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**transgressive  
comedy and  
partiality**

making sense of our amusement  
at *his girl friday*

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**ward e. jones**



ONE OF THE MORE COMMON experiences of the film viewer is that of finding something on the screen funny or humorous. This occurs not only within the genre of comedy—even a viewer who assiduously avoids comedies will find herself amused at certain places in the films she watches. One would find it next to impossible to avoid all films that include scenes intended to bring about some form of amusement.

Some of this amusement will be in response to what I will call *transgressive actions*—that is, the kind of events that would, in many other, easily imaginable instances, appropriately bring about very different kinds of responses. In humor at the transgressive, we find ourselves laughing at acts of violence, abuse, or cruelty—at the kinds of occurrences that (as we well realize in calm reflection) are more likely to generate—and that are, perhaps, more deserving of—anger or indignation at the perpetrators, sympathy or sadness for the victims. This phenomenon is *prima facie* perplexing, since our default response to wrongdoing does not (nor should it) include amusement. The present paper explores one kind of transgressive comedy—that which invites viewers to laugh with a perpetrator of wrongdoing. While there has been considerable discussion of when, if ever, amusement *itself* is immoral, there has been little discussion dedicated to understanding how and why there is apparently acceptable laughter *at the prima facie* immoral.<sup>1</sup>

I will not be attempting to explain all examples of humor at the transgressive. Indeed, much of the present paper will be concerned with laying out some of the complex terrain at the junction of humor and ethics, much of it terrain that I do not even begin to attempt to understand. My positive claim, developed in Sections 4–6, will be that our favoritism toward certain persons or characters plays a role in some examples of humor at wrongdoing; in particular, I will suggest that it plays a central role in our amusement at the events in the 1940 Howard Hawks film *His Girl Friday*.

### **i. what we find amusing: the incongruous**

At the heart of humor and comedy is a familiar state of mind that I will throughout this paper refer to as “amusement,” a state of mind characteristically (but not always) manifested in the external behavior of laughing, giggling, and smiling. Amusement is an intentional state, both dependent upon and intertwined with an agent’s beliefs or pretenses; it is always a response to and about something—one always finds *something* amusing. What is this “something?” In writings on humor,

the only real contenders for the intentional object of amusement all more or less fall within the broad family of the *unexpected*, the *inappropriate*, or most generally, the *incongruous*.

The claim that the incongruous is what we find funny can be traced back to Aristotle, but the position was not given a significant airing until Francis Hutcheson's brief *Reflections on Laughter* in 1750.<sup>2</sup> A recent defender of the incongruity thesis, John Morreall, writes:

The basic idea behind the incongruity theory is very general and quite simple. We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns.<sup>3</sup>

I will refer to this claim as the "Incongruity Thesis":

*Incongruity Thesis:* the intentional content of S's amusement is to be found in S's believing or imagining that an incongruous state of affairs obtains.

The claim that incongruity is the object of all humor has its critics, and there is a great deal of work that still needs to be done in making more precise both the notion of incongruity involved in humor and the kinds of incongruity that give rise to humor (as opposed to those that do not).<sup>4</sup> There is, however, no shortage of support for the thought that humor is a response to, at, and about incongruities or something closely related to them.

The Incongruity Thesis predicts that any instance of humor involves a violation of expectations or norms. This prediction seems remarkably well borne out: some kind of incongruity characterizes the vast majority of what we find amusing. From childish laughter at physical differences and deformities, to laughter at embarrassments, to sophisticated puns and wordplay, the object of amusement involves something like a juxtaposition that one does not anticipate or a norm that is violated. In embarrassing situations, amusement usually arises in the face of an incongruity between, on the one hand, the embarrassed person's expectations of herself, and, on the other hand, what happens to her. In riddles and jokes, we get an incongruity between the question and the answer, or the joke and its punch line. This is strikingly revealed in what are sometimes called "meta-jokes:" "What are the last three hairs on a dog's tail called? Dog hairs."<sup>5</sup> A meta-joke relies on the incongruity between the norms governing answers to riddle questions (namely, that they be unexpected or incongruous) and the answer we get in a meta-joke riddle (namely, one that is straight). Meta-jokes violate the expectations of jokes themselves, which explains why they are most popular among young children who have recently learned the expectations and norms involved in joking.

If humor involves a violation of expectations or norms, then understanding what is humorous in an instance of comedy will require identifying the expectations

or norms that it violates. Such situations can be extremely complex, especially in film. An early scene in *His Girl Friday* involves Walter Burns marching out to meet Hildy Johnson's new fiancé, Bruce Baldwin. Walter marches straight to an elderly man sitting in the lobby and enthusiastically introduces himself. A spectator viewing this scene in isolation from the rest of the film would take this to be a case of mistaken identity, something that can be funny when and because it results in inappropriate behavior from the person making the mistake and elicits confusion or surprise from the person who is taken for someone else. Those of us who have watched *His Girl Friday* from the beginning, however, quickly catch on that this is not a case of mistaken identity. Rather, Walter is *pretending* to be committing a case of mistaken identity, a fact that makes the situation, and its humor, far more complex than it would otherwise have been were it a simple case of mistaken identity. Why is pretending to mistake someone's identity funny? Part of what is going on is that Walter is violating the norms of introduction; he is not following the norms that govern our behavior when we meet a friend of a friend. More than this, however, we can see that Walter is putting on a private show; he is intentionally acting *for Hildy*, a pretense that is both hidden from Bruce and at Bruce's expense. In short, where Bruce (humorlessly) sees a straightforward case of mistaken identity, in reality we see a *practical joke* being played on Bruce. Thus, another incongruity lies in the disparity between Bruce's view and ours; it is Bruce who is mistaken about what is going on, not Walter. While brief, this rich scene is riddled with incongruities.

Revealing the incongruities in comedic situations is not the only way in which we can defend the Incongruity Thesis. Supporters of the claim have used it to explain a number of features of humor, such as why humor is unique to human beings, why what is found funny varies from person to person and culture to culture, and how comedy can be seen as a catalyst of social or attitudinal change.<sup>6</sup> The Incongruity Thesis is also revealed in the dialectical phenomena that surround amusement. Like all mental states, amusement is susceptible to challenge and disagreement.<sup>7</sup> When someone finds a performance funny that I do not, I might explain to her that I found the performance "obvious," "predictable," "old," or "monotonous." Each of these responses fits nicely with the thought that what we find funny is the unexpected or incongruous.

