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## "Italians" Know Nothing About Love: The Marx Brothers as Guardian Angels of Young Couple in Jeopardy

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## CHAPTER NINE

### "ITALIANS" KNOW NOTHING ABOUT LOVE: THE MARX BROTHERS AS GUARDIAN ANGELS OF YOUNG COUPLES IN JEOPARDY

MARC DIPAOLO

Harpo! When did you seem like an angel the last time?  
And played the grey harp of gold?  
—Jack Kerouac, "To Harpo Marx"

#### *The Deputy Seraph and the Marx Brothers in Heaven*

Are the Marx Brothers believable guardian angels? It may be difficult to conceive of Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx playing winged agents of the Almighty, but they were indeed cast as heavenly mediators in *The Deputy Seraph* (1959), an unfinished pilot that might have become a television series had Chico's real life deteriorating health not halted the production. The surviving fifteen minutes of the pilot shows the three aging comics standing on a cloudy "Heaven" set playing supernatural variants of their classic personas.<sup>1</sup> While the production values are poor, the bizarre footage boasts some clever sight gags, including Harpo munching on his own halo as if it were a hamburger and Groucho riding a motorcycle through the stars. The fantasy concept, complete with cartoon Christian imagery, might seem like a poor fit for the trio, and could easily inspire the reaction, "What were they [the brothers, the writers, etc.] thinking?" In fact, I must admit that I was somewhat taken aback myself when I first saw *The Deputy Seraph* rushes as a young adult. (I certainly didn't know what to make of Angel Chico, still wearing that *commedia dell'arte* hat in Heaven.) But then I remembered how often the comedians behaved like bizarre guardian angels in many of their films, usually taking extreme measures to protect young engaged couples from gangsters, creditors, and annoying future

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<sup>1</sup> The footage was excerpted in the 1993 documentary *The Unknown Marx Brothers*.

in-laws. Sometimes the Marx Brothers seemed to have ulterior motives for assisting the young couples, while other times they appeared to be acting purely out of a selfless desire to help. Their generous spirit gave them a larger-than-life-quality that certainly impressed me as a child.

I remember that, when I was first introduced to their films at roughly the age of ten, my superhero-obsessed mind had no difficulty placing the threesome in the category of zany do-gooders who were always there when they were needed. I saw Groucho, Harpo, and Chico as fairy godfathers who humbled arrogant aristocrats, outwitted gangsters and cops, and helped broke young lovers raise the money they needed to get married. *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *A Day at the Races* (1937) were particular favorites of mine, and I believed that the reason Harpo was able to perform magical tricks in those films—such as “running” up a stage backdrop to avoid the police—was because he was fighting on the side of justice, so God granted him special abilities to emerge victorious over the likes of Sig Ruman and Douglas Dumbrille.

Of course, in addition to mentally associating the Marx Brothers with angels, I was also associating Guardian Angels with the Greek god of erotic love, thanks to my familiarity with reprinted Renaissance artwork that depicted angels as “pudgy infants” modeled after Cupid (Coudert 286). Although I didn’t know it at the time, Catholic theology also supports a view of angels as agents concerned with human life and sexuality since, “in the Middle Ages, the view prevailed that every man had such a [Guardian] spirit at his side” and “[w]hat is more, it was thought that the procreation of living creatures could not be explained except by the participation of angels.... They were, indeed, not considered, for this reason to be creators of life...but to be helpers in a manner that men were not capable of discerning” (Michl 420). And, according to Judeo-Christian tradition, Anael, “one of the seven angels of Creation” was one of the higher order of angels who “exercise[d] dominion over the planet Venus” and was “one of the luminaries concerned with human sexuality” (Davidson 17). One of the figures who inspired Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Anael represents the tradition of angels as agents of love that appears to have inspired the angel characters the Marx Brothers played in *The Deputy Seraph*.

Of course, I don’t wish to push my boyhood view of the Marx Brothers as angels too far—especially since I must admit to having been fooled into thinking they were Italian when I was young (and even went as far as claim them as a source of ethnic pride). However, I do think that my naive interpretation of the Marxes as guardian angels of young couples in trouble suggests a legitimate view of their characters that was seized upon and developed by *The Deputy Seraph*’s production team. After all, despite their anarchic spirit and cynical one-liners, there is a warm-hearted and egalitarian quality to the Marx Brothers’ humor that can be traced all the way back to their

first two Paramount pictures, *The Cocoanuts* (1929) and *Animal Crackers* (1930), if not to their earliest vaudeville acts. In fact, by introducing the romantic leads and subplots that paved the way for the brothers' eventual transformation into guardian angels, these early films establish a precedent that justifies producer Irving Thalberg's decision to emphasize their more altruistic character traits in their first two MGM pictures, *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races*.

While it is regrettably true that the producers who succeeded Thalberg after his death were not as skilled at making the more selfless versions of the classic Marx Brothers characters interesting and believable on screen, I would argue that the problems with the later films have more to do with the scripts and the directing than with the Marx Brothers "going soft" or "getting too sentimental." Furthermore, *Go West* (1940), *Room Service* (1938), and *At the Circus* (1939) aside, I feel that the romantic leads themselves are often quite interesting characters that deserve a measure of critical attention themselves, especially if Allan Jones and Maureen O'Sullivan play the roles. Therefore, I intend to employ reader-response theory to focus my critical attention on the young lovers—their problems, their characterizations, and their ability to evoke audience sympathy—as well as to explore the various motivations that the films assign the Marx Brothers in coming to their aid, be those motivations selfish, selfless, supernatural, or bizarrely unexplained.

