

In Conversation: *The Lady Eve* and Stanley Cavell

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An ophiologist walks into a bar on a boat. He's looking for some time alone with his book. That book, titled *Are Snakes Necessary?* (figure 1), is, we intuit, a page-turner for him if for no one else, but he can't really get into it because he keeps noticing women noticing him, and it's clear that they want him to notice them too. This is annoying, not least because he's committed himself to snakes instead of marriage. Told of how many enticing women may be on the boat he takes from his herpetological expedition in the Amazon back to the United States, he declares, "Oh you know me, Mac; nothing but reptiles!"¹ Later, one woman who sees him in the bar will ask, "Are you always going to be interested in snakes?" To this he responds, "Well, snakes are my life, in a way." Or they were his life until he falls for her, falls for her literally when she sticks out her leg, unnoticed, and trips him.

This scene of literal falling in love falls early in the 1941 screwball comedy *The Lady Eve*, directed by Preston Sturges. The woman, Jean, later renamed Eve, is played with lightning-fast wit by Barbara Stanwyck; she is a card sharp—and the daughter of a card sharp—who first is attracted to the man, Charles, as a perfect specimen of what her father designates the "sucker sapiens," a "mug" they can fleece for money at the card table. Charles is played with charming emptiness by Henry Fonda; he's the heir to the Pike Pale Ale

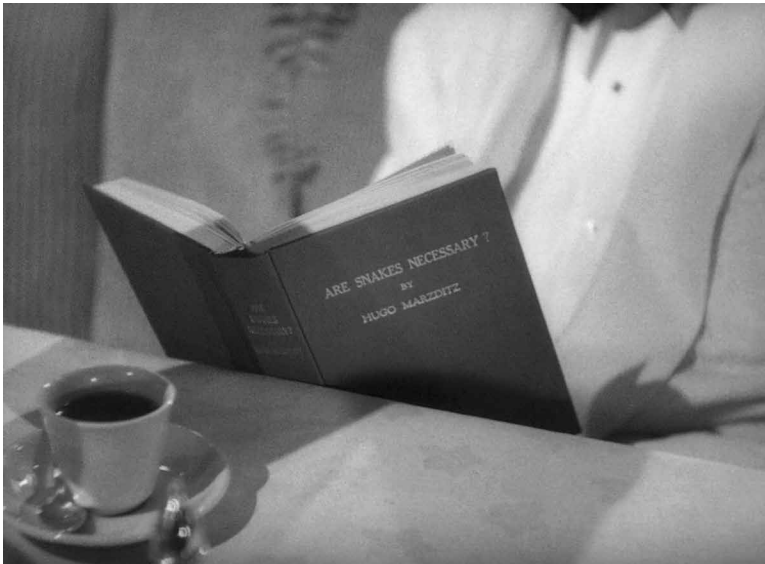


Figure 1. Charles Pike reads a book, *Are Snakes Necessary?*

fortune and is nicknamed Hopsie after a key ingredient in ale. After the first time she literally makes him fall for her, he will keep falling for her on his own, again and again and again, as if knocked off his feet by repetition compulsion. “Oh, ho, bumblepuppy—why, she’s used to having young men fall for her,” Sir Alfred McGlennan Keith (a conman who will pretend to be her uncle in the second half of the film) intones to Charles after he’s fallen over for the third time in a row, this time at a party at Pike Palace in Connecticut.

All this falling, I’ll argue in this essay, is part of an ongoing conversation, replete with repetitions, between the film’s two lovers. This essay is a reading of *The Lady Eve* in conversation with Stanley Cavell’s reading of it, especially in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981), where “conversation” is one of his key terms for interpreting the film and for interpretation as such. Cavell later claims that “the mode of conversation that binds or sweeps together the principal pair” in the remarriage comedies “is the feature that comes in for the greatest conceptual development in *Pursuits of Happiness*.”² Cavell puts those remarriage comedies in conversation with their literary precedents in a way that is mimetic of the kind of conversations that interest him in Hollywood screwballs such as *The Lady Eve*. Justifying the seriousness with which he takes “the words spoken in the film” in his introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*, titled “Words for a Conversation,” Cavell argues it is

the nature of conversation about film generally, that those who are experiencing again, and expressing, moments of a film are at any time apt to become incomprehensible (in some specific mode, perhaps enthusiastic to the point of folly) to those who are not experiencing them (again). I am regarding the necessity of this risk in conversing about film as revelatory of the conversation within film—at any rate, within the kind of film under attention here—that words that on one viewing pass, and are meant to pass, without notice, as unnoticeably trivial, on another resonate and declare their implication in a network of significance. These film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversation.³

Cavell describes two interrelated mimetic events here: film words' mimesis of "ordinary words" and the film critic's mimesis of "conversation within film" in the act of "conversing about film." The second requires more attention, because Cavell is not only trying to find a style of conversing about film that would inhabit the mode of conversing in the films he studies; he is also attempting to indicate that his own criticism risks incomprehensibility precisely in trying to reveal something enthusiastically about the conversations in these films. In this sense, I take Cavellian conversation to be a mode of film criticism (and also literary criticism, since Cavell demonstrates how these films are themselves in conversation with Shakespeare's plays) that attempts to analyze the "networks of significance" that conversations in film can create. Cavell's conversation with these films seeks to analyze by inhabiting and experiencing the conversations within them ("enthusiastic to the point of folly" potentially indexes a kind of submission through mimesis). This risks his analysis becoming incomprehensible to those who aren't "experiencing" those films, but it takes that risk in order to invite others into the experience: the experience of criticism as a genuine conversation, often (as in Cavell's case) about conversations in film. Exemplary for Cavell are the conversations between the two main protagonists in *The Lady Eve*. Jean and Charles, who think they know each other with certainty at the time of their engagement, realize there were things they had not and perhaps could not have known and, after their attempts to take revenge against each other for the revelation of what they did not know, work toward acknowledging each other through conversation.

I propose that Cavellian conversation be seen as a mode of what the philosopher often calls "acknowledgment," a way that characters and critics attempt to be present to and recognize each other in good faith, even with enthusiasm, despite the possibilities of incomprehensibility.⁴ I should acknowledge up front that

this essay is very much in conversation with Cavell, with all the mimetic risks that entails. I'll spend the bulk of this essay weaving Cavell's interpretation of *The Lady Eve* into my own, repeating some of his claims in order to advance one of my own: that repetition can be, perhaps counterintuitively, the way out of conversational impasses, breakdowns in communication that conversations in the film, our interpretations of the film, and critical conversation more generally can all run up against. While Cavell valuably studies the importance of one form of repetition fundamental to the Hollywood comedies of remarriage, the "re" in remarriage, I explore the multiple kinds of repetition that structure *The Lady Eve*, repetitions that are motivated by its revenge plot as much as its remarriage one. The repetitions of the revenge plot also drive the film's meditation on reduction to type: of Jean's desire to become something like the ideal, simplified type that Charles fantasizes her to be, and of Jean's revenge against Charles for his vengeful reduction of her to a criminal type when he realizes she's not the knowable type he thought she was. I'll conclude by suggesting that attending to structures of repetition in *The Lady Eve* and Cavell's theory of conversation can help with one conversational impasse plaguing my discipline, what Rita Felski has called the "method wars" over "the merits of close reading versus distant reading, surface reading versus deep reading, and reading suspiciously versus reading from a more receptive, generous, or postcritical standpoint" in literary studies.⁵ These method wars chime with different histories of methodological reflection and debate in cinema and media studies and have begun to have some direct impact on that discipline too. David Kurnick has described the reiterative method wars of literary studies as in fact being less about method than about mood and argues that they constitute a series of "method melodramas" that run through various caricatures of critical methodology from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's description of paranoid reading to Felski's own account of critique.⁶ Melodrama, as defined in Cavell's follow-up to *Pursuits of Happiness, Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1996), is a "negation of the features of the comedies," most especially conversation.⁷ In the melodramas Cavell studies, "the negation of marriage" takes "the form of the negation of conversation." Complementing Cavell with Kurnick, I will propose that the method wars themselves constitute a "negation of conversation" that can end in either divorce or something like remarriage, a renewal of conversation across party lines that Cavell might help us achieve. Such a conversation would allow for a more honest and generous reflection on method itself and hopefully lead us toward a flexible, pluralistic approach to methodology

and the affective moods that can attach themselves to different methods in the study of literature and film.

