

Philip Barry and the Yankee Aristocracy

Steve Vineberg

Here, as I understand them, are the conventions of high comedy (also known as comedy of manners):

- (1) It takes place among an aristocracy of some kind—often, but not always, an aristocracy of money.
- (2) The exclusive club to which the protagonists belong has a definite set of rules (or mores) that can't be transgressed.
- (3) The characters tend to take trivialities very seriously and approach serious matters with great humor.¹
- (4) Sex is discussed openly; often, in fact, it's the subject of high comedy. Appropriately, high comedy often begins in sex farce.
- (5) The proof of class—the characters' calling card—is their wit, and their natural environment is language, which they employ with elegance.
- (6) High comedy itself is a very delicately crafted thing—a soufflé. In order to work it must be as light as gossamer and seem easy and slight and entirely superficial. What the finest high comedies accomplish is to seem superficial while actually being profound. But if you play a high comedy too seriously—if you give in to the sadness at its heart—then you wreck it.
- (7) In traditional high comedies—like *The School for Scandal* or *The Game of Love and Chance* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*—the characters are wealthy enough to be able to do what they want (always providing they don't cross class boundaries). Their lives are charmed; they are fated to move towards a happy ending. And since comedy of manners is conventionally about the manners of aristocrats, by tradition its attitude is complacent and conservative. Twentieth-century comedy of manners is more complicated, however—partly by the variety of aristocracies to which the characters can belong, not all of which guarantee wealth and some of which (like the bohemian clique that claims the three protagonists of Coward's *Design for Living*) embrace fairly radical ideas; and partly by the omnipresence of what Noel Coward referred to in one of his lyrics as “those twentieth-century blues.”
- (8) Comedy of manners has a distinctive style—highly polished, very brittle,

Steve Vineberg is a professor of theater and film at Holy Cross College and is the author of *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style* and *No Surprises, Please: Movies in the Reagan Decade*. His work is published frequently in *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Perfect Vision*, and *The Oxford American*.

tremendously elegant and graceful—and, in its modern version, a distinctive tone—comic, somewhat sardonic, somewhat satiric, with an aftertaste of melancholy. It's the tone of characters who pretend to be carefree and free-spirited but in truth care passionately and mourn their losses with a heavy heart. In the midst of a commitment to the fleeting, the ephemeral, is the acknowledgement of the bitter taste of death.

When most of us think of high comedy, we think of something like *The Importance of Being Earnest* or the plays of Noel Coward. But Americans have had our own high comic playwrights, whose period of popularity came between the two World Wars. As Americans, however, their approach to class, one of the key elements of the genre, is necessarily—at least superficially—more liberal and modern. That's what makes Philip Barry such a strange case. My most gifted student, Jonathan Hastings, in his thesis on modern comedy, described the opening image of George Cukor's 1940 movie version of Barry's most famous play, *The Philadelphia Story*: "... seen behind the credits is a perfectly symmetrical mansion, a symbol of old monied aristocracy. The next image is the Liberty Bell, an icon both of Philadelphia and of the ideal of American democracy and individuality. The film tries to reconcile these two images, and in doing so presents a picture of private life as different from that experienced by the British in Coward's play."²² Both *The Philadelphia Story*, which was written in 1938, and *Holiday*, written in 1928 and filmed in 1938 by Cukor (it was the second movie version, but the only one worth discussing), represent the approach of a twentieth-century American highcomic playwright—and one who was, like Richard Brinsley Sheridan, to the manor born—to the notion of a Yankee aristocracy.

As Americans, we're not supposed to believe in the inflexibility of class boundaries; therefore the heroes of Barry's plays are restless, uncomfortable with their aristocratic status or with the demands it places on their behavior, or else non-aristocrats who have somehow been passed into the club and feel compelled to comment on its strangeness. Both *Holiday* and *The Philadelphia Story* are premised, at least partly, on the apparent intrusion of an outsider into the sheltered circle of old money. In *Holiday*, Julia Seton, the elder daughter of a Manhattan banking family, falls in love with a young man named Johnny Case who comes from (relative) poverty. When Julia introduces him to her stuffy father, Edward, the older man naturally feels around for Case's roots, but Julia's suitor cuts his probing short:

