to "take Hitler and stick him on the funny pages." When harassing the mayor, one reporter asks him, "Is it true you sleep in red underwear?" Before the mayor can dismiss this query, another reporter jumps in to question whether the mayor is "on Stalin's payroll". To enhance the comic value of this politically subversive banter, the reporter mispronounces Stalin's name. Indeed, throwaway one-liners about Red armies lining up in Moscow are peppered throughout the

film, but at no stage does Hildy make a humorous comment about world politics. Her deliberate exclusion from this particular realm of comedy seems to imply that Hildy can only use comedy as a mode of subversion in the context of a heterosexual relationship, and not in the arena of geopolitics.

To Hildy's credit, though, there are moments when she employs humor beyond the confines of her interactions with Walter. Unfortunately, the mode of comedy employed in these instances is mimicry, a device that reaffirms Hildy's inferior status as one who can imitate, but never initiate. In one slapstick scenario, Hildy is composing her scoop on Williams' escape on a typewriter while Bruce tries to make it clear to her that he plans to leave for Albany on the nine o'clock train. As she's typing, Hildy distractedly repeats what Bruce is saying and ends up including the words "nine o'clock train" in her story. The humor in this instance may seem benign, but it implies that when working, Hildy assumes a professional backseat and writes whatever someone tells her to. Given that Walter has just incited Hildy to stay on the job and write the Williams story, the joke here becomes an explicit comment on the power dynamic that exists between Hildy and Walter and strips her of all agency, comedic or otherwise.

A similar dynamic is established when Hildy first tries to participate in the political arena from which she has, until now, been excluded. When the reporters begin to suspect that Hildy knows where Williams is hiding, they crowd around her and threaten to harass her in much the same way that they previously cornered the mayor and sheriff. When Sheriff Hartwell questions Hildy about Williams' whereabouts, she chooses to use comedy as a way to embolden herself and mock his authority:

Sheriff Hartwell: "Are you going to talk or aren't you?"
Hildy Johnson: "Well, what do you want me to say?"

Sheriff Hartwell: "What do you know about Williams?"
Hildy Johnson: "What do you know about Williams."

Through this literal reading of the sheriff's question, Hildy once again sets herself up as one who can mimic, but not mock. Comedic agency, then, remains in the masculine realm.

Indeed, Hawks takes great pains to construct comedy as a masculine attribute in *His Girl Friday*. In a final intriguing move, he blurs the traditional power dynamic between genders by having Hildy behave much like the men of *The Front Page* by making women the subject of her humorous asides. For example, Hildy overtly undermines the occupation of most women through comedic exaggeration. In an ironic moment, the script has Hildy mocking wives and mothers, posts that she has declared to be "respectable" and "halfway normal". According to Hildy, "being a woman" involves "[having] babies and [watching] their teeth grow." Through this humorous comment, Hildy lambastes feminine occupations as futile. At another point, Hildy seemingly conspires with Walter to sexualize and mock women without their consent:

Hildy Johnson: "Walter!"
Walter Burns: "What?"
Hildy Johnson: "The mayor's first wife, what was her name?"
Walter Burns: "You mean the one with the wart on her?"
Hildy Johnson: "Right."
Walter Burns: "Fanny!"

Since this raunchy joke is bound to get laughs from the audience, it seems as if Hildy has comic agency. But the fact that she has to adopt a masculine, misogynist stance and quite literally make a woman the butt of her joke to be considered funny maintains a more traditional gender dynamic in the world of *His Girl Friday*.

As such, Hawks does not fully exploit the carnivalesque space created within screwball comedies through speech acts. His female characters are not liberated to the extent that they can disrupt traditional gender dynamics as Hawks erects comedic boundaries and controls the way in which women navigate humorous spaces. By determining how women laugh, whether they are laughed at or laughed with, Hawks prevents *His Girl Friday* from being the “brilliant” feminist coup that Fabe wants it to be.

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