

Divorce in Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Gender Issues are Taken to Court

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Abstract

From its early days to the present time, Hollywood romantic comedy has explored gender issues both by focusing on images of newly born love stories and by dramatizing the complications arising from marital discord and divorce. In this paper, I analyse how a number of recent romantic comedies including *The War of the Roses* (1989), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *The First Wives Club* (1996) have articulated their discourses on gender relations by drawing on specific representations of marital crisis and divorce and particularly how these narratives have addressed the problem of the distribution of power between the sexes in a post-feminist era.

From its early days to the present time Hollywood romantic comedy has explored gender issues not only by focusing on images of newly born love stories but also by dramatising the subsequent complications arising from marital discord and divorce. Films like *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife* (1920), and, later on, *The Awful Truth* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) or *His Girl Friday* (1940) are among the earliest representatives of a specific kind of comedy in which the issue of divorce remains central for the definition of gender identities and sex roles. Separation and divorce are depicted in these remarriage comedies as a brand new start for the romantic couple who, after engaging in a process of individual learning and negotiation, invariably decide to reunite and step back into marriage. Marital breakdown, therefore, is generally described in these films of the 20s, 30s and 40s as an unimportant temporary maladjustment that, once overcome, enables the couple to move into a state of blissful conjugal reaffirmation. As Tina Lent (1995, 331) and Kristine Karnick (1995, 138) have argued, the basic project of these comedies was precisely to sanction and naturalize contemporary love and marriage ideals—as well as the specific division of gender roles underlying such ideals—at a time when the validity of current patterns of coupledness and the legitimacy of wedlock had begun to be questioned by a large number of Americans, as reflected by the mounting divorce rates recorded in the United States between 1910 and 1920 and also in the early 30s.

In the 90s, the Hollywood industry has expanded and reformulated the classical subgenre of remarriage comedy that was so popular between World Wars I and II by producing a number of comedies which, once again, have concentrated on the dislocation of the couple, rather than on its formation, as a means to tackle the issue of gender relationships in today's Western society. It is the aim of this paper to analyse how some recent romantic comedies, including *The War of the Roses* (1989), *Husbands and Wives*

(1992), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *The First Wives Club* (1996), have articulated their discourses on gender relations by drawing again on specific representations of marital crisis and divorce and particularly how these narratives have addressed the problem of the distribution of power between the sexes in a post-feminist era.

Although the general mood of these tales of marriage and divorce ranges from the confessional and at times nearly metaphysical tone of *Husbands and Wives* to the light melodrama of *Mrs. Doubtfire* or the sadistic, tragic overtones characterising *The War of the Roses*, conjugal crisis and the immediate chaos it brings with it always appear to stem in these films from a common source which could be broadly defined as the dissociation of individual identity and romantic commitment or, in other words, the clash between the Self and the Couple. By drawing on the perception of romantic entanglement as the sphere where self identity must be ultimately discovered or rediscovered—an idea that can be traced back to Shakespearean comedy—these Hollywood comedies of the 90s provide the audience with a unified narrative and ideological background against which the dynamics of gender relations and conjugal life are examined.

The partnership between love and self, as Peter Evans and Celestino Deleyto have remarked (1998), stands not just as a key defining feature of the genre of romantic comedy both in its written and filmic forms, but it has also emerged as an essential ruling principle of the modern experience of coupledness and marriage. Given that such a close connection is established, both in fiction and in real life, between the attainment of romantic fulfilment and the construction of identity, it is no surprise that in these 90s comedies the underlying tensions which disrupt marital harmony and problematise the love ideals upon which the legitimacy of wedlock is said to rest are inextricably linked to the problem of the distribution of public and private space between the sexes, that is, to the very definition of male and female (social and individual) identities. Marital conflict, thus, is said to arise in these comedies from the difficulties of one and often both members of the couple to integrate their self-seeking desires within the larger framework of marriage and the family, which inevitably brings to the foreground the issue of identity and particularly of how it is constructed within the sphere of gender relations.