The claim that incongruities are the intentional object of amusement—that incongruities are *what* we find amusing—has a good deal going for it. There are, however, many questions that it leaves unanswered. As we clearly do not find *all* incongruities amusing—some incongruities frighten us, some of them make us curious<sup>8</sup>—we still need to know which incongruities are amusing. Relatedly, the claim that it is incongruities that we find amusing does not tell us what role amusement is playing in our behavioral economy: what is this mental response to an incongruity doing *for us*? We need to know what is accomplished when we find something funny, what function it serves. We need to know, in short, why we find incongruities amusing. What follows touches on this broad question, by

way of focusing on a small but puzzling subset of the incongruities that we find amusing.

## ii. humor at the transgressive

One subset of incongruous events comprises transgressive events, events that appear to cross ethical boundaries; one kind of incongruous event will be, in other words, the *ostensibly wrong* or the *ostensibly bad*. Accordingly, if what we find amusing is the incongruous, then we might expect that a subset of what we find amusing is the transgressive. That is, we might expect there to be a great deal of humor that is at or about the transgressive, in which we see or are invited to see as amusing something that would more typically—and in most situations more appropriately—invite an emotion like indignation, anger, pity, or sympathy.

This expectation is clearly borne out. A great deal of successful humor concerns transgressive actions. There are jokes about the transgressive, like the following:

The Secret Service has an opening in its ranks, needing to recruit someone to join those who guard the President of the United States. They post a notice in bulletins for government workers, and soon they receive three applications: one from an FBI man; one from an agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; and a third from a Chicago city policeman. Each is given a qualifying exam, beginning with the FBI man.

The FBI man is given a revolver and told to go into the adjacent room and shoot whomever he finds there. When he has been gone only a few seconds, the FBI man returns, saying, “You must be out of your minds! That’s my wife. I’m not shooting her.”

“Fine,” say the examiners. “You must be a good family man, but you are not cut out for the Secret Service.”

Next, the ATF agent is sent in with the revolver, with the same instructions, to shoot whomever he finds in the next room. He, too, returns in minutes, exclaiming, “That’s the mother of my children, you lunatics!”

“Good for you,” say the examiners. “Enjoy your family and your career in the bureau; we can’t use you in the Secret Service.”

Finally, the Chicago policeman is given the same test. When he has been in the adjacent room for a few seconds, shots are heard, then sounds of struggle and muffled groaning. Afterwards, the cop reappears, looking somewhat mused, and says, “Some moron put blanks in the gun; I had to strangle her.”<sup>9</sup>

This is (in my experience) a fairly successful joke, but it is also clearly about a transgressive event. The punch line—that which triggers our amusement—involves a man having just strangled his wife in order to get a job.

Moving from jokes to performance comedy, we might first think of clowns and their antics. One of the standard fares of clowns is abuse: they push each other over, hit each other with large hammers, and even shoot each other out of cannons. Clown behavior found its way into early television with the very successful and long-running American ensemble *The Three Stooges*, whose humor largely depended upon the various ways in which the members of the ensemble physically abused each other. Humorous but abusive actions can, of course, be far more sophisticated and interesting than those we find at the circus and in *The Three Stooges*, as is revealed (among other places) in the institution of practical jokes. Setting out to perform a practical joke on someone involves thinking up a more or less clever way of doing something that will cause her inconvenience, fear, shock, or embarrassment. Practical jokes are a kind of performance in which one abuses an acquaintance in some way.

From early in cinematic history, films have taken humor about the transgressive to extremes. As early as 1925, we get cannibalism: Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* involves a scene in which a starving man, hallucinating that the Little Tramp is a chicken, tries to kill and eat him. More recently, the 1981 comedy *Eating Raoul* centers around a couple luring, robbing, and murdering men, one of whom they eat at the end of the film, and the 1989 comedy *Parents* involves a young boy discovering that his otherwise straight-laced suburban parents are cannibals. In the 1940s, we get mass murder: *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) is about a man discovering that his elderly aunts have poisoned twelve men, and Ealing Studios' *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) is about a man who kills six people in order to ascend to a minor dukedom. What about mutilation and torture? No problem, try the black knight scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), or the musical sequence set during the Inquisition in Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part 1* (1981). As one looks through the history of film, one comes to suspect that few kinds of transgressions have been left untouched as sources of humor.

Compared to these films, *His Girl Friday* looks somewhat tame on the scale of transgressive seriousness. Nonetheless, there must be no doubt that it does include transgressive actions. Walter arranges to have Bruce put in jail three times in the film, and he has Bruce's mother kidnapped. All of these Walter does merely in order to get Hildy back. Even if Bruce or his mother are never *physically* hurt, they have clearly been wronged; their respective freedoms have been taken away, and in each case, they deserve nothing of the sort. In framing Bruce and kidnapping his mother, Walter has wronged them in ways that can in no way be said to be justified by either his aims in doing it or the consequences that result from it. While *His Girl Friday* should perhaps not be categorized as a "dark" or "black" comedy, it should be uncontroversial that it prominently includes humor about transgressions.

It is important to see that humor *about* transgressive actions is not the only kind of what we might call "transgressive humor." Some instances of humor are not *about* transgressions at all. Take the following joke: One good thing about

Alzheimer's disease is that if you get it you can hide your own Easter eggs.<sup>10</sup> This joke, playing as it does on the symptoms of a tragic and fatal disease, is not about any transgressive action or wrongdoing. Rather, it seems as if the joke *itself* is transgressive. To invite an audience to find amusement in a disease that brings about the kind of suffering that Alzheimer's disease does, is to transgress; widespread and fatal diseases are not the sort of thing that one usually laughs about. This kind of comedy—in which we are invited to laugh at the wretched or the unfortunate—has very old roots, going back (at least) to the Elizabethan genre of tragicomedy. It is heavily present in early comedic films, in the bumbling, under-achieving, and pitiable characters created by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.<sup>11</sup> *His Girl Friday* has elements of tragicomedy as well; the plot revolves around the press coverage of a gentle, quirky, amiable man who has been convicted of murder, and who is waiting to be hanged the following day. Nonetheless, while these aspects of the film have a transgressive aspect to them, they do not involve an invitation to laugh at transgressions *themselves*. It is the latter category—humor *at* wrongdoings—with which I am concerned here.