Remarriage and Revenge

Cavell's overarching argument in *Pursuits of Happiness* is twofold. The first aspect is to identify a basic narrative structure that links together seven of the best screwball comedy films made in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s and to argue that this narrative structure gets repeated and revised enough that it comes to constitute a subgenre of the screwball comedy, the comedy of remarriage. The central narrative events of this subgenre are something like a divorce and then a reconciliation of a married couple; the central tropes are doubles, mirrors, metacinema, magic, and surreal trips to a paradisaical place called Connecticut; and the central formal innovation has to do less with any particular techniques of cinematography than with the kinds of relationships created by fast talk, the rapid and witty and self-reflective dialogue between characters, especially the couple who will divorce and reconcile. Cavell will call this "conversation," a term that he will also use to describe the films' relationship to some ideas and texts from the Renaissance and to describe his own interpretive relationship to the films.

The second claim that Cavell makes in this book is that the Hollywood comedy of remarriage is one of the most important inheritors of Shakespearean romance, a genre he glosses as "Shakespearean romantic comedy" (with reference to Northrop Frye's "The Argument of Comedy" and *A Natural Perspective*), the exemplary instance of which he finds in the "structure of remarriage" that gives shape to *The Winter's Tale*, where divorce and reconciliation are associated with death and rebirth.⁸ Among the films he studies, Cavell begins with *The Lady Eve* because he finds in it "a reasonably clear sketch both of the generic and the Shakespearean dimensions of the task I set myself."⁹

In literary circles, Cavell is probably much better known for his readings of Shakespearean tragedy, especially his very influential account of *King Lear*. Cavell's exploration of idealization in these screwball films is the flip side of his interest elsewhere, not least in this work on Shakespeare's tragedies, in skepticism. By "skepticism," Cavell does not primarily mean an inability to know the world or whether other beings exist. Instead, for Cavell "skepticism suggests . . . that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but

acknowledged.”¹⁰ Skepticism is, as Andrew Norris glosses this definition, “our resistance to accepting the world and acknowledging those with whom we share it.”¹¹ Our desire for certain knowledge is a symptom of our discomfort with accepting and acknowledging the world and other people in their everyday, ordinary presence in our lives. In a commentary on his interpretation of *Othello* at the end of *The Claim of Reason*, where he had become concerned with the symmetries and asymmetries between “skepticism with respect to the external world and skepticism with respect to other minds,”¹² Cavell writes of the psychological effects the existential condition of skepticism can have in Shakespearean tragedy, which he sees as a “response to skepticism,” proposing that skepticism’s doubt is motivated by “a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge.”¹³ Put differently, skepticism—the resistance to acknowledging and accepting the world and others—can, under pressure, take the form of a displaced denial that is recognizable as revenge against the world or against the person who revealed the limits of their ability to know.

Skepticism thus defined is not central—at least not explicitly central—to Cavell’s study of Hollywood comedies of remarriage, which, as I’ve noted, he associates not with Shakespearean tragedies but instead with Shakespearean romance, especially *The Winter’s Tale*.¹⁴ “Skepticism” is the key term in Cavell’s extended interpretation of *The Winter’s Tale* elsewhere, in particular what he describes, in characterizing the play’s king who comes acutely to doubt his wife’s fidelity, as “the skeptic’s sense . . . of being cursed, or sickened, in knowing more than his fellows about the fact of knowing itself, in having somehow peeked behind the scenes, or say, conditions, of knowing.”¹⁵ I call Cavell’s analysis of idealization in the Hollywood comedies of remarriage the flip side of his study of skepticism in the tragedies, because idealization is a kind of inverted skepticism, a way characters think they know the one they love with certainty. In *The Lady Eve*, when the characters’ idealizations are punctured by the revelation of something they did not know, or the revelation that they cannot know their lover’s mind with certainty, they turn to revenge. But because *The Lady Eve* is not a tragedy, revenge becomes wedded to conversation as the characters learn to acknowledge each other, which includes acknowledging each other’s unknowability. In this sense, conversation and to a certain extent revenge too become modes of what Cavell describes, in his account of the “remarriage” part of *The Winter’s Tale*, as “efforts of recovery.”¹⁶

Cavell’s interpretation of *The Lady Eve* is so compelling because he adroitly demonstrates how it reworks the comedy of remarriage

structure from *The Winter's Tale* (crossed with the magus father-daughter-suitor dynamics of *The Tempest*) in which lovers, to paraphrase Cavell's quotation of Sigmund Freud, find each other by refinding each other.¹⁷ But Cavell's tendency to take *The Lady Eve* as a paradigmatic case, as a jumping-off point, "a reasonably clear sketch both of the generic and the Shakespearean dimensions of the task I set myself," leads him to underplay how much repetition—not just the repetition that constitutes remarriage—structures the film. This is not a criticism of Cavell; he is self-conscious and explicit that he is interpreting *The Lady Eve* as a "sketch" for the genre he maps, and that requires emphasizing the basic features of the genre as such and then only later examining how "new members" of the genre he studies bring with them "some new feature or features" that "contribute to the description of the genre as a whole."¹⁸ Revenge is simply not one of the "features" that is definitional for the genre as Cavell sees it, so he acknowledges it briefly in films where it is present but does not make it his focus. Attending more extensively to revenge in *The Lady Eve*, however, might suggest a new feature to the comedy of remarriage more broadly.¹⁹ Cavell tends to see the comic ending of *The Lady Eve* as, in a relatively unequivocal way, "overcoming" the elements of melancholy and anger that circulate earlier in the film, whereas I claim that the film actually makes the revenge plot, with its emphasis on repetition, crucial to achieving its comic ending. The repetitions of the revenge plot make possible the remarriage plot rather than needing to be overcome once and for all. In that sense, *The Lady Eve* may show us the ongoing entanglement of revenge and remarriage as a structural feature of the Hollywood comedies of remarriage, which do not always end with a final transcendence of the former through, as Cavell puts it at the end of his reading of *It Happened One Night*, "a release from this circle of vengeance [that] I call acknowledgment."²⁰

Repetition and revenge: these terms are not unrelated in the generic traditions that *The Lady Eve* draws on. The film's revenge plots seem to draw in very distinct ways on the history of revenge tragedy but then redeems that generic tradition in a comic reconciliation. It is interesting to note that Cavell, so self-aware when it comes to his use of parentheses (as I'll show later), should note only parenthetically the relevance of revenge to *The Lady Eve*, despite at the end of his reading calling it a "revenge comedy":

In *The Lady Eve*, the man's tendency to lecture nobly is treated to an exposure of pompous self-ignorance so relentless that we must wonder how either party will ever recover from it. (The woman describes the exposure

as teaching a lesson, the spirit of which is evidently revenge; earlier she had saved him from what he calls “a terrible lesson your father almost taught me,” namely, about games of so-called chance. Or was the lesson about disobeying the woman? She expressed particular impatience with him, quite maternal impatience, in saying, “You promised me you would not play cards with Harry again”).²¹

As this parenthetical statement gathers more syntactic and rhetorical complexity (a much-repeated tic in Cavell’s writing), we witness Cavell at once pointing to the central importance of revenge in the film and cordoning it off from his analysis of remarriage.