My mother and father died when I was quite young. My father had a small grocery store in Baltimore, which he was never able to make a go of. He left a number of debts which my mother worked very hard to clear up. I was the only child, and I wasn't in a position to help very much. She died the May before my

sixteenth birthday. . . . I hadn't any connections, except for an uncle who's in the roofing business in Wilmington. He wasn't much good, though—he was inclined to get drunk—still is . . . But I was what was called a bright boy, and I managed to wangle a couple of scholarships. They helped a good deal in school and college, and there were always plenty of ways to make up the difference. In term-time I usually ran eating-joints and typed lecture notes. In summers I sold aluminum pots and pans . . . or worked in a factory or on a newspaper. Once I got myself engaged as a tutor. That was pretty unpleasant. Then there were department stores at Christmas and florists at Easter. During law school I slept all night on a couch in a doctor's office, and got fifteen a week for it. That was soft. . . . Anything else, sir?³

This onslaught of reality makes Edward weak, but everyone else in the room—Julia and her siblings, Ned and Linda—and of course everyone in the audience, is cheering for Johnny. He's a Horatio Alger hero: with ingenuity and hard work, he's landed in a top-drawer New York law firm and made himself a bundle on the stock market. And once Edward gets over his initial nervousness about handing his daughter over to a young man of no background, he comes around to Julia's way of thinking. She recognizes in Johnny the fiber that led her grandfather, the original author of the Seton millions, up the mountain of financial success.

But Julia's effort to sell her fiancé to her cautious, conservative papa isn't the conflict of the play. Even with the price of admission to the Seton club in his pocketbook, Johnny is no ordinary swell. He isn't interested in settling down right away and concentrating on making his money multiply. What he has in mind is a holiday, to "try to find out who I am and what I am and what goes on and what about it—now while I'm young, and feel good all the time."⁴ This plan is, of course, a slap in the face to his prospective father-in-law, who can't imagine anything more exciting than making scads of money and who equates a holiday for the purpose of self-exploration with sloth. And Julia, whom Johnny misunderstood to be a soulmate, sides with her father. It's Linda, her kid sister, who perceives the value of his scheme—Linda, who has always felt like a misfit in her own family, who finds the air of their uptown mansion suffocating, who realizes, with intensifying fervency and certainty as the play goes on, that she'll never discover who *she* is until she can get away from her family. Barry draws the lines very clearly in this play, but they're not precisely class lines—they divide those with positive values from those with negative ones. So the elder Seton, who not only lacks the imagination to see the benefit of an alternative lifestyle but is essentially corrupted by greed for money, and Julia, who can only admire Johnny as long as he's adhering

to the Seton standards for how to conduct your life, are carefully distinguished from Johnny, Linda, and their common friends the Potters, who are educated and witty and wise (but by no means rich). What Barry does here is very unusual. He sets up a conventional aristocracy at the beginning, tricks us into thinking that he wants Johnny to gain entrance to it, and then creates a *second* aristocracy that is identified not by money, but by wit, intelligence, education, culture, playfulness, liberality, flexibility and discrimination (in the best sense). This is, of course, the club to which we would desire to belong. And in Cukor's film, we know it's worth belonging to—and that it is indeed a highly selective club—because it boasts Cary Grant (as Johnny) and Katharine Hepburn (as Linda) among its members. (The flaw in *Holiday*—it's hard to buy the notion that Johnny could ever have believed that the rather repugnant Julia was his match—is both embodied in and exacerbated by the casting of the 1938 movie version. When Hepburn and Grant are on screen together, we see that there can be no other woman for Johnny Case.) At the end of the play, after Julia has given up on Johnny, Linda, who values him for the very qualities that, ultimately, Julia despises, determines to take her sister's place on Johnny's holiday. Of course, the future they're tumbling into is full of adventure but not hardship. Remember that Linda is an heiress and Johnny just made a killing on Wall Street. It's a romantic-comedy finish in a high-comedy world.