While it is clear that there is humor involving the transgressive, it is important to recognize that the transgressive events here are not *incidental* to our amusement. In all of these cases, the very *transgressiveness* of the events involved is something that we are laughing at. The joke about the Chicago cop would either not be funny, or it would be a very different joke, were it to not involve the transgression of its punch line. This is equally true of practical jokes; what, if anything, is funny about a practical joke is precisely that it involves the abuse of the joke's butt. It is also true of the films that involve humor about the transgressive. What is so funny about the premise of *Parents* is precisely the incongruous spectacle of a suburban, prim couple with a penchant for human flesh. Part of what is funny about *His Girl Friday* is that Walter chooses the means he does—that of framing Bruce and kidnapping his mother—in attempting to gain his ends. The wrong of these events is not incidental to the humor at hand; on the contrary, the wrong is essential to their being funny at all. We would not be laughing if Walter had spent the film pleading with Hildy to come back, just as the joke about Alzheimer's disease would not be funny if it were about amnesia. This fact must be accommodated by any attempt at explaining amusement at the transgressive. A satisfactory account of humor at transgressions must accommodate the fact that a viewer who finds *His Girl Friday* humorous does not think that putting an innocent person in jail in order to get your ex-wife back is morally acceptable. The incongruity, and humor, depends upon the transgressiveness of the actions involved, and any acceptable explanation of humor at transgressions must respect that fact.

It should be clear by now that amusement at transgressions is not an unusual phenomenon; on the contrary, one would suspect that humor at transgressive actions will be found wherever comedy and amusement exist. Nor, I think, should it lead us to disparage ourselves, modern society, or the film industry. While I will not argue this point here, I see no reason to believe that *His Girl Friday*, and all

other comedic films involving transgressions, are themselves wrong or offensive. This is not to say that there are no offensive films or jokes involving the transgressive. The thought that they are offensive *simply* in virtue of their involving transgressions, however, seems implausible. The philosophical interest in humor at the transgressive derives not from its being wrong, but, on the contrary, from its being both possible *and* permissible. How is it that a great deal of successful and unobjectionable comedy invites us to laugh at *what we know to be* wrongdoings?

There are two questions here: (1) What is going on when we find wrongdoings humorous? (2) Why is our doing so not itself wrong? My concern in this paper is with the first question, and I will leave the second question for future work.

### iii. fact, fiction, and point of view

Many of the examples in the previous section concerned our laughter at *fictional* transgressions, and, accordingly, one might be tempted into concluding that the phenomenon of humor about the transgressive is heavily dependent upon the fact that the events about which we are laughing are not real. Humor at the transgressive, goes this thought, occurs when and because the transgressive actions did not actually happen. While I do not want to deny that knowing that a transgression has or has not really occurred can have *some effect* upon one's amusement, this can at best be only part of the story in any one case. A wrongdoing's being fictional is neither necessary nor sufficient for our finding it humorous.

That a portrayed wrongdoing is fictional is clearly not sufficient for its being humorous, as some fictions about transgressions are not funny, even when they are attempting to be. On the contrary, in some cases humor at transgressions seems to become stronger when we know that the depicted events *are* true. Both "hidden camera" comedy and the interview-comedy of Sasha Baron Cohen, for example, rely on verity for their amusement. Both of these comedic techniques are related to practical jokes, and in this regard it is revealing that in many cases one will find a *realized* practical joke funnier than an imagined one. The imagined practical joke often will not be as funny as one that has actually been executed, for at least part of what is so funny about a practical joke is its having been carried out. This is likely to be true even if one did not observe the prank first hand, but was merely told about it: "Did that really happen?," we might ask, laughing even harder when we are assured that it did.

This is, of course, not true of most fictional portrayals. Films that include transgressive events do not, in contrast to practical jokes, generally get funnier if the transgressions being portrayed are true. In many cases, however, it is not clear that knowing whether or not a wrongdoing really occurred will affect the extent to which we find a narrative funny. If, for example, *His Girl Friday* began with a title card that told us that the events that happened in the film were true, would that detract from our amusement at the film? I find it implausible to think that it would. Such a title card does appear at the beginning of Joel and Ethan Coen's comic

thriller *Fargo*. This title card is false—the film does not depict true events—but it is not clear that it matters either way to the amusement that the transgressions in the film generate.<sup>12</sup>

The effect of our knowing that the transgressive events in a narrative really did occur should not be understated. If we approached, say, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* believing that it was made about a real serial killer, then we might not find the film as funny as we do. In fact, we might find it inappropriate and offensive that the filmmakers were inviting us to laugh at a lighthearted presentation of real serial murder. It is not obvious, however, that it could not be carried off, that a portrayal of a series of murders that really occurred could be very funny indeed. Although they do not involve transgressive actions, we might compare the so-called Darwin Awards, which describe real people who have hurt themselves, and even lost their own lives in some spectacular fashion due to their own mistakes. The Darwin Awards invite us to laugh at these unfortunate individuals by placing them in the context of natural selection; in accidentally killing themselves, they are “chlorinating the gene pool.”<sup>13</sup>

What this final consideration suggests is, I think, something quite deep about humor: finding something amusing is most centrally dependent upon the portrayal of the event, upon the way the narrative is laid out or contextualized. Whether or not it did or did not occur, our amusement at an event is dependent upon the *point of view* that we have or are given of the event. This should not be surprising, given the content of humor. Something will appear incongruous to me only from a certain point of view; had the same thing been approached from another direction or within another framework, it might not have been funny. On the contrary, it may have appeared mundane, routine, sad, pitiful, unpleasant, or odious.

The point of view that leads to amusement, however, must be more than one that makes some event incongruous. The point of view from which we find a transgressive action amusing is one from which (in contrast to other points of view of the same transgression) we are somehow led to respond with not pity or anger, but with mirth. What are the components of this point of view? We have already looked at two of them: First, the transgressive comedic point of view is not one in which the wrongness is neutralized, for the very wrongness of transgressive actions—as a kind of incongruity—seems to contribute to our finding them amusing. Whatever are the elements of a portrayal of, or a point of view on, transgressive actions that invite amusement, they are not elements that *hide* their transgressiveness. Second, the transgressive comedic point of view may or may not include our being informed that the events related are fictional. In some cases, fictitiousness may contribute to amusement at amusement, in others (e.g., practical jokes) verity may do so.