In fact, many of the ancient revenge tragedies that founded the genre are structured around a tension between social, political, or personal breakdown and restoration or reconciliation. What Cavell writes elsewhere about televisual seriality could apply to the revenge tragedy genre as well: “repetitions and recurrences are modes of a requirement that the medium of television exacts in all its formats.”²² Repetition, in serial television and revenge tragedy alike, helps to realize a generic structure even if that repetition always occurs with a difference, what Cavell might call the open-ended reiterativeness of genre.²³ Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, for example, is structured around a series of repetitions: Clytemnestra lays a trap for her husband, Agamemnon, and kills him like a sacrificial animal, just as Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia. In response, their son, Orestes, tricks and kills Clytemnestra, continuing the cycle of deceitful crime that she began (although it really began long before, since the Curse of the House of Atreus stretches back to earlier generations whose crimes have themselves been repeated). But these repetitions are cut off; something like a reconciliation between Clytemnestra’s avenging Furies and Orestes takes place in the trial overseen by Athena. The founding of a new legal order, along with the restoration of patriarchal rule, brings the revenge plot’s repetitions to an end.²⁴

In obvious ways, *The Lady Eve* is not a revenge tragedy, but it might be said to engage with that generic structure as much as with Shakespeare’s comedies of remarriage. We could, with Cavell, call the film a revenge comedy of remarriage and attempt to develop that specific feature of this instance of the genre further. The more reiterative repetitions of the revenge tragedy drama seem to be necessary in this film, structurally for the narrative and psychologically for the two main lovers, for the repetition of remarriage to happen. Reconciliation and restoration aren’t so much the things that contain or negate revenge, as in *Oresteia* the trial folds Orestes’s and

the Furies' reconciliation into a new legal and political order, but instead are what revenge makes possible.

An analysis of the narrative arc of *The Lady Eve* will show how the surprisingly restorative work of revenge is woven into the structure of the film: it leads from a mutual resistance to desire, from desire to a fall into the couple form, from that fall into a falling out and a revenge plot that requires a number of falls, and finally to reconciliation premised on misrecognition (Charles's inability to see that Jean is Eve) or, perhaps better to say, repetition premised on recognition (Charles's ability to see Jean as Jean for the first time).

Desire and Idealization

The film begins with Charles's resistance to desire, that breezy "Oh you know me, Mac; nothing but reptiles!" when warned about the women who will greet him on the boat. (This declaration is followed by a cut to a series of not exactly subtle shots of the boat's steam stack overflowing.) As Charles tries with almost no success to avoid the gaze of the women interested in him and keep his head in *Are Snakes Necessary?*, Sturges cuts from an "unmediated" view of Charles to Jean watching him and watching the women who are watching him in her compact mirror (figure 2).



Figure 2. Jean's compact mirror

Jean offers cutting commentary on the other women's tactics and Charles's unresponsiveness, suggesting that she's seen this all before: "Holy smoke, the dropped handkerchief! That hasn't been used since Lily Langtry. You'll have to pick it up yourself, madam. It's a shame that he doesn't care for the flesh. He'll never see it. Look at that girl over to his left. Look over to your left, bookworm." ("Bookworm" is one way to cut a snake down to size.)²⁵

Jean becomes both director and cinematographer here. To Cavell's suggestion that this registers metacinematic awareness, making Jean a double for Sturges and the sucker, Charles, "a stand-in for the role of audience," I'd add that Jean's narration of other women desiring Charles (where her mirror is a double for the camera) keeps her at a distance from desire more generally and, back turned, ensures that her watching cannot be watched by him.²⁶ This is not only because "sexuality is for this sophisticated and forceful woman still a problem" (for whom in the film isn't it one?) but also because she has been raised and trained, as her father Harry will later remind her, to cordon off sexuality from desire and from feeling, to see her sexuality as an instrument for cons, for mugging mugs: "A mug is a mug in everything," comments Harry, played by Charles Coburn.²⁷ Neither of them can maintain this distance from desire for long. Charles falls for Jean, literally and figuratively; likewise, for Jean, her terror at the sight of the snake with which Charles is traveling seems to literalize, in hyperbolically Freudian imagery, her unconscious sense that her sexuality might actually be wedded to desire when it comes to Charles. He calls his snake "Emma"; when he offers to introduce her, she slyly responds "That's a new one," making a joke that turns out to be more than a joke about the sexual symbolism of the snake. "We are being clunked on the head with an invitation to read this through Freud," Cavell quips, like Jean had clunked Charles on the head with an apple she had just taken a bite of when she first spots him boarding the boat.

In the wake of feeling this desire for each other, both resist the complexity of it in various but entangled ways. Charles resists in part by idealizing her, painting a picture for them in which he has known her forever, which is also to say that he's painting a picture in which she's wholly transparent to him, an ideal he can know—can have known—absolutely: the opposite of skepticism. In other words, he'll try to desire her in purely sentimental and ahistorical terms, as becomes clear at the moment when they commit to the idea of marrying each other while looking into the ocean during their second evening together (figure 3):

Every time I've looked at you here on the boat, it wasn't only here I saw you. You seemed to go way back. I know that isn't clear, but I saw you here, and at the same time further away, then still further away; and then very small, like converging perspective lines. That isn't it. It's like . . . like people following each other in a forest glade. Only way back there you're a little girl with a short dress and your hair . . . falling to your shoulders, and a little boy is standing, holding your hand. In the middle distance, I'm still with you, not holding your hand anymore because it isn't manly, but wanting to. What I'm trying to say is . . . only I'm not a poet, I'm an ophiologist, . . . I've always loved you. I mean, I've never loved anyone but you.

"I'm not a poet, I'm an ophiologist." Truer words have never been spoken. This is a reverie he'll try to repeat to Eve later in the film, not realizing she is Jean. Part of the fantasy that informs his speech is that by loving her he somehow has known her since she was young, that she has become—has always been—transparently knowable to him, although maybe his shifting analogies register his doubt about this fantasy even as he insists on it. (And in this Charles gets further, for better or worse, than that other idealizing Charles, Charles Bovary, whom Gustave Flaubert narrates as having a similar but failed fantasy after first meeting his future second wife, Emma: "That evening, as he was returning home, Charles



Figure 3. Charles and Jean discuss their relationship's future

took up again one by one the words she [Emma] had used, trying to recall them, to complete their meaning, in order to recreate for himself the portion of her life that she had lived during the time when he did not yet know her. But he could never see her, in his mind, differently from the way he had seen her the first time, or the way he had just left her.”²⁸ When it is revealed to Charles soon after that he doesn’t know a lot about her and her past—including that she’d been a card sharp until she decided to go straight for him—he will lash out at her and abandon their engagement. Jean will remember this when, later in the film and as Eve, she marries him and then, on their honeymoon, tells him about all the lovers she had before him to end their marriage, an assertion of how much he might not yet know or might not be able to acknowledge.

Jean tries to teach him a lesson about idealization. The most immediate part of that lesson comes in response to this explicitly unpoetic reverie (“It isn’t as simple as all that”). Whether she’s smiling genuinely or just trying to smile genuinely as he rehearses the reverie that he’ll repeat verbatim to Eve, she understands the dangers of sentimental, simplifying, ahistorical narratives of love: “One of us has to think and keep things clear,” she tells him as he doesn’t exactly seem to be listening. Later in the film, when after Charles falls in love with Jean “disguised” as Eve he tries to repeat this reverie verbatim, he is interrupted by her interjections and by a horse’s head butting. (It’s “a repetition even the horse tries to tell him is inappropriate,” Cavell quips.)²⁹ Eve’s interjections repeat his earlier declarations in advance of his delivery and, in repeating them, reveal both their insincerity (or at least commonplaceness) and the irony of Charles’s fantasy of having known Eve forever when he doesn’t even realize that she’s Jean: “That’s remarkable,” he says when she preempts his comment about having known her and held her hand since they were very young; “that’s like telepathy. . . . I don’t deserve you.” “Oh, but you do, Charles. If anybody ever deserved me, you do, so richly.”

But perhaps the wisest and wittiest part of this ongoing instruction in the perils of idealization comes in Jean’s description of her ideal romantic partner earlier in the film. It’s after Jean has tripped Charles, strong-armed him into taking her back to her room to pick out replacement shoes because the trip broke her heel, gotten him to invite her into his room, and run away screaming in genuine terror when she realizes he has a snake named Emma who has gotten loose; he runs after her back to her room to apologize. Jean, as she recovers from her fright, caresses his hair. Charles vibrates in ecstasy as he breathes in her perfume, and they talk. Nora Gilbert comments that this scene constitutes “the verbal equivalent of a

sexual climax,” but as she also notes, there’s nothing particularly erotic about the verbal exchange itself, likely a strategy to get it past the censors in Will Hays’s Production Code Administration.³⁰ Charles and Jean eventually come around to discussing their ideal romantic partners:

Jean: You have a right to have an ideal. Oh, I guess we all have one.

Charles: What does yours look like?

Jean: He’s a little short guy with lots of money.