The most intriguing character in *Holiday* is Ned Seton, Julia and Linda's brother. As the only son, Ned, who wanted to become a musician, has been forced to enter his father's business, and his hatred of it has driven him to drink. The closest the play comes to a tragic figure, he's Barry's example of what happens to a young man or woman of spirit who assents to being cowed by Edward Seton; he also provides the touch of melancholy that we find in many modern high comedies. Before running off to join Johnny on the ship to Europe, Linda turns to Ned, whom she adores, and invites him to join them. He's tempted, but he's too weak to defy his father. In the fine screenplay by Donald Ogden Stewart and Sidney Buchman, which tones up scenes like this one, when Linda promises she'll be back for Ned, he answers, "I'll be here"—it's the best he can manage. (Viewers of the movie are likely to recall the expressiveness Lew Ayres, a most affecting Ned, brings to this exchange.) Ned is the play's most serious claim to being a critique of the aristocracy. In every other way, Barry's play, wonderful as it is, ends up fudging what presents itself as an American/democratic assault on the traditional/conservative stance of high comedy.

The Philadelphia Story, which takes place in the world of Philadelphia high society, introduces two outsiders. The protagonist, Tracy Lord (Barry wrote the part for Katharine Hepburn, who played it on both stage and screen), is about to marry for the second time. Her first husband, C. Dexter Haven, was an aristocrat like herself; the second, George Kittredge, comes from humbler roots, but like Johnny Case, he's pulled himself up by his proverbial bootstraps. But Kittredge is no

Johnny Case—a point that the movie makes immediately when we see Cary Grant as Dexter and the bland M-G-M contract player John Howard as George. Case deserves to belong to the finest club in the world. George is a social climber and a snob whose vision of Tracy, as it turns out, is as a symbol of virtue rather than as a partner or a human being: “We’re going to represent something, Tracy—something straight and sound and fine. You’re like some marvelous, distant . . . queen.”⁵ More than that, she’s meant to reflect his image of himself as a member of the ruling class; with her on his arm, George believes, a man like C. Dexter Haven will no longer be so condescending to him. He’s wrong, of course—Dexter sees right through him. When Dexter suggests that Tracy is marrying beneath herself, she’s shocked that he should make so classist a remark, but he corrects her: “You could marry Mac, the night-watchman, and I’d cheer for you.”⁶ Dexter is the Philip Barry sort of aristocrat ~ the world he travels in runs according to a set of values, not a set of rules, just like the world Linda Seton chooses in *Holiday*.

Kittredge is rather a straw figure—more so than Julia Seton, though they occupy the same position in Barry’s schema (though she’s more horrifying). The likable outsider in *The Philadelphia Story* is Macaulay (Mike) Connor, the tabloid journalist who, along with his photographer girl friend Liz Imbrie, infiltrates Tracy’s wedding weekend. Mike (played by Jimmy Stewart in Cukor’s film) has taken this loathsome job merely for pay; he’s really a fiction writer who’s written a book of stories, one of which derives its title from a Spanish proverb, “With the Rich and Mighty always a little Patience.” Mike’s point of view about the moneyed classes—that they’re inherently foolish, living according to a world view that is hopelessly out of date—appears to challenge the high society of the play in a way that Kittredge, who courts that society until he feels he’s being rejected by it, could never plausibly do. And the challenge seems to complicate the issue, because the Lords’s world isn’t like that of the Setons—it’s represented by Dexter, and by Tracy’s parents, both of whom Barry presents sympathetically (even though a sexual indiscretion on her father’s part has temporarily unsettled their marriage). The world of *The Philadelphia Story* is liberal in attitude, and though everyone who lives in it has money, no one worships it in the way the Setons do. So if the play is going to take Mike’s objections seriously, then its portrait of the aristocracy will have to be more complex and surprising than we’re used to in high comedy.

But though Barry loves Connor, he doesn’t embrace his ideas about the rich; he depicts them as biases. Connor arrives prepared to despise his subjects and ends up not only revising his opinion of the bride’s family but actually falling in love with the bride. Barry parallels Mike Connor’s development with that of Tracy herself. Though the object of three men’s adoration, including her ex-husband’s, Tracy is a mass of prejudices. It’s clear that she and Dexter share the blame for the mess they made of their marriage, but she identifies his alcoholism—and Dexter himself—as the villain. His weakness shriveled her compassion rather

than engaging it, just as her father's infidelities have turned her against him, even though her mother sees them as an understandable struggle against growing old and warns Tracy that they're none of her business. "You'll never be a first class woman or a first class human being," Dexter tells Tracy, "till you have learned to have some small regard for human frailty."⁷ So Tracy has to stumble a little. On the eve of her wedding, she gets drunk—something she's done only once before in her life, and afterwards she blocked it out—and she allows herself to probe her attraction to Mike long enough for one passionate kiss. That drunk and that kiss bring her down to earth; and the priggish, intolerant reaction they draw from George demonstrates definitely that he's not the man for her. He acts in a way that reflects her own worst impulses; his response helps to lead her away from them. "You're too good for me, George. You're a hundred times too good," she explains as she calls off their marriage. "And I'd make you most unhappy, most—That is, I'd do my best to."⁸