What are the other components of the point of view from which we find the transgressive humorous? In the remainder of this paper, I want to explore the suggestion that in some cases our amusement at transgressive actions will be

dependent upon our attitudes toward the persons or events involved in the situation before us. That some such attitudes will be relevant is easy to see; if someone close to me was murdered by her spouse, or if I have just had a run-in with the police, then I may not find the joke about the Chicago policeman who kills his wife at a job interview humorous. Similarly, if I am the person on whom a practical joke is played, or if I am very close to that person, I may not find the joke amusing. This is true even though I may recognize the incongruity in both jokes. Interpersonal attitudes are not always relevant in our amusement at transgressive actions; many of those who *do* find the Chicago policeman joke funny will have no strong feelings toward or against any of its character types. I want, however, to argue that such attitudes, in the guise of *partiality* toward the perpetrator of transgressive actions and/or our *partiality* away from its victim, play a role in some narratives involving transgressions. In particular, I will suggest that it plays an important role in our amusement at *His Girl Friday*.

#### iv. humor and partiality

Everyday and experimental observations together reveal that some generalization like the following is true:

A person's being amused at something is significantly correlated with the person's partiality toward or away from certain features of the humorous situation.

In finding something amusing, I tend to be "disposed toward" the maker or performer of the joke and/or "disposed against" the butt of the joke, and the degree of one's amusement increases or decreases with the degree of these dispositions. This I will call the *Principle of Partiality in Humor*. I do not want to overstate the strength of this principle. There are exceptions, where humor and partiality cut across each other, and the social dynamics of humor are complicated well beyond what the Principle maintains.<sup>14</sup> The Principle says only that amusement and partiality—and their magnitudes—*generally* correspond with each other.

One prominent arena in which we can see the partiality/amusement relationship at work is that of *social grouping*. There has been a good deal of discussion, in the empirical literature on comedy, of the dynamics of humor interactions in grouping. In his review of the sociology literature on humor, for example, Gary Alan Fine writes: "Often if the members of one group laugh at the actions of another group, it serves to integrate the first group, through what Dupréel (1928) calls 'the laughter of inclusion.'"<sup>15</sup> And in his review of the psychology literature on humor, Antony J. Chapman writes that

for members of one group, a joke may increase morale and consolidate them as a group while at the same time sustaining or intensifying aggression

towards outsiders. Those outsiders may be encouraged by the same joke to reciprocate hostilities. Such effects have been reviewed extensively . . .<sup>16</sup>

What these studies and observations reveal is that amusement allows groups to gain and maintain their existence. Amusement, it appears, promotes cohesiveness. If amusement plays a role in grouping, however, we have reason to believe that it generates attitudes of partiality toward and against other persons. As the internal dynamics of a group are intimately related to the individual psychological attitudes of the individuals who make up that group, it would appear that humor generates personal attitudes that encourage grouping. That is, humor tends to generate the attitudes associated with partiality toward and against other persons, attitudes that contribute to the behavioral patterns of inclusion and exclusion that constitute interpersonal groups.<sup>17</sup>

The Principle of Partiality in Humor seems to be made true by the influence that *being amused by* and *being partial toward* have on each other, an influence that works in both directions. In one direction, being amused seems to affect one's partiality toward things in a humorous situation; in the other direction, one's partiality toward something in a humorous situation affects how funny one finds it. The effects of both relationships are observable in everyday interactions and revealed in social psychological studies.

On the one hand, my being amused either by or on your behalf can influence how I feel toward you. When I laugh at your joke, this tends to lead me to have a positive attitude toward you; when a joke successfully makes fun of Jones, this can lead me to a disparaging attitude toward Jones. While it is clear that this is a complex influence with exceptions, the existence of such a tendency is illustrated by one common use of *ridicule*. Ridiculing, or mocking, is often undertaken with the intention of bringing about the state of amusement in others for the purpose of garnering their favor or agreement. Think of schoolchildren making fun of others in order to be popular or in order to make someone else unpopular. Here, humor is being *used* in order to bring about social preferences and grouping, a use that is possible only because amusement encourages a partiality toward some people or things, and/or away from other people or things. Political cartoons and caricatures, in which a leader is ridiculed in order to get the viewer to side against her, work in the same way. This same effect of amusement can, of course, be put to less pernicious and more mundane uses: a teacher may crack jokes in order to get his students to like him, or a woman may joke in order to get her date to like her.<sup>18</sup> All of these cases reveal the propensity of a person who finds something funny to develop biased or partial attitudes for or against a person involved.

The reverse influence—in which my partiality affects whether, and the extent to which, I find you or something you say funny—is slightly more difficult to show. It is suggested by certain familiar patterns of amusement: happy couples eagerly laugh at each other's jokes, and groups of friends more readily laugh with each

other than with strangers. Such patterns can also be explained in other ways, however. Perhaps the existence of couples and groups of friends is to be partly explained by their having similar senses of humor. Or, perhaps this result stems from acquaintances *understanding* each other better—the better I understand you, the better I am going to understand your wit. While this may be the right explanation for many cases, controlled empirical studies reveal that feelings of partiality outside of love and friendship can affect one’s amusement. In one study, for example, subjects examined cartoons in which either a professor is hurling a pie in a graduating student’s face, or a graduating student is hurling a pie in a professor’s face. Faculty members reported finding the first funnier than the second, while students found the second funnier than the first. In another experiment, the experimenter herself was rude to certain subjects and polite to others. Subjects were then all shown the same video (subjects believed that this was a live link-up) in which the experimenter accidentally spills hot tea on herself. Subjects who were treated rudely by the experimenter found the accident funnier than those who were treated politely. These and other studies are described by a leading proponent of the Principle of Partiality in Humor, the psychologist Dolf Zillmann, who summarizes the findings thus: “The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth.”<sup>19</sup>

### **v. humor and partiality in *his girl friday***

So, according to the Principle of Partiality in Humor, (1) my finding something funny inclines me to side with and/or against other persons, and (2) my biased attitudes toward persons affect the extent to which I find something funny. In this section and the next, I want to bring the partiality/humor relationship described in the previous section to bear on *His Girl Friday*. I will suggest that this relationship is doing a great deal of work in our engagement with the film. Humor leads us to side with the devious, conniving Walter (as opposed to Bruce), and this resulting partiality allows us to laugh at what Walter does to Bruce and his mother.