Charles: Why short?

Jean: What does it matter if he’s rich? It’s so he’ll look up to me, so I’ll be his ideal.

Charles: That’s a funny kind of reasoning.

Jean: Well, look who’s reasoning. And when he takes me out to dinner, he’ll never add up the check. And he won’t smoke greasy cigars or use grease on his hair, and . . . oh, yes, he won’t do card tricks.

Charles: Oh!

Jean: Oh, it’s not that I mind your doing card tricks, Hopsie. It’s just that you naturally wouldn’t want your ideal to do card tricks.

Charles: I shouldn’t think that kind of ideal was so difficult to find.

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

Charles: Why don’t you marry one of them?

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

This is a hilarious de-idealization of the idea of an ideal itself, and it has profound personal and philosophical implications across the film. Jean’s ideal is readily available at any barbershop, and his primary characteristic is defined in terms that are as dialectical as they are deflating: he must be physically (and mentally) in a position to idealize her. Equally important is the lesson that comes with her apparent turn to sincerity at the end: she doesn’t want an ideal type, however defined, or a fantasy of always already achieved knowledge of a romantic partner; she wants to be taken by surprise. As she puts it to Charles slightly later, when he really does surprise her by revealing that he has evidence of her criminality, “I fell in love with you, which wasn’t in the cards,” cards that she can almost always control.

Jean also guards against Charles’s tendency to idealize women in more pointed and personal ways. As she tells him at the bar

about women in general, when she doesn't yet know that he's just seen a photograph identifying her as a card sharp, as one of "the bad ones," "the best ones aren't as good as you probably think they are, and the bad ones aren't as bad; not nearly as bad." She wants to be seen—by him and by herself—as "not nearly as bad" as she rightly assumes that he, with his narrow-minded morality, would judge a con artist to be. Part of her wants to believe in what Maria DiBattista has called the "story about human growth" that Charles seems to offer her.³¹ But part of her doesn't. What brings them together, what transforms Jean's seduction into something more than instrumental, is her *ambivalent* desire to become his ideal, to reform herself into his vision of her: "I'd give a lot to be—well, I mean, I'm going to be exactly the way he thinks I am, the way he'd like me to be," she says haltingly to her father after she decides she doesn't want to con Charles. This may be the only line in the whole film that Stanwyck delivers haltingly. Cavell calls this self-correction: "declaring that she would give anything to be—that she is going, she corrects herself, to be—everything he thinks she is, everything he wants her to be."³² But it seems to me less self-correction than a syntactic index of ambivalence, an ambivalence further elided by Cavell in his paraphrase's substitution of "she'd give anything to be" for "I'd give a lot to be."

Jean, then, gently resists Charles's idealizations but also, on some level, attaches herself to the clichéd, sentimental vision he paints of their relationship stretching back and forward transparently in time and the possibility for reforming, for going "straight" or being "straightened," that it offers. (Jean says to her father "You can go straight too!" He responds, "Straight where?") His reverie may, in my reading, be about a kind of impossible knowledge and transparency, but Jean also experiences it as a transformative possibility. Her father turns out to be right that Charles, like "these righteous people" more generally, is "narrow-minded," but his narrow-minded, unpoetic idealizations feel to Jean, at least for a moment, like an expansive opportunity to be different than what she has been. On some level, she also wants to be plunged into his fantasy, into his idealization of her. To adapt Lauren Berlant, Jean is a complex person who recognizes her own complexity and yet wants to "rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself"; this is a sentimental makeover that, Berlant says, is often undertaken "in the vicinity of a love plot."³³

But it's too late for Jean to make herself into this simpler version of herself, to become the sentimentally simplified person Charles thinks he knows her as, because he makes her into a

different kind of simpler version of herself once he comes to see her as a criminal. This is Charles's revenge plot, much briefer than Jean's (to follow) but with its own internal repetition. As payback for the revelation that she is a more complex person than the one he was convinced he "always" loved and knew, Charles vengefully repeats his reduction of Jean to a simple, knowable type by reducing her to a different simple, knowable type: the criminal. When this mug views her mug shot, he flattens her: as Harry puts it, "A mug is a mug in everything," indeed, and he takes the inscription on the back of the photograph to be exemplary of who she has been and who she is; he also, cruelly, makes her look at the photograph to ensure she knows that he knows who she really is now. It is a photograph of her, her father, and their partner, Gerald (played by Melville Cooper), disembarking a ship. Muggsy, the mug's traveling companion and paranoid caretaker, has coerced the photograph out of the ship's captain, who has on file a record of known card sharps but would rather not share it if no one has claimed to have been conned. Muggsy and the captain bring it to Charles as he waits for Jean, looking over the railing of the ship in a subtle echo of the blocking of the reverie scene the night before. The pacing and cinematography in this scene emphasize how Charles takes the photograph as rigid proof of what Jean essentially is, although he is actually imposing this meaning on her.

When Charles slides the photograph out of the manila envelope in which it was delivered to him, the camera attends to him looking at it (figure 4). Before we register any reaction on his face, Sturges cuts to a subjective shot from his perspective; we see the photograph (figure 5). For a second it seems as if it were being presented to us as a still frame until we notice his thumb on the photograph, as though pointing at Jean, and casting a shadow that she seems to be descending into. Charles is holding what we're viewing; we look through his eyes now. In the photograph, in addition to Harry, Gerald, and Jean, there are two other figures: a porter carrying their suitcases and a man blurred in the background who, wearing a light-colored (possibly white) blazer and hanging over the railing, is almost a double of Charles when we saw him at the opening of the scene, in white and whistling over the railing. Jean looks directly at the camera, as if offended that this photograph is being taken by paparazzi without her consent, as if feeling already how this might be used against her and asserting, in response, an image of herself as unashamedly aware of her notoriety and open to life and to interaction. Everyone else seems oblivious to the camera, with the possible exception of the porter.



Figure 4. The mug receives a mug shot



Figure 5. Jean mugs for the camera

This photograph thus inverts, visually and positionally, the earlier subjective shot showing Jean's perspective when she looks in her compact mirror and sees Charles, sees other women seeing Charles, and directs and comments on the moving images that appear in her mirror. Here the image of Jean and everyone else is static, and we see through Charles's eyes rather than Jean's; the photograph is, as Cavell suggests, "slightly inflected so as clearly to resist coincidence with the photographic field of the moving film images."³⁴ But there is a kind of movement to the image, or at least to Jean in the photograph, since the camera seems to have caught her just as she turns to look at it, surprised but also refusing to allow that surprise to define how the photograph captures her. The image of Jean is thereby looking at Charles and at us, knowing the effect of this photograph's iconic reductionism but incapable of doing anything about it other than looking unashamedly and stylishly herself.

Cavell is interested in how this photograph advertises itself as an image of Stanwyck herself, creating a doubling of Jean and the actress who plays her that is "isomorphic" with the doubling of Eve and Jean within the film, and so associating us with Charles "in the position of the gull."³⁵ In my experience, that sense of doubling that Cavell persuasively proposes—which highlights the complexity of Jean but also the complexity of Jean/Eve's relationship to Stanwyck—also creates, for me as a spectator, an acute disidentification with Charles's perspective. Here I feel aware of how instantaneously Charles's ethical perspective differs from that of a less "narrow-minded" person, of anyone who can imagine that Jean is more than what this photograph's back side text contends she is, and not least because she is Barbara Stanwyck. Charles's vengefulness comes out of his narrow-mindedness, his insistence on reducing Jean to what the inscription says she is. The editing of this sequence both writes the inscription onto Charles's mind and disrupts our alignment with his perspective. From Charles's perspective, reading the back of the photograph with him, we saw the text dissolve into a close-up shot of Charles's face, angled down and still looking at the photograph, but now, after undergoing this process of imprinting, we see his face angry and disgusted; he has been reduced to a hardened moralizer (figures 6–8).

Charles puts the photograph back in the envelope and goes inside to have a scotch at the bar, this time meaning to order scotch, in an inversion of the earlier scene where, giddy with infatuation, he orders scotch in the morning when he means to order coffee, and Jean has to correct him. When Jean comes in, she's surprised to

"Handsome Harry" Harrington,
his daughter Jean and third
character known as Gerald.
Professional card sharps; also
bunko, oil wells, gold mines
and occasionally green goods.