And just as Tracy has to find her own humanity by embracing weakness, growing into the "first class woman" and "first class human being" Dexter (who has grown out of his drinking phrase) has been awaiting, so Mike has to grow past his prejudices. Gloriously sloshed, Tracy gives him a lesson in seeing beyond class:

Holy suds, what have "classes" to do with it? . . . What do they matter—except for the people in them? . . . Mac, the night-watchman, is a prince among men and Joey, the stable-boy, is a rat. Uncle Hugh is a saint. Uncle Willie's a pincher. . . . There aren't any rules about human beings, that's all!⁹

She also tells him that he's intolerant—that "you can't be a first-rate writer or a first-rate human being until you learn to have some small regard for—"¹⁰ And then she stops herself in mid-sentence when she realizes what she's saying, and where she got it from. Once again Barry effectively mutes his critique of the aristocracy, this time by exposing Mike's attitude toward them as snobbishness and inexperience, Connor learns his lesson. And he doesn't get Tracy in the end; how could he, when she and Dexter—Hepburn and Grant—are fashioned for each other? He leaves with his resilient photographer, Liz, who's a far better match for him. Mac the night-watchman be damned; all the heroes in *The Philadelphia Story* seek out their own kind.

The spokesman for the outsiders in Barry—those born without money—might be Richard, the composer in the 1927 *Paris Bound* who, like Macaulay Connor, falls unexpectedly in love with an aristocrat. He tells her:

. . . You're the kind of people I've resented all my life. I never expected to believe that you could be so—so damned valuable. I used to curse into my beard whenever I passed a house like this. I used to spit on the pavement whenever a decent-looking motor-car passed me. I don't anymore, because I've found two among you whom I know to be of absolutely first importance in all the ways I value. You're hard in the right places, you're wise with a most beautiful wisdom and for your life as you live it, I've nothing but salutes and cheers. You're a revelation to me, Mary.¹¹

“For your life as you live it”—that seems to be the key. The open-ended, exploratory approach to life that Johnny and Linda share in *Holiday*, while Edward and Julia evidently feel threatened by it, is the ethic that both Tracy and Mike adopt by the end of *The Philadelphia Story*, and that finally distances Tracy from George Kittredge. Barry may not have been able to surmount his own background entirely, even in *Holiday*, where he took on the Edward Setons in whose drawing rooms he must have spent many youthful hours. But he did promote an ideal aristocracy of the mind and the heart, and its prime virtue was the ability to shake off prejudices. “I don't know. —Oh, I don't know anything any more!” Tracy moans to Dexter as she considers the wedding she's just botched. “That sounds very hopeful,” Dexter replies. “That's just fine.”¹²

Notes

1. This is a point that the American high comedy playwright S.N. Behrman made in a 1952 *New York Times* article called “What Makes Comedy High?” The piece is reprinted in *The Passionate Player: A Scrapbook*, ed. George Oppenheimer (New York: Viking Press, 1958) 241-245.

2. Jonathan Hastings, *Towards a Sense of Modern Comedy in Film and Dramatic Literature*, unpublished undergraduate thesis, 1998, 49.

3. Philip Barry, *Holiday*, in *Famous American Plays of the 1920s*, ed. Kenneth Macgowan (New York: Dell, 1959) 444-445.

4. 474.

5. Philip Barry, *The Philadelphia Story* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc.) 71.

6. 66.

7. 67.

8. 158.

9. 98-99.

10. 98.

11. Philip Barry, *Paris Bound*, in *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the American Theatre, Early*

Series, ed. John Gassner (New York: Crown, 1949) 272.

12. Barry, *The Philadelphia Story* 148.