There is some disagreement, among philosophers who write about fiction, as to whether we feel *proper* emotions toward fictional characters or in the face of fictional events. The pressure away from thinking of our feelings toward fictional characters as real emotions derives from the fact that we clearly do not *believe* that what we are encountering in a fiction is real, and that, consequently, our feelings do not have the consequences in action that they would otherwise have. In watching a horror film, our heart rates may increase, our eyes may get wider, and we may even scream, but we have no temptation to flee or to kill the monster before us. As a response to this kind of consideration, Kendall L. Walton speaks of the horror film viewer as being in “quasi-fear.”<sup>20</sup> Quasi-fear is similar to fear, but when I feel the former, I do not believe that something dangerous is before me. Rather,

quasi-fear is the result of imagining or making believe that I am in a dangerous situation. Those who oppose Walton on this point claim that real fear need not be based on belief in the way that Walton supposes.<sup>21</sup>

Whether our affective responses to films are proper or *bona fide* emotions, it is clear that what we feel often amounts to something like what Murray Smith describes as “allegiance” with some characters and against others: as we watch films, and follow their characters, we feel differently toward them. Put very crudely, we like some and dislike others; we approve of some and disapprove of others. In this way, our feelings involve an *appraisal* or an *evaluation* of the characters we follow. This is allegiance, “the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator.” Smith writes:

Evaluation, in this sense, has both cognitive and affective dimensions; for example, being angry or outraged at an action involves categorizing it as undesirable or harmful to someone or something, and being affected— affectively aroused—by this categorization. On the basis of such evaluations, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference.<sup>22</sup>

Whether the anger that Smith describes is, in the cinema, *bona fide* anger or quasi-anger, it is clear that this feeling would bias the spectator against the character who arouses such feeling. She sees the character as a villain, as a scoundrel, as insensitive, as self-centered, as greedy . . . a list that can go on and on. In some manner or other, the spectator is said to have *negative* feelings toward such a character. The spectator can, of course, have more *positive* attitudes toward the characters she follows on screen. She may like or be touched by a character, she may feel pity or sympathy if the character has suffered, or she may see the character as courageous or full of life.

It may be possible for the spectator to feel both positive and negative attitudes at the same time; this may happen, for example, if we are encouraged to feel pity or fondness toward a wrongdoer.<sup>23</sup> It may also be possible for a spectator not to develop *any* feelings toward the characters, either positive or negative; this may be because the film has no real narrative or because the narrative is so puzzling or fragmented that the viewer is not able to make enough sense of the characters’ actions to feel anything toward them.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, when a film includes enough of a plot that it can be said to have character development, the viewer will begin to feel toward, and in the process make evaluations of, the film’s characters. It takes very little cinematic characterization for a viewer to begin to feel partially toward or against a character on screen.

Humor may have a distinct and deciding role in the development of a spectator’s allegiance. Indeed, another way of stating the Principle of Partiality in Humor is that humor can both augment and be augmented by what Smith calls allegiance. On the one hand, our partiality toward one person is often the result of

our amusement *with* him, while our partiality away from another person is often the result of our amusement *at* her. On the other hand, our partiality toward one person leads us to be more likely to laugh with him, and our partiality away from another person leads us to be more likely to laugh at her. All of these tendencies are instantiated in our engagement with *His Girl Friday*.

Our laughter *with* Walter, and *at* Bruce, does a good deal of work, early in the film, in developing our allegiance with Walter rather than with Bruce. The fact that viewers do side so readily and quickly with Walter should, upon reflection, come as some surprise. We know that Hildy is both suspicious and wary of Walter, we know that he did not treat her as she wanted to be treated, and we also know that Walter is devious, bossy, and self-centered. Bruce, on the other hand, is an upright, solid, and virtuous man who has a great deal of affection, respect, and admiration for Hildy; he clearly seeks her happiness on her own terms. Given these two characters, it is certainly not a foregone conclusion that we will side so early in the film with Walter rather than with Bruce, and we can imagine many other similar scenarios in which our allegiance would go in the opposite direction. Nonetheless, the attentive viewer of *His Girl Friday* is likely to develop a fondness for Walter, and this is in no small part due to his making her laugh. Laughter, it must be admitted, is not the only mechanism by which *His Girl Friday* has us side with Walter. We get far more time with Walter in the first part of the film, Walter is played by the eminently captivating and likeable Cary Grant, and we see a rapport and passion between Walter and Hildy that does not exist between Bruce and Hildy. All of these features of watching the film collude in our allegiance with Walter. Nonetheless, our amusement with Walter, at Bruce's expense, is surely one of these features. As we saw in Section 1 above, Walter's first meeting with Bruce is characterized by Walter's mocking him, in a ridiculing act that is utterly hidden from Bruce. This continues through the restaurant scene, as Walter continues to mock-compliment Bruce's staid clothing, personality, job, and attitudes. Once again, all of this is lost on Bruce, as he takes Walter's continual faux compliments to be genuine. *His Girl Friday* is carefully constructed—its humor included—in order to lead us to allegiance with Walter.

Subsequently in the film, and more centrally to my concerns in this paper, the humor/partiality relationship begins to work in the opposite direction. The Principle of Partiality in Humor predicts that once our allegiance to Walter is established, we are primed to continue laughing with Walter and at Bruce, supporting the former over the latter. Our allegiance with Walter in his competition with Bruce, the Principle predicts, sets us up to be disposed to laugh at Bruce (and his mother), should the latter be appropriately incongruous. As Walter begins his scheming to get Hildy back, this prediction is borne out. We continue laughing with Walter throughout the film, *even though* many of his actions have a tinge of cruelty. It is this latter feature of the film that now needs to be explained. While the Principle of Partiality in Humor explains our tending to side with Walter in our amusement, it does not, by itself, explain why we find amusing

Walter's *ostensibly cruel* treatment of Bruce and his mother—his having the former repeatedly put in jail and the latter kidnapped. In order to do so, I need to add, to what has been said so far, a proposal about the effect of partiality (and, by consequence, of amusement) upon our ethical responses to wrongdoing. This is the aim of the next section.

## vi. partiality and ethical response

The Principle of Partiality in Humor holds that amusement encourages partial attitudes toward other persons. Our partiality toward others, however, is in *prima facie* conflict with our attitudes toward their ethical shortcomings. The conflict here is a psychological one, and it arises between the attitudes involved in being partial toward—or caring about—someone and the attitudes involved in *recognizing* that the person cared for has committed a wrong. My being partial to you can lead me to be, in some ways, *more lenient* toward you with respect to what you do.