Harrington also known as Dr.
Herscher, Major D. D. Brown, the
Rev. Dr. Upswitch, Capt. Julius
Joyce, retired, C. K. J. Malvern
etc. etc. Poses also as dentist

Figure 6. The mug shot's caption (back side)

"Handsome Harry" Harrington,
his daughter Jean and third
character known as Gerald.
Professional card sharps; also
bunko, oil wells, gold mines
and occasionally green goods.

Harrington also known as Dr.
Herscher, Major D. D. Brown, the
Rev. Dr. Upswitch, Capt. Julius
Joyce, retired, C. K. J. Malvern
etc. etc. Poses also as dentist

Figure 7. The caption fades into a shoulder-up shot of Charles reading it



Figure 8. Fade complete: Charles finishes the caption

find him at the bar “at this hour.” Everything has changed between them. Charles will repeat and invert his earlier reverie about having known Jean forever by claiming, after Jean promises that she intended to tell him about her past when they arrived in New York (so that Harry and Gerald could get away), that he knew she was a card sharp all along and that he was the one “playing” her for a “sucker.” This is part of how Charles’s revenge plot depends on repetition: on the exchange of one claim of absolute knowledge for another and one reduction of type for another. Jean understands that this claim, coming on the heels of his making her look at the photograph, is a vengeful attempt to make her “feel cheap,” like nothing more than a criminal sucker sapiens.

The photograph’s inversion of the empowering metacinematic experience Jean has with her compact earlier is redoubled when Charles smugly presents the photograph to her; we see her view the photograph but never get to see the photograph from her perspective (figures 9–10). Charles’s new view of her now dominates. “Rotten likeness. I never cared for that picture,” Jean says when he makes her look at the photo. She perhaps means that it’s not a flattering photo (although actually it is, since she’s the only one who looks good in it, partly because she’s Barbara Stanwyck and partly because she’s the only one mugging for the camera). But “rotten

likeness” is also a claim that the reduction of her to *this* likeness, with its criminalizing inscription, is itself “rotten.” Jean plays along earlier when Charles says she bounces men up and down and up (“You have the darnedest way of bumping a fellow down and bouncing him up again.” “And then bumping him down again.” “Oh!”), but in a sense, Charles has done that to her, perhaps unknowingly, by making her want to be his ideal (bump up) and then making her feel “so low” (bump down). To Charles, Jean is now a “professional card sharp” and nothing more, as the inscription on the back of the photograph says; his vengeful imposition of that reductive type on her is a refusal to acknowledge her, a departure from conversation with her. In other words, the photograph in the film works like a kind of personification, reducing a complex person with a complex history to an emblem of feminine criminality to get back at her for being more complex than he could have known.³⁶ It is significant that Muggsy is the one to unearth the mug shot and to get it into Charles’s hands; this “sort of a bodyguard, governess, and a very bad valet” seems to have been named for a life of personification allegory, where his intractable skepticism renders him incapable of becoming a mug and always paranoically on guard against anyone looking to con the naive Charles. In an illuminating comment about Sturges’s playful use of stereotypes in his films, James Harvey suggests that “a Sturges character never tries to disguise his formulaic nature: he proclaims and fulfills it, makes it vivid and wonderful, as Charles does in this couch scene with Jean. He is the bumpkin in excelsis.”³⁷ While this seems true of Charles in the first half of the film, this volta at the midpoint, where Charles reduces Jean to a kind of criminal stereotype just when he tries to project backward in time his own nonbumpkin knowledge of her nature, shows just how excruciating having stereotypes imposed on one can be and how much that imposition can seem motivated, to paraphrase Cavell, by a disappointment that seeks revenge.³⁸

This frustration with stereotype is crucial to the second part of the film’s revenge plot, Jean’s much more extended one. Her desire for revenge is more complex—and has more complex effects—than Charles’s. Jean not only feels betrayed and scorned. She is also motivated by the fact that she was seduced into wanting to be the ideal he wanted her to be (“I’d give a lot to be—well, I mean, I’m going to be exactly the way he thinks I am, the way he’d like me to be”), and then she was “fixed” as a type of criminal in his mind, a personification of criminalized feminine sexuality. After reading the photograph, he couldn’t or wouldn’t see her any other way—he claims, in fact, that he had *always* seen her that way—and didn’t want her to see herself any other way either.



Figure 9. Charles gives the mug shot to Jean



Figure 10. Jean attempts to explain

Doubles and Disappointment

Jean's revenge plot, a series of mirrorings and repetitions, is partly about public humiliation, about making Charles fall for her again, literally and figuratively, when all he feels is rage and resentment. But what she does is sharper than that, more didactic, and her revenge plot will shape much more of the plot of the movie than Charles's does: she makes him fall in love with what we might call an ideal, Eve (the Lady Eve Sidwich in full), that figure of unfallen innocence in the Eden of Connecticut that no one can seem to locate on a map (as Eve relates a train conductor had claimed, "I don't know where Connect-i-cut is"). Muggsy, from the first time he sees Eve, is confident that she is Jean but equally confident, in his exegetically misogynist way, that she is an incarnation of every Eve who has made a man fall since Adam: "You tryin' to tell me this ain't the same rib was on the boat?" She wears the same perfume, she wears no disguise, she barely bothers to feign the English accent everyone at the party is supposedly quite charmed by, and she even tells Charles that he looks very familiar. But Charles tells Muggsy that the skeptical shadow doesn't understand "psychology": "They look too much alike to be the same." As Cavell notes, Jean has a different explanation, insisting on an actual change in their mutual perception: "I hardly recognized him myself. He seemed shorter and bonier. It's because we don't love each other anymore."³⁹ Jean has been much more aware of the complexities of perception since the beginning. Early on when she and her father are first conning him at cards, she tells Charles that they're not worried about the possibility of him conning them, because "you look as honest as we do." Charles's explanation of why Eve can't be Jean emphasizes the repetitive structure of the revenge plot, whereby Eve doubles Jean and reduplicates the idealizing courtship-to-de-idealizing revelation sequence on her own terms. Jean's gloss on his misrecognition as a perspectival shift underscores the transformed terms and experiences of this repetition.

And then once Charles has fallen in love and repeated the courtship of Jean, rehearsing the same clichéd sentimental vision ("We held hands way, way back"), she'll reveal that ideal as always already fallen. On the train, she tells him about her sexual history with many partners. "Eden were no Eden thus exposed," to borrow a line from another Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁴⁰ Cavell notes that Jean's lesson is "that passion may have a past of flesh and blood"; he ventriloquizes her to be saying "very well, I'll show you the reality of your ideal."⁴¹ I want to build on Cavell's insight to emphasize how far-reaching Jean's lesson is. In the traditional

revenge plot, going back to *Oresteia*, the repetition inherent to revenge renders it intractable without external, legal intervention. In *The Lady Eve*, revenge's repetitions are, paradoxically, the path to acknowledgment.

Jean's vengeful lesson culminates in that revelation of her (fabricated) sexual history. The lesson begins with Angus, the first lover she mentions in passing, which maybe Charles can find a way to forgive, and just when he has, condescendingly, figured out tentatively how to offer that forgiveness, she brings up many other lovers (Vernon, Herman, Cecil, Hubert, Herbert, John, and John's twin cousins too), thus ensuring that he can't possibly forgive her, that he'll see his ideal as very low indeed. Jean's lesson to Charles here is that there was no pure and innocent past that he can see and know completely, that she was and will remain not entirely knowable to him even if there's much he can and should know about her, including how to forgive her and how to acknowledge when there is actually nothing to forgive.

So, what explains their getting back together, with Eve refusing Charles's money in the divorce, finding her way onto his ship to the Amazon, tripping him again, and ending up again in his cabin at the end of the film? Is this genuine reconciliation or repetition of a bad cycle that the two should escape from? Is it a breaking of the cycle of revenge or a continuation of it?

The film implies, without ever making explicit, that Charles has learned his lesson about idealization and control, which allows him to forgive Jean or realize there's nothing to forgive. His disappointment in the ideal, Eve, makes him able to acknowledge Jean as more than what he projects onto her, positively or negatively. She gathers this from how happy he is to see her, and that allows her in turn to forgive him.