In the Hollywood comedies I intend to analyse, female identity is largely defined both by focusing on the clash between the places traditionally offered to women by patriarchy and the new horizons open to them in post-feminist times and by examining the impact of this tension upon the ideal of heterosexual monogamy. At a superficial level, all these narratives appear to endorse notions of womanhood clearly detached from patriarchal models of female submission and self-sacrifice traditionally connected to motherhood, wifehood and domesticity, basically by featuring female protagonists who strive to define themselves as self-sufficient, independent individuals both in the private and in the public sphere. For instance, in *The War of the Roses*, Barbara Rose (Kathleen Turner), after spending most of her youth working as a domestic manager, eventually decides to search for self-fulfilment by stepping outside the home and creating a catering company all by herself, a decision which her husband Oliver (Michael Douglas) regards as silly and ridiculous. In fact, it is precisely Oliver's refusal to treat her as a subject,

rather than as a commodified object, that makes her realise how constrained she is in her marriage and how much she needs to run away from it in order to recover the sense of self she has gradually lost while exclusively acting as a pleasing wife and a nurturing mother. In this sense, Barbara's right and capacity to pursue interests other than those related to the home and the family as well as Oliver's inability to come to terms with a post-feminist division of gender roles that entails a more egalitarian distribution of public and private space between men and women are, no doubt, explicitly acknowledged in the narrative. However, significantly enough, Barbara's determination to reconstruct her identity both by entering the work market and by refusing to submit to her husband's self-centred desires is said to result in chaos and death, which, in my view, largely undermines the film's apparent endorsement of women's independence and gender equality.

In *Mrs. Doubtfire* the characterisation of Miranda Hillard (Sally Field) as a victim of the pressure to maintain the difficult balance of being a responsible, dutiful mother and housewife, a reliable partner and a good professional with very little help and emotional support from her husband Daniel (Robin Williams) can also be said to imply a critical attitude on the part of the narrative regarding the social and psychological constraints women still have to endure in the 90s as a result of gender inequality. The film, however, as occurs in *The War of the Roses*, seems to problematise the very definition of female identity that it apparently attempts to validate as acceptable and desirable for post-feminist audiences. By highlighting Miranda's incapacity to meet the demands of career and family life, both within and outside wedlock, and by defining her access to the work market not as a personal choice but as an imposition mainly motivated by economic reasons, as she herself explains, the narrative would be indirectly reinforcing traditional views on womanhood as essentially linked to domesticity alone, a plainly conservative attitude that is mainly undercut by keeping an intense focus on a redefined notion of masculinity no longer detached from childcare and household duties.

Far more explicitly than *The War of the Roses* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The First Wives Club* celebrates female emotional autonomy and women's independence and highlights their centrality in the context of post-feminist relationships. In *The First Wives Club* marriage failure is also said to go hand in hand with intense feelings of self disintegration and personal frustration affecting the female protagonists, Annie (Diane Keaton), Ellys (Goldie Hawn) and Brenda (Bette Miller), three middle-aged women who have devoted themselves to supporting their husbands and to taking care of their families and, in so doing, have forgotten to explore and develop their own individual identities. From the very beginning, the film warns the spectator about the tragic consequences of not being able to cultivate the Self within the Couple, an inability which, as Cynthia's suicide illustrates, is said to result in self-destruction and death. As the narrative progresses, Annie, Ellys and Brenda undergo a process of self-reaffirmation that enables them to create a space in which they can express their feelings, face their anxieties and fight for their dreams, a space that had previously been denied them on account of their 'duties' as mothers and wives.

Openly concerned with drawing a politically correct picture of womanhood, the

film strives to outline not a single, monolithic definition of post-feminist female identity, but rather it displays a series of sketches of what it may be like to be a woman in the 90s, focusing, however mildly, on issues that range from the impact of the contemporary cult of youth and the body upon women's lives to lesbianism. Initially characterised as a sort of irrational drive to take revenge on the opposite sex by ruining the lives of their ex-husbands, the process of discovery of a new self in which the three female protagonists of *The First Wives Club* engage eventually reflects a less ambiguous ideological positioning than those of *The War of the Roses* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, in the sense that the narrative does not problematise women's achievement of autonomy and independence as the other two comedies do. This is ultimately reflected through the lyrics of the final song *Annie*, Ellys and Brenda sing triumphantly, which express both their refusal to be treated like objects and their determination to abide by their own rules.