Lying behind this conflict is our tendency to endorse the goodness of those we care about—to care about someone involves seeing that they are, essentially, good, and seeing their goodness. To care about someone is, in part, to be willing to *endorse* or *vouch for* the goodness of this person. This is not to say that I will vouch for her in all, or even most, situations. Endorsing the goodness of a person is not inconsistent with seeing her as lazy, slow, untrustworthy, or unmotivated; I may not feel comfortable, say, providing a letter of reference for her latest job application or acting as her guarantor when she borrows from the local bookie. Caring for someone is consistent with recognizing the limitations of her capabilities.<sup>25</sup> When I care for someone, however, I vouch for her in the sense that I will have a tendency to claim that she is (at bottom) a good person, that she lives a good sort of life, that she makes (at bottom) the right sort of life decisions, and that she has (by and large) a decent character. This is not to say that we cannot disagree with those we care about, or that we cannot wish they would change bits of their lives. To care for someone, however, is to be disposed toward seeing his decisions as having a basis in his sense of what is good and right. It is to be open and sympathetic to the cared-for person's way of evaluating the world.

A consequence of this aspect of being partial toward someone is that her wrongdoing can have a distressing psychological affect on me. This is one of the dangers, one of the risks, of caring. Imagine a man who hears about an act of vandalism in another town, by and against people he knows nothing of. It would surprise us were he to feel strong emotions toward this event; indeed, a very strong reaction would lead us to question his mental health. If we now imagine that this man discovers that the vandal is his son, however, then we would not be surprised to see the father becoming deeply upset and disappointed. Caring for someone can readily escalate one's reaction to his wrongdoing.

If those who care for others are in danger of experiencing strong negative emotions, then we would expect there to be “mechanisms” by means of which those who care can avoid such strong emotions. Such mechanisms do, indeed, exist. One familiar way to avoid the pain of believing that someone one cares about has done wrong involves *deceiving* oneself into believing otherwise. The stock philosophical example, often trotted out in discussions of wishful thinking, is that of the mother who cannot believe that her son has committed the crimes of which he is accused. The plausibility of the example trades upon the general thought that there is a tension between a mother’s love of her son and the belief that he has committed some heinous crime. Another familiar way of avoiding the tension between caring for someone and believing that she has done wrong is *explaining away* or *excusing* the badness of the person one cares about. There are an extraordinary number of ways in which this can be done, and we are very adept at doing so: the cared-for did not know what she was doing, she did not intend to cause harm, she was under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or she was led to do so by her friends. At their limit, such moves appeal to very distant conditions that, in spite of our not being able to clearly spell out their force, seem to us to distance the person cared for from responsibility for the action, and thus, from wrongdoing itself: she has some or other genetic make-up, she was neglected or beaten as a child, or she had no role models to give her a moral education.<sup>26</sup>

A third way in which someone who cares can avoid the pain of knowing the cared-for has done wrong is one, I suggest, that plays a role in our amusement at Walter’s transgressions in *His Girl Friday*. One can simply *play down* the badness of what the person one is partial toward has done. In taking this response to the cared-for’s wrongdoing, one does not change one’s mind, in general, about what is or is not bad (although that may, in some cases, be true). Rather, one brushes it off as *not all that bad*. A tendency like this may explain how close-knit families can be deeply involved in crime; my love for you, involved as you are in immoral and criminal activities, leads me to a weaker condemnation of your activities.<sup>27</sup> More familiarly, perhaps, this tendency will be behind the “boys-will-be-boys” attitude that our imagined father might take to his vandalizing son. In this way, the father minimizes or (a revealing phrase in the context of this paper) *makes light of* his son’s behavior. By thinking that his son’s action is not really all that bad—by dismissing it with a boys-will-be-boys response—the father can avoid the more extreme reaction that he may otherwise have felt in fully recognizing the harm that his son has caused, the wrong that he has perpetrated, or the kind of person he has become.

It is important to see what the father is not doing:

1. He has not changed his commitment to a *generalization* like “One should not wantonly destroy another person’s property.”<sup>28</sup> He is not rethinking the wrong of vandalism, or adding a *ceteris paribus* clause to his belief in its general wrong; he will not now say things like, “Vandalism is wrong *except*

when my son performs it.” It would be wrong to see the father’s playing down his son’s vandalism in terms of a change in the father’s beliefs. Rather, what we have before us is a father’s *emotional response* to an action he believes to be wrong having been affected by his love for his son. The father is not *aroused* by the wrongdoing before him; such an arousal would, if it were to occur, be painful, and the father is avoiding it by minimizing the wrong his son’s actions.

2. At the same time, the father should not be seen as *ignoring* the fact that his son has transgressed. The attitude “boys will be boys” only makes sense in the context of a recognition that “boys transgress.” The former statement entails, and is a particular response to, the latter. Were the father wholly ignoring the iniquitous nature of what his son is doing, he would not need to make light of it. He would not need to portray it as a boyhood prank.
3. It would also be wrong to see the father as doing this consciously or voluntarily. He would no doubt bristle were we to suggest to him that he is playing down his son’s crime in order to keep from facing the fact that his son is something of a hooligan. Rather, the boys-will-be-boys response is a hidden, and more or less temporary, suppression of painful moral emotions.

In sum, then, the father’s caring for his son entails that he would feel shame, disappointment, or distress were he to focus on the harm his son has caused to someone else. In order to avoid this shame and disappointment, the father recognizes, but does not emotionally focus on, the harm that his son has caused; on the contrary, he sloughs off the action as a harmless boyhood prank.

There are some striking similarities between the father’s treating his son’s vandalism as a prank, on the one hand, and our laughter at Walter’s abuse of Bruce and his mother, on the other. Both cases are significantly characterized by an agent’s partiality toward a wrongdoer—that is, the father’s toward his son, the spectator’s toward Walter. In both cases, someone (involuntarily, unconsciously) makes light of something that she knows is, and is aware of as being, a wrongdoing. My suggestion is that the spectator’s *partiality*—like that of the father—explains the *making light of*. The model is not a perfect fit. One difference is that the spectator knows that she is, and the father knows that he is not, responding to a fiction. This may make it easier for the spectator to avoid the distress that endangers her.

What, precisely, is this danger in the case of the film spectator? I have claimed that the source of the father’s making light of his son’s wrongdoing is his need to avoid the pain that would result from fully acknowledging that someone he cares for has done wrong. We, as viewers of *His Girl Friday*, cannot be in the same danger, for—as just mentioned—we know that our allegiance is with a fictional character. Nonetheless, there is a certain sense in which we do need to avoid recognizing,

fully and emotionally, what Walter does. Imagine what we would feel were Walter to do something that we could not laugh at, something that we could not play down: imagine he pulls out a knife and stabs Bruce, or he begins viciously beating and kicking Bruce's mother. We would be shocked by such a display. Such a shock would reveal our expectations of Walter; we take him to be, essentially, a better man than this, and we would feel disturbed by such a display. We are partial toward Walter, and we would feel violated by him, distressed not just by such actions but by the fact that *he* has carried them out. Once we become partial toward Walter, there are things that we expect from him, things at stake in our relationship with him.