The film is more direct about the fact that Jean has learned a lesson herself about how revenge isn't as satisfying as she thought it was, that to hurt one you've cared for, whatever they've done to you, can hurt you too. In a later commentary on *The Lady Eve*, Cavell suggests that "when Eve turns solemn on the train, after Charles jumps off and slips on a bank of mud, she is not simply feeling guilty for her treatment of this mug, and not even simply realizing that she has deprived herself of someone she has had genuine feeling for, but recognizing before all that his protestations to her of love have been, however deviously arrived at, helplessly sincere."⁴² This seems true to me, but I would add to it that Jean/Eve's recognition of Charles's confused sincerity coincides with her own sadness over the revenge she has taken. This is perhaps why when she watches him get off the train after her honeymoon revelations



Figure 11. Jean/Eve closes the blinds of the train window

and sees him immediately fall, a repetition of his many falls earlier in the film, she seems sad, so sad that the camera cuts from his fall to her closing her blinds in shame at having watched him fall again, as though she's closing the curtain on the spectacle of revenge she has produced, a more oblique echo of her earlier metacinematic looking at him in her compact mirror (figure 11).

There are more cynical readings of the end of the film available, which would emphasize the fact that Charles is a sucker until the very end, still not realizing that Jean is Eve and that it's the reassertion of her power over him that leads her to want to be with him rather than any kind of genuine forgiveness or lesson learned on either side. But I tend toward a more recuperative reading, although one that is careful to guard against the tendencies toward sentimentalism and idealism that the film is so humorously critical of. That more recuperative reading would go something like this: Revenge has taught them both lessons about the dangers of idealism and the limits on knowing another person completely, lessons that they need in order to forgive each other and to forgive themselves for what they've done to each other, to understand what they can and cannot know, and to try to negotiate each other's projections and identifications without cruelty going forward. That is, they have learned through revenge's repetitions how to have what Cavell will call a genuine conversation. Perhaps what is so

interesting about this film is that reconciliation isn't positioned as the overcoming of revenge's potentially endless iterations, which has been so much an explicit concern in the history of revenge tragedy. Instead, the revenge plot's iterability lays the ground for each of them seeing each other again and anew and learning how to talk with each other. Rather than repetition compulsion, revenge surprisingly leads to reprise and reinvention. As Muggsy exclaims as he slips out of the bedroom that Jean and Charles have just slipped into to consummate their marriage, "Positively the same dame!"

Method and Melodrama

My reading of *The Lady Eve* builds on Cavell's to flesh out its engagement with the revenge tragedy tradition and to interpret more extensively the effect of its structuring repetitions. I find myself very much in conversation with Cavell as I write this, and in conclusion I want to turn to how that very concept of conversation organizes our readings of the film and offers a methodology for interpretation that would be useful to return to in criticism today at a moment when "interpretation," as impetus to conversation, has become a contested term for what to do when we study a literary or filmic text.⁴³ Repeating it now might help us escape from what has come to seem like the endlessly repetitious cycle that constitutes what have been called criticism's "method wars," a dispute that has repeated itself with subtle differences over the last thirty years about whether criticism should be engaged in what is variously called paranoid reading or symptomatic reading or critique, an analysis of what's hidden beneath the surface of the text (such as some form of ideology), or whether criticism should focus on seeking pleasure in texts, reading their surfaces, or becoming attached to and enchanted by them.⁴⁴

I have already mentioned how Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* theorizes the comedy of remarriage structure in some Hollywood screwballs of the 1930s and 1940s in relation to Shakespearean romance, especially *The Winter's Tale*, but Cavell also finds a more submerged Renaissance intertext for these films in John Milton's writings about marriage and divorce. Like so much else in *Pursuits of Happiness*, the connections Cavell draws are diffuse but suggestive. The link for Cavell is that both Milton, in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, and these comedies of remarriage define marriage not as a domestication of eroticism, an instrument for the transmission of property, or a means for controlling reproduction but instead as conversation, fundamentally. In his follow-up to *Pursuits*

of *Happiness*, a study of the comedy of remarriage's "shadow genre," Hollywood melodramas, Cavell writes that for Milton, conversation is "the *fact* of marriage":⁴⁵ fast talk, in terms of the comedies of remarriage, and, in Milton's words, "meet and happy conversation" between intellectual equals that can prevent "loneliness to the mind and spirit."⁴⁶ Citing Milton on the idea that "a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and noblest end of marriage," Cavell claims that in these comedies of remarriage, "talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life."⁴⁷ Divorce is necessary, in Milton and in the Hollywood films Cavell studies, when conversation fails, finds itself in an impasse: when the couple can't talk through their problems and cannot acknowledge each other. If they can reconcile, it will have to be through responsive conversation as a mode of acknowledgment too. (Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in these terms, is also a comedy of remarriage.)

As for Milton, marriage and divorce for Cavell are not only about a relationship between a couple; they also, by extension, are about individuals' relationships to political bodies or, especially for Cavell, to texts. The idea of conversation winds its way through *Pursuits of Happiness*: the title of the introduction is "Words for a Conversation," and he hopes in part to describe a conversation between Shakespeare's romances in the Renaissance and the Hollywood screwballs of the 1930s and 1940s, films whose most significant aspect is conversation, talk as a "form of life," which he then defines again in relation to Milton's definition of marriage. But conversation is also explicitly his method for "defending the process of criticism, so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation. (And I think of conversation as something within which that remark about conversation is naturally in place. This one too.) . . . These films are themselves investigations of (parts of a conversation about) ideas of conversation, and investigations of what it is to have an interest in your own experience."⁴⁸

The parenthetical qualifications in this passage suggest the density the term "conversation" has for Cavell, embedding multiple layers of history and meaning, a genealogy. He sees the intense focus on talk as the fundamental mode of married life in the Hollywood screwballs he studies as reactivating Milton's definition of marriage as much as it reactivates the generic structure of some of Shakespeare's late romantic comedies. And Cavell describes his interpretative relation to these films as itself a kind of conversation, a conversation that is "revelatory of the conversation within film," which are themselves in a conversation about conversation—"these

films are themselves investigations of (parts of a conversation about) ideas of conversation”—not least conversations that stretch back to Shakespeare and Milton.

This definition of method models criticism as an ongoing and experiential relationship with cultural objects and experiences in a way that pushes subtly against what otherwise seem like the heteronormative and monogamous assumptions about marriage that Cavell tacitly accepts from this tradition, at least in *Pursuits of Happiness*. (He will push beyond the heteronormative in *Contesting Tears*, not least through a conversation with Sedgwick.)⁴⁹ For Cavell, a couple can have conversations with each other but also with texts that are in conversation with other texts across time and space and also with other critics who are in conversation about them. These conversations both are and are not marriages. This intervention in the Miltonic concept of marriage as conversation perhaps detaches the “pursuit of happiness” from the couple form and creates conversations across texts and between critics.

But Cavellian conversation, insofar as it remains in touch with Milton, also bears with it the important possibility of divorce. When do we need to break up with others we’ve tried to be in conversation with, authors, texts, generic models, and critics? That’s partly a question that can only be answered when the members of that “we” are specified, of course. But it’s also a question of where “critique” might fit in a conversational method, both critique of the objects studied and critique of a critic entering into conversation with them.