If the construction of female identity is emphatically connected in these 90s Hollywood comedies to the process of redefinition of women's space in society and the resulting socio-cultural transformations, such is also the case with the articulation of male identity, which in the films under discussion is invariably coded in terms of men's capacity to adjust to the changes concerning the position of women in the public and private realms. In this sense, Oliver Rose and Daniel Hillard, the protagonists of *The War of the Roses* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* respectively, can be said to embody two diverging models of masculinity that, in spite of their differences, clearly illustrate the centrality of the issue of women's liberation in the contemporary male search for identity. Oliver Rose, the Michael Douglas character, derives his sense of self from strong feelings of being in control of everything that surrounds him, including his wife, an attitude which characterises him as a representative of the traditional masculine myth that, as Antony Easthope has explained (1992, 46), is essentially based on notions of control, mastery and domination. For him, women's detachment from domestic management and, most importantly, women's search for individual autonomy and independence stand as a dangerous disruption of the otherwise well-balanced traditional order of things, an ideological standpoint which, as I have suggested, the film, however ambiguously, also seems to endorse. As he is definitely displaced from the centre of Barbara's life and, thus, starts losing those feelings of controlling superiority that granted him a unified sense of self, Oliver clings to his family-provider role in order to claim the ownership of the house in a final attempt to reassert both his power and his identity. Judging from the final remarks of the narrator of the story, Gavin, such a model of masculinity has no place in today's society for it can only promote both individual and social chaos. According to Gavin, a far more tolerant male type is demanded instead, one who is able to respect women's decisions and desires and act accordingly. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the issue of the formation of male identity in the light of women's expanded freedoms emerges, no doubt, as the central topic for discussion throughout the narrative. Unlike Oliver, Daniel appears to be willing to move in the direction of gender equality by taking up responsibilities traditionally labelled 'female', such as those related to childcare and domestic matters. In this film, masculinity is largely equated to fathering, a cultural trend that, in my view, has

recently started to make its way into a considerable number of Hollywood productions. As Susan Jeffords has put it (1993, 254), fathering appears as 'the vehicle for portraying masculine emotions, ethics and commitments, and for re-directing masculine characterisations from spectacular achievements to domestic triumphs', a strategy that, no doubt, is extensively used in *Mrs. Doubtfire* as a means to produce positive male images.

Unlike *The War of the Roses*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *The First Wives Club*, Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives* does not address the issue of the definition of gender identities and sex roles by focusing on the work/domesticity dichotomy and its fluctuations within the context of gender relations. Instead, Allen's film concentrates on sexuality as the most controversial arena in which men and women come to define themselves in the 1990s. In *Husbands and Wives* marital conflict is said to arise mainly from sexual dissatisfaction on the part of one or both partners, as happens to Jack and Sally, and from mutual emotional coldness and a lack of erotic longing, as is the case with Judith and Gabe, who can never find the time to support each other emotionally or to make love. In Allen's film, the centrality of sex for the definition of identity is particularly relevant to the male protagonists, Jack and Gabe, who at some point attempt to reassert their masculinity and their sense of self by proving their sexual allure to themselves in relationships with younger women. The narrative, however, firmly disavows the link between erotic performance and the male self, suggesting in turn that men should search for identity in other realms apart from that of sexuality, as Jack and Sally's reconciliation and Gabe's position at the end of the film illustrate. A similar statement is made in *The First Wives Club* through the film's final integration of Mortie, Brenda's ex-husband, in the harmonious circle of the comic ending once he has abandoned his pursuit of everlasting youth through sex and has begun to revitalize his former union with Brenda. By depicting the relationships Brenda's and Ellys's ex-husbands establish with young women—relationships that are exclusively structured around sex, professional and economic power—in a negative light, the narrative emphasises the need to do away with the link traditionally established between masculinity, financial control and virility, and also with female objectification, as essential steps towards a redefinition of gender identities that may entail a greater degree of equality between the sexes. Furthermore, as Judith and Michael and also Jack and Sally state at the end of *Husbands and Wives*, what may ensure both individual and romantic fulfilment and also marital harmony is nothing but a shared disposition to understand each other's idiosyncrasies as well as the mutual recognition of men and women as active subjects who must always be allowed to pursue their personal interests and to explore their needs and desires, no matter whether the final choice is to remain single like Gabe, to remarry like Jack and Sally or to marry a new partner like Judith in *Husbands and Wives*, to combine work outside home and family life like Miranda in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and Barbara in *The War of the Roses* or to privilege the experience of wifehood and motherhood over career like Brenda in *The First Wives Club*.

Often oscillating between an enthusiastic endorsement of feminist claims for gender equality and a more or less explicit residual nostalgia for the traditional division

of sex roles and specifically for romantic ideals of the past—a trend that, according to Steven Seidman (1991, 195) has recently emerged within the US culture of intimacy as part of the current neo-conservative discourses on gender relations—I would conclude that these Hollywood divorce comedies of the 90s not only attest to the heightened value attached to individual identity within the contemporary dynamics of romantic attachments and conjugal life, but they also seem to make a self-conscious attempt at blurring former gender identity boundaries in order to give way to less constrained male and female models that can be regarded as acceptable and desirable for the audiences of a post-feminist era, even if at times they end up falling back into the old stereotypes they mean to reformulate.

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