That which is most at stake here is the success of the narrative of *His Girl Friday*. It depends upon the spectator's continuing and unfettered partiality toward Walter. The plot, and our humor-driven interest in it, could not recover from the shock of our becoming disappointed or distressed by what Walter does. Some works of fiction, like *The Sopranos* or Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, in which characters we are fond of do horrible things, thrive on filling the viewer with an anxiety regarding characters of whom he is fond. As a narrative driven mainly by humor, however, *His Girl Friday* requires that the spectator avoid this tension. Its success as a comedy necessitates that the spectator not feel the kind of tension that characterizes *Lolita* or *The Sopranos*, that the spectator not be slowed down or pulled away from her immersion in the narrative by such conflict. In order to be swept away by the rapid comedy of *His Girl Friday*, the spectator needs to avoid any knocks to her attitudes toward its characters. Her partiality toward Walter must not be shaken; the film would be ruined, or it would at least not be the same film, were that to occur.

It comes as a surprise to many viewers of *His Girl Friday* to realize, on reflection, that Walter has done such cruel things to Bruce in the film. This is revealing, and it well fits the account given here. The film works very well in "hiding" Walter's transgressions in our partiality toward him, so well that most of us are not "aware" that Walter is treating Bruce so badly. The words in scare quotes in the previous sentence must be understood in a particular way, for we must not deny that we know that Walter has put Bruce in jail—after all, this is one of the things we are laughing at—nor must we deny that we know that this is wrong—after all, the transgressiveness of his act is one of the things that makes it humorous. The awareness that we lack, I suggest, is a kind of emotional awareness, an *affective* acknowledgement of and response to the wrongdoings that occur in the film.<sup>29</sup> The film achieves this by developing, and then utilizing, our partiality toward Walter, a partiality that leads us to emotionally play down his wrongdoings.

It is important that Walter's first encounters with Bruce are harmless, that he does not abuse Bruce in anyway. Nevertheless, Walter's clever *teasing* of Bruce, in the office lobby and over lunch, in a way that only Hildy and the viewer are privy to, contributes to our feeling a certain partiality toward Walter over Bruce. This allegiance with Walter, I suggest, sets up our response to Walter's abusive

treatment of Bruce later in the film; it leads us to make light of Walter's treatment of Bruce. This "making light of," in the film, takes the form of humor, but, as my example of the father of a vandal shows, it need not. We are amused that Walter *put Bruce in jail* in order to get his ex-wife back; such an extreme tactic is, to say the least, incongruous. Most important, for my explanation of humor at transgressions, our amusement at Walter's actions is itself a way of *not being disturbed* by Walter's treatment of Bruce.

In arguing that our partiality toward Walter contributes toward our humor at his transgressions, I am committed to the claim that if a viewer were not led to be partial toward Walter, the film would not be, for her, as funny as it is for others. This seems plausible. If one were not taken by Walter, if one were put off by his conniving and deviousness, then it seems that one would not find what he does to Bruce and his mother as funny as one otherwise would have. In short, if you are not partial to Walter, then I suspect the film—as a comedy—does not work for you as well as it does for those of us who are partial toward him. If, say, you find yourself partial to the kind, gentle, and respectful Bruce instead of the self-centered, arrogant, grandstanding Walter, then I predict that you are likely to find what Walter does to Bruce leading you to indignation or pity. If you are not partial toward Walter, then the humor driving *His Girl Friday* simply will not work for you.

## vii. conclusion

In closing, I would like to consider two responses to the position I have defended. Both point to some of the directions in which fruitful work in this area could be taken.

The picture that I have drawn of our response to transgressions in *His Girl Friday* will be applicable to other comedies involving transgressions, films like *Monsieur Verdoux* (Charlie Chaplin, director, 1947), *The Ladykillers* (Alexander Mackendrick, director, 1955), *Eating Raoul* (Paul Bartel, director, 1982), *The King of Comedy* (Martin Scorsese, director, 1983), *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, director, 1989), and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, director, 1994). In all of these films, we are invited to feel sympathy for, and to laugh with, characters who commit transgressions. In addition, however, there is a large body of comedies involving transgressive actions in which our sympathies lie with the *victim*, and not the perpetrator; Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton both tended to work this way, and the more recent films *The Jerk* (Carl Reiner, director, 1979) and *The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, director, 1998) are nice examples of films in which our sympathies lie with the victims of wrongdoing. *Prima facie*, it looks as if this is going to be a problem for my account. If, as I have argued, our partiality toward a wrongdoer can lead us to laugh at transgressions he commits, then how does our partiality toward a *victim* lead us to laugh at transgressions *done to her*?<sup>30</sup>

I am not convinced that this is a problem. Even if partiality toward a character does contribute toward our amusement at his victimization, this is not necessarily

in conflict with the account that I have defended in this paper. As is well known, something can cause X to happen in one context, while in another it may prevent X from happening; to take a very simple case: a gust of wind may, on a calm day, cause a glass sitting on a table to fall and break; on a windy day, however, that same gust of wind may prevent that same glass from falling and breaking, because it counterbalances wind from other directions. Similarly, in different narratives, our partiality may play very different roles in our laughter at transgressions. That partiality plays a role in our amusement at *His Girl Friday* that is very different from its role in our amusement at, for example, *The Big Lebowski*, is suggested by the fact that in the first film the challenging question is, “Why do we not get angry with Walter?” while in the second film, the challenging question is, “Why do we not pity Lebowski?” I have argued that partiality toward Walter plays a role in allowing our laughter in the first, but it is *prima facie* plausible that our partiality toward Lebowski plays no role at all in allowing our amusement in the second. It seems more likely that our laughter at what happens to Lebowski is *in spite of* our partiality toward him. Rather than allowing for our amusement at his victimhood, it seems that our partiality for Lebowski must be overridden by some other factor in order for us to laugh at what happens to him. This “other factor” may be that we do not see Lebowski as *only* a victim; like the Little Tramp and Wile E. Coyote, we believe in Jeff Lebowski’s resiliency, that he is not really being harmed by what is happening to him. There is a good deal of work to do in understanding what conditions—other than partiality—are present or absent in these and other cases of transgressive humor, but it is by no means obvious that the outcome of this work will count against my claims in this paper.