And the attempt to fit critique into our conversation about critical conversation might in the end help us get out of the reiterative conversations about “critique” versus “postcritique” that increasingly risk becoming a cyclical distraction from the work of producing good criticism. As David Kurnick has argued, postcritique and its kindred modes have tended to make their interventions in “vehemently, even melodramatically, binarized terms”: “in one corner: violence, aggression, mastery, delusions of grandeur,” and other bywords for critique, and, “in the other,” reparative reading or surface reading or postcritique, with its claims of “modesty, openness, attention, curiosity, receptiveness.”⁵⁰ Kurnick’s sense of melodrama is perhaps not so far from Cavell’s specification of its “negations of communication, of what I call conversation”; in the melodramatic binarizing of method that Kurnick describes in postcritique and its forbears, communication fails. Participants in the melodrama become incapable of acknowledging the real motives and hopes of critical methodology and turn to caricaturing, reducing others to type.⁵¹ This melodramatic caricaturing of critical

method, what Kurnick calls “moralized characterology,” has a corollary in the kind of reductive projections, idealizing or criminalizing, that Cavell and I see *The Lady Eve* as being critical of: failures of acknowledgment. Likewise, in his book on Hollywood melodramas, Cavell refers to characters in films where remarriage is impossible as foundering in, or having imposed on them, a “fixation of images” that makes real conversation between complex, opaque individuals—or between a critic and their object—impossible.⁵² At the same time, as Jean’s ambivalent desire to become Charles’s idealized vision of her suggests, ideals and types can be heuristics, points of sometimes useful identification, if we maintain an awareness that they are not determinant or defining or exhaustive: if we remember that critical methods, even simplified versions of themselves, are tools that we can use rather than necessarily people that we are. (This lesson from *The Lady Eve* reveals its difference from a later tragedy of remarriage that could be said to enter into conversation with it, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* from 1958, in which the imposition of an idealized type works to erase—and eventually kill—the particularity of the woman made to conform to it.) Sometimes we need to be paranoid readers, sometimes it is more useful to be reparative ones, and sometimes we can allow ourselves or feel ourselves drifting between the two. We shouldn’t attach ourselves to one idealized methodology and make it our identity, although we also shouldn’t be so casual with our methods that we do not make commitments. We can do critique and, as Berlant has suggested with reference to Cavell, “extend a nonmastering relation to the enigma of that object that performs our obligation to it by way of a looseness that, from the perspective of drama, can constitute a formally comic scene or make routes within the impossible.”⁵³

Cavellian conversation as I understand it can break the cycle of vengeful payback and caricaturing that has become overly fixed in the method wars as they continue to inflect work produced in literary and (to a lesser extent) cinema and media studies. Or, to take a lesson from my reading of *The Lady Eve*, Cavellian conversation can felicitously reemerge in moments when the reiteratively vengeful cycles of the method wars lead to breakdowns in conversation, failures to acknowledge the complexity of others, and reductive impositions of types. Kurnick helpfully shows, for example, how Felski’s melodramatic articulation of postcritique reduces figures she associates with critique to types in a failure to acknowledge the complexity and variety of their work and their ethos. Kurnick’s account of Foucault, to give just one instance, demonstrates how Felski’s drive to reduce him to a figure of “willed impersonality” elides his status “as an object of mourning and a subject of feeling.”

“as a primary interlocutor for queer theory, as the most prominent gay intellectual killed by the plague,” and as an author who often made explicit how his “taste” and his “pleasure” informed his work.⁵⁴ Conversations between opposed parties—critical Foucauldians and postcritical Felskians—could perhaps lead to a deeper acknowledgment of how critique can work in tandem with pleasure and attachment or how (in David Carroll Simon’s formulation) critique and postcritique alike could be considered as forms of “passing feeling rather than settled disposition,” not so much methodological tools as “experiences we can trust to give way to other ones.”⁵⁵ Consider the work of D. A. Miller, who has shown a variety of methodological dispositions and moods across a career that has toggled between literary and film studies. Depicted as an arch paranoid reader for Foucauldian crimes committed across *The Novel and the Police* in Sedgwick’s famous “Paranoid Reading” essay, Miller came to theorize close reading in what could be called hyperbolically postcritical terms (“an almost infantile desire to be close, period, as close as one can get, without literal plagiarism, to merging with the mother-text”) and then developed a theory of “too close” reading of Alfred Hitchcock’s films that synthesizes loving obsession and exposure of what is hidden (albeit in plain view), critical virtuosity, and “the various mental states of surprise, suspense, suspicion, discovery, dizziness, disappointment, isolation, and folly entailed in looking at Hitchcock [and any other text] too closely.”⁵⁶

Conversation as Cavell theorizes it, via Shakespeare, Milton, and the Hollywood films he is so attached to, allows us a way to become attached to and involved in artworks, both their surfaces and their depths, while at the same time realizing that those objects may themselves be doing critique (like *The Lady Eve*’s critique of idealizing attachments). These artworks may also, in turn, require critique—an examination of their limitations, or of what they can’t or won’t account for on their own—that need not constitute skepticism.⁵⁷ Cavellian conversation, rooted in a Miltonic theory of marriage and divorce, offers us a way of being critical without totalizing skepticism of our objects, or at least offers us a mode of critique that guards against that skepticism by remaining open to art objects and learning to acknowledge what they know.⁵⁸ Having a real conversation about the benefits and drawbacks of different kinds of criticism, without caricaturing and moralizing about our opponents, will go a long way. If we can do that, as Jean says at the end of *The Lady Eve*, “we’ll work it out somehow,” at least at the level of method (it obviously won’t solve the political and economic causes of the crisis in the humanities). Whether that working out

leads to a critical remarriage or a divorce of mutual unintelligibility is something we will need to work out in conversation.

Notes

This essay began in epistolary exchange with Katie Kadue (my real ideal) and developed in conversation with her. It benefited from Ramsey McGlazer's scrupulous eye, from James Leo Cahill's editorial feedback, and from the anonymous reviewers for *Discourse*. Thanks are due as well to the attendees of the Renaissance Project symposium at Pomona College in June 2022.

1. *The Lady Eve*, directed by Preston Sturges (1941; The Criterion Collection, 2020). All images and dialogue discussed in this article are from this source.

2. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

3. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11–12.

4. See, e.g., Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 238–66; Stanley Cavell, "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance," in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 329–496 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 109.

5. Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): v. For postcritique's influence in the pages of *Discourse*, see Jennifer Fay's suggestion of resonances between Cavell and Felski in her attempt to move beyond "media studies' still entrenched paradigms of critique" in "Must We Mean What We Film? Stanley Cavell and the Candid Camera," *Discourse* 42, nos. 1–2 (2020): 112–39. I will return to Fay's suggestion. Felski has herself repeatedly cited the film scholar Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach to film as an inspiration. And Felski was a touchstone in "The State of Method in Cinema and Media Studies" roundtable (chaired by Nicholas Baer and Pardis Dabashi) at the annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in 2023. The 2023 special issue of *Discourse* titled "Paranoia and New Attentional Forms" (45, no. 3) demonstrates a variety of different ways that cinema and media studies is engaging today with the paranoid versus reparative iteration of these method wars, most extensively in the contribution by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Taking the Reparative Pill: Cyberspace, Machine Learning, and the Closure of the Real" (280–308). For another fascinating recent analysis of Sedgwick's concepts of "paranoia" and "repair" in an interpretation of Roberto Rossellini's *Europa '51*, see Ramsey McGlazer, "Rossellini beyond Repair," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 35, no. 1 (2024): 1–42.

6. David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020), 349–74.

7. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 5–6. Conversation as "the *fact* of marriage" is a definition Cavell borrows from John Milton's divorce tracts, to which I will return.

8. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 19.

9. Cavell, 34.

10. This definition comes from the famous meditation on *King Lear* in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 324.

11. Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

12. Cavell, "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance," 451–58.

13. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–6.

14. The exception is Cavell's interpretation of *It Happened One Night*, which he begins with some general comments about his work on skepticism (*Pursuits of Happiness*, 73–80) that become especially important for his commentary about knowledge and acknowledgment in that film (108–9).

15. Cavell, "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winters Tale*," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 197.

16. Cavell, "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winters Tale*," 198.

17. Cavell finds this line from Freud first as an epigraph to his chapter on *The Lady Eve* (*Pursuits of Happiness*, 43) and then refinds it later in his interpretation of *The Philadelphia Story* (149).

18. On *The Lady Eve* as "a reasonably clear sketch both of the generic and Shakespearean dimensions of the task [Cavell] set [himself]," see Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 34. On Cavell's theory of genre as articulated for his study of the Hollywood comedies of remarriage, see *Pursuits of Happiness*, 28–29. I analyze below Cavell's comment on revenge at the end of his interpretation of *The Lady Eve*.

19. Exploring the other films Cavell studies is beyond the scope of this essay. For brief mention of revenge in relation to those other films, see Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 109 (on Capra's *It Happened One Night*), 214 (on Cukor's *Adam's Rib*), and 252 and 261–62 (on McCarey's *The Awful Truth*).

20. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 109.

21. Cavell, 56. Thirteen years later in *Contesting Tears*, Cavell will suggestively if obliquely look back on *Pursuits of Happiness* and refocus its concerns as precisely the intersection of repetition and revenge, via Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, although I think this remains mostly implicit in *Pursuits of Happiness*: "The transformation of incestuous knowledge into erotic exchange [such as Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant having grown up together before they were married in *The Philadelphia Story*] is a function of something I call the achievement of the daily, of the diurnal, the putting together of night and day (as classical comedy puts together the seasons of the year), a process of willing repetition whose concept is the domestic, or marriage, however surprising the images of marriage become in these films. 'Repetition' is the title Kierkegaard gives to his thoughts about the faith required in achieving marriage; and the willing acceptance of repetition[,] or rather eternal recurrence, is the recipe Nietzsche discovered as the antidote for our otherwise fated future nihilism, the thing Nietzsche calls 'the revenge against time and its 'It was'—a revenge itself constituting a last effort not to die of nostalgia" (82–83). This passage from *Contesting Tears* interestingly repeats a series of comments about Nietzsche and revenge from *Pursuits of Happiness* (see 262) but makes repetition much more central.

22. Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television," *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 81.

23. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 5: “So it is part of the idea of a genre I am working with that both the specific relevant ‘features’ of the genre and the general candidacy of an individual film for membership in the genre are radically open-ended.” A reviewer of this essay suggested that Cavell’s thinking about seriality and genre might be put into conversation with Judith Butler’s conception of gender identity and repetition, and this seems to me especially suggestive in relation to Butler’s insight that “the ‘I’ is the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence,” and thus “there is no ‘I’ that pervades the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that ‘I.’” Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 311. To blend Cavell and Butler’s terms, the repetitions of features of a genre over various instances contest the coherence of that genre and show it to be radically open-ended.

24. One could say something similar about a number of less paradigmatic revenge tragedies that inherit and innovate the ancient Greek and Roman models: in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, one social order is wiped out through a sequence of often mirrored deaths, only for another to be restored at the end of the play. In Spenser’s second book of *The Faerie Queene*, the knight Guyon’s revenge against Acrasia is folded into a structure of political, even imperial, restoration.

25. Thanks to Ramsey McGlazer for worming this line into my ear.

26. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 66.

27. Cavell, 54.

28. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin, 2011), 20.

29. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 48.

30. Nora Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 37–38.

31. Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 315.

32. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 50. This is also the moment when Cavell brings *The Tempest* to bear on *The Lady Eve*, first through a comment on Harry’s “wizard’s robe.” The comparison is apt in many ways, but I think it’s worth noting that rather than expand on the analogy between Jean and Shakespeare’s Miranda, he turns, parenthetically, to “another allusion” or “echo” that comes to mind, drawing a connection between Miranda, Jean, and Katharine Hepburn’s Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story* and so shifting gears from a focus on Prospero/Harry’s magic to Miranda/Jean/Tracy’s wonder at men: “(. . . I am thinking of the late moment of awakening in *The Philadelphia Story*—comparable to that late moment at which Miranda more fully realizes the imminence of her departure into human womanhood and human relationship, exclaiming ‘How beauteous mankind is!’—at which Katharine Hepburn says, in a sudden access of admiration, ‘I think men are wonderful.’)” But Hepburn’s Tracy’s exclamation “I think men are wonderful” seems more general and more, well, full of unequivocal wonder than Jean’s own love for Charles, which remains studded with ambivalence, registered in her response to Charles’s reverie and in this moment of negotiating the difference between the complexity of her identity and history and the simplified “straightness” of Charles’s ideal of her.

33. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

34. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 62–63.

35. Cavell, 63–64. Cavell also suggests parenthetically that “it would be just like Sturges were the object we are shown to be, what it seems to be, a production still from the set of this film.”

36. The overlapping of cinema and the mug shot dates back at least to Wallace McCutcheon’s silent short *Photographing a Female Crook* (1904). See Althea Wasow, “Moving Images/Modern Policing: Silent Cinema and Its Afterlives” (diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2021).

37. James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Da Capo, 1987), 571.

38. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 5–6 (see above in my introduction for the original quotation about *Othello*).

39. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 48.

40. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005), book 9, line 341.

41. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 65.

42. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 309. This later reading of Sturges’s film repeats many of the points of the interpretation in Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness*, so I have not engaged with it much here, but some accounts of specific scenes, such as this one, offer new insights.

43. In literary studies, see, e.g., Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010), 371–91; “Interpretation and its Others,” special issue of *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014), introduced by Rita Felski; and Aaron Hanlon, “Explanation beyond Interpretation,” *Philosophy and Literature* 48, no. 1 (2024): 165–84. This has been a less vexed term for cinema and media studies in the recent past, but “interpretation” has been influentially contested at other moments, as in David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Eric Smoodin, “The History of Film History,” in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, ed. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin, 1–33 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), especially the synthetic comment about interpretation on 18.

44. I find the most illuminating summary and analysis of these various positions in Kurnick’s “A Few Lies,” which engages especially with Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–52.

45. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 5. For more on the comedy of remarriage’s “shadow genres,” see James McFarland, “When There’s No More Room in Hell, Should We Read Stanley Cavell?,” *Discourse* 42, nos. 1–2 (2020): 140–72, particularly 148.

46. John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in *John Milton: Selected Prose*, ed. C.A. Patrides (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 133.

47. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 88; Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in *John Milton*, 133.

48. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 7.

49. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 151–96. For a more critical account of *Contesting Tears* as an attempt to “contain the threat posed by feminist thought,” see Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8–11.

50. Kurnick, “A Few Lies,” 351, 358.

51. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 169.

52. Cavell, 23. In a line that is for Cavell exemplary of melodramatic breakdown in marriage, Paula in George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944) claims, when learning that her husband was already married and never told her, “Then from the beginning there was nothing” (*Contesting Tears*, 6). One could say something similar about the repeated misrecognitions that constitute the ongoing method wars.

53. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 90.

54. Kurnick, “A Few Lies,” 356.

55. David Carroll Simon, “Milton’s Panorama: *Paradise Regained* in the Age of Critique,” *Criticism* 60, no. 4 (2018): 533–55.

56. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 129–32 (and intermittently throughout). Quotations from Miller are drawn, respectively, from his *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 58, and *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 10. Ben Parker’s review of *Hidden Hitchcock* in *Film Quarterly* aptly concludes with the proposal that the book “should not be taken as a turning away from Miller’s more obviously political work on discipline and surveillance (in a Foucauldian sense), or on queerness, the closet, and textual pleasure,” as a throughline of concern with narrative subjectification and the “stutterings of style” can be traced across the varying methods and moods. Ben Parker, review of *Hidden Hitchcock*, in *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 137.

57. On critique as thinking through ways of being limited, see McGlazer, “Rosellini beyond Repair,” 34, which points back to Jennifer Fleissner, “Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism,” in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, 99–126 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

58. Here I pull back from Jennifer Fay’s attempt in “Must We Mean What We Film?” to align Cavell with Rita Felski and against critique. Fay’s extremely subtle reading of Cavell’s “candid canon” of cinema that means “what it says” rather than what it “masks” is compelling and persuasive (121, 115), as is her account of Cavell’s emphasis on filmic revelation in *The World Viewed* (1971) contra the varieties of ideology critique “that would emerge in the 1970s as apparatus theory, the pedagogy of the New Left, and its radical cinemas” (112). But Cavell makes it possible for us to disentangle critique from skepticism in ways that Felski’s caricature of critique does not. I don’t think Cavell’s conception of “skepticism” and Felski’s conception of “critique” should be used interchangeably (and although I don’t take Fay to be

aligning with Felski in any simple way, this could be the indirect implication of Fay's quotation of Felski's "skepticism is dogma" line), and I do not see evidence—in Felski's *Limits of Critique* or in literary or film studies—that a joyless, rote unmasking of literature and film dominates. Likewise, an attention to surfaces and the ordinary need not be opposed to critique. On this, see Ian Smith, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 36–40. On "skepticism as dogma," see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9, quoted in Fay, "Must We Mean What We Film?," 115.