I admit that my account might be seen to suffer if someone were to find a story that unifies both kinds of amusement: that with perpetrators and that with victims. Jessica Gildea has attempted to unify both with the interesting suggestion that we tend to share the viewpoint of the character to which we are partial.<sup>31</sup> This seems to work well in some cases, as when Lebowski jokes while his head is being dipped in the toilet. It does not, however, work in all cases of laughter at the victimization of those we are partial to: the Little Tramp and Lebowski really do appear *scared* when the former is being chased by his hallucinating and hungry fellow prospector and the Nihilists drop a marmot in the latter’s bathtub. Yet we laugh.

A second objection is to the starting point of my argument. I began with the thought that our base or default response to wrongdoing is pity, anger, or condemnation, and, accordingly, I have approached the problem of humor at transgressions by attempting to understand how such responses are *averted*. That is, I have approached humor at transgressions as something that happens when other, particular conditions push the default emotions aside. These conditions, I have claimed, include partiality toward the transgressor. Partiality introduces mechanisms for avoiding the pain of recognizing that the one to whom one is partial has wronged; these mechanisms open the door for other responses to the wrongdoing,

including that of amusement at the incongruity that the transgression is. An alternative, more direct approach toward transgressive humor would deny that the default response to wrongdoing is pity, anger, or condemnation. On the contrary, humor at transgressions reveals that transgressive actions *just are* something that we take pleasure in or enjoy. In an interesting debate between Noël Carroll and Cynthia Freeland on the pleasure derived from horror, Carroll takes a position analogous to that which I have defended in this paper, while Freeland takes a more direct approach.<sup>32</sup> Carroll argues that fear and disgust at monsters and their deeds are “the price to pay” for the pleasure of having our curiosity satisfied by the horror film’s “narrative of disclosure”; on his account, the pleasure we gain from horror is not a direct response to that which horrifies us. Freeland disagrees, suggesting that we take pleasure in the “spectacle” of violence itself. Freeland’s account of the pleasure of horror depends upon a certain picture of human nature, one in which we are shown to enjoy or become thrilled at violence and suffering. A similar approach to humor at transgressions would be one in which we, quite “naturally,” become amused in the face of wrongdoings. The issues here seem to me to be deep, and I have said nothing in this paper to rule out the alternative picture. While I am sympathetic to Freeland’s account of our immediate and direct fascination at horror and disgust, I am less sympathetic to the analogous position regarding our humor at transgressions. Someone’s shock, pity, or anger at a wrongdoing does not seem to me to be in need of an explanation in the same way that someone’s amusement at a wrongdoing does. This, however, I must leave as an issue for future exploration.<sup>33</sup>

## NOTES

Thanks to Tom Martin, Murray Smith, Pedro Tabensky, Samantha Vice, Dean Ween, an audience at Smith College, and the students who participated in my seminars on philosophy and film at Rhodes University and Bennington College.

1. Although see Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, and the comments on comedy in Smith, “Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes.” Carroll, “Horror and Humor,” an investigation into why humor and fear so readily coincide is related in spirit to this paper.

2. Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter*. See also Schopenhauer’s comments, found in *The World as Will and Representation*, at I:13.

3. Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 15–16.

4. For a criticism of the centrality of incongruity to humor, see Scruton, “Laughter,” Section 5. For useful attempts to clarify the kinds of incongruity involved in humor, see Morreall, “Enjoying Incongruity,” and Feinberg, “The Absurd and the Comic.”

5. Also see Ted Cohen’s discussion of “shaggy dog” stories in his *Jokes*.

6. For the first two points, see Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter*, Section II. For the third point, see Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Chapter 10.

7. See Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, Chapter 3.

8. Morreall, “Enjoying Incongruity.”

9. I have taken this joke verbatim from Cohen, *Jokes*, 84–85.
10. Another joke taken verbatim from Cohen, *Jokes*, 43.
11. More recent films that could be categorized as tragicomedies: Robert Altman's *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), which takes place in a surgical field hospital during the Korean War, Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971), which is about a death-obsessed teenager who falls in love with a 79-year-old woman, and Bruce Robinson's *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* (1989), which is about a man who discovers another head growing out of his neck and taking over his life.
12. Although, as Elizabeth Spelman pointed out to me, it would clearly make a difference as to whether we were watching the events themselves (as opposed to a re-enactment of them). While she is right about *Fargo*, I doubt that this is true of *His Girl Friday*.
13. The Darwin Awards are recorded and awarded online by Wendy Northcutt at <http://www.darwinawards.com>.
14. For an extensive discussion of the social sources and consequences of humor, see Mulkay, *On Humour*.
15. Fine, "Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor," 173.
16. Chapman, "Humor and Laughter in Social Interaction," 149–150.
17. Neuropsychologist Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, suggests that laughter, rather than humor, is the more basic grouping phenomenon. Such a position is not incompatible with the claims I depend upon here.
18. For a discussion of literature on what he calls "humour in a sexual marketplace," see Mulkay, *On Humour*, 84–90.
19. Zillmann, "Disparagement Humor," 91–92. See also Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor."
20. Walton, "Fearing Fictions," Section II.
21. See, e.g., Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?"
22. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 84.
23. Viewers of, say, *A Bout de Souffle* (or, *Breathless*) (1959), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), or the U.S. television series *The Sopranos* may find themselves feeling this way. See Murray Smith's contribution to this volume.
24. See, e.g., *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).
25. Although it is perhaps worth noting here that social psychology experiments show that lovers vouch for their beloveds in many ways. Hall and Taylor, in "When Love is Blind," for example, find that people who observe their spouses in group tasks tend to explain the success of the group task on the spouse and the failure of the group task on other members of the group.
26. See, e.g., the essays collected in Tabensky, *Judging and Understanding*, and Part II of Wasserman and Wachbroit, *Genetics and Criminal Behavior*.
27. This is a phenomenon widely explored in U.S. film (e.g., *The Godfather* films) and television (e.g., *The Sopranos*).
28. Murray Smith suggests (in correspondence) that spectators of fiction often suspend their moral commitments. I am suspicious of this, largely because of the so-called phenomenon of imaginative resistance; see Hume "Of the Standard of Taste," Moran "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," and Gendler "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance." This is a large issue that I cannot pursue, however.

29. This feature may separate *His Girl Friday* from what are commonly referred to as “black” or “dark” comedies, in which the wrongdoings are made more evident to the spectator.

30. I thank John Garfield and Jessica Gildea for pressing me on this point.

31. Unpublished class essay, Bennington College, 2007.

32. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, Chapter 4, and Freeland, “Realist Humor.”

33. In his “Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes,” Murray Smith takes some steps toward developing the Freeland-type position.