### **The Annoying Young Lovers and The Remote Control's Fast-Forward/Chapter-Skip Button**

Attractive young male and female leads who play characters that are in love with one another but too broke to marry round out the supporting cast of every Marx Brothers film save three—*Monkey Business* (1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *Duck Soup* (1933). In most cases, these young lovers want desperately to get married but their union is threatened by opposition from three formidable sources: a rich mother who has cut off their allowance, a criminal who plots to steal the deed to their land and business, and an entrenched establishment that doesn't grant fame or success to poor newcomers.

In many of the films, the wealthy, disapproving mother figure (often played to perfection by Margaret Dumont) is often angered that her child has chosen to marry someone without good blood or a substantial fortune, and she will not pretend to support the marriage by giving her child any more of her money to live on. For example, in *At the Circus*, the male lead is the one in danger of losing his inheritance, while in *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers* it is the woman. The young lovers also frequently face opposition from a criminal element that is trying to steal their land or business away from them, thereby

financially crippling them and endangering their domestic stability, as in *Go West*, *A Day at the Races* (1937), and *The Cocoanuts*. Finally, at least one of the lovers (usually the male), has an undiscovered and unappreciated talent in the arts that can be parleyed into a successful career, if only a wealthy patron would deign to offer the struggling artist a break – in *The Cocoanuts*, that talent is architectural design, in *Animal Crackers* it is painting, and in *A Night at the Opera* (1935) it is singing.

In each film, the young lovers can make only so much progress on their own behalf before circumstances are so aligned against them that they crumble. They often win audience sympathy by taking dramatic stands against Dumont, punching out leering gangsters, and showing off their impressive singing talents, but these efforts, on their own, are not enough to pay overdue bills or win over cold hearts. However, the Marx Brothers bring an element of the unexpected to the forefront that causes a reversal of fortune for the young lovers in the end. For example, Groucho often seeks to win the heart of the Dumont character, softening her up enough to get her to relent and restore her child's allowance. Chico and Harpo are willing to kidnap, coerce, and steal to get society bigwigs to finally grant the young lovers an audience to determine that the kids can indeed sing/paint/landscape. (That audience invariably ends in the bigwig realizing that he's been a blind fool and should have offered the young protégé a commission in the first place.) Finally, the thieves, gangsters, and Nazis who seek to ruin the financial security and reputations of the lovers prove to be no match for the slapstick of the Marx Brothers, and they are usually left in an unconscious heap for the police to collect in the end.

Variations of the subplots and themes examined above can be found in most of the Marx Brothers films, but it isn't immediately clear why these recurring characters are such a fixture of the film series. Indeed, there has been some debate about the role of the "serious" romantic subplot in the Marx Brothers films. Most often it is seen as a boring intrusion forced upon the Marx Brothers' fans by misguided studio executives and marketing committees of the time who hoped to broaden the brothers' appeal with women. Consequently, viewers of today may justifiably skip past all the scenes involving the young lovers while watching the DVD. Another possibility is that young lovers serve a legitimate artistic purpose in the films, such as providing—along with the establishment villains and the stuffy Margaret Dumont character—a necessary "real-world" stability that contrasts nicely with the Marx's anarchic spirit. In a similar vein, the young lovers can serve as an inversion of the "comic relief" notion in the tragedy genre – a "serious relief" from the Marx's wackiness.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the

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<sup>2</sup> The love scenes may also represent a reversal of the Shakespearean technique of including a romance between lower-class characters in a subplot that mocks, and counterpoints, the less broadly rendered romance between upper-class characters in the

justification for the presence of the young lovers, they appear in ten of the thirteen Marx Brothers films – *The Cocoanuts*, *Animal Crackers*, *A Night at the Opera*, *A Day at the Races*, *Room Service*, *At the Circus*, *Go West*, *The Big Store*, *A Night in Casablanca*, and *Love Happy*. Once the young lovers become part of the story, they need to be dealt with by anyone who is unwilling to fast-forward through their scenes, or who chafes at the fact that the lovers, instead of the Marx Brothers, are onscreen during the fade-out at the end of *The Cocoanuts*. So why are the young lovers in the films at all? How does the script justify their presence, and the Marxes' involvement in their fate? Is it because, as I have argued above, the Marx Brothers are guardian angels of a kind?

Sometimes that is the case, but not always.

Of all of the films, *Love Happy* (1949) and *Go West* come closest to overtly stating that the three men are indeed guardian angels of a kind – in *Go West*, Groucho proclaims himself and his two silly cohorts "Miracle Men," while in *Love Happy*, Harpo and Chico show off genuine (and unexplained) supernatural powers. In other films, each of the three brothers seems to have a different motivation for coming to the aid of the beleaguered betrothed.<sup>3</sup> These varying motivations help to differentiate and redefine each of the Marx Brothers in the post-*Duck Soup* phase of his career, and provide Chico in particular with a dramatically different character than he played in the Paramount films.

A selfish con-artist and pun master with learning disabilities in the Paramount films, Chico unexpectedly transforms into the soul of loyalty and generosity in *A Night at the Opera*, and he retains this softer characterization throughout the rest of his film career. Whether he is called Ravelli, Binelli, or Pirelli, Chico is invariably the Marx Brother who begins a given film with the closest emotional connection to the young lovers—especially to the young man, whom Chico either works for or grew up with in the same ghetto in Italy/Brooklyn. Chico's shady past is acknowledged through his adeptness at conning the villains (and sometimes Groucho) out of money on behalf of his handsome, troubled friend, but he has qualms with stealing directly. Significantly, Chico's character acts as a conscience for Groucho and Harpo, who sometimes are having too much fun to realize that their actions are

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main action of the play. Therefore, in the Marx Brothers' reversal, the guileless romantic subplot contrasts with the more prominent—as well as more cynical and nonsensical—love triangles involving the rich Margaret Dumont character, the fortune-hunting Groucho character, and a male villain who is out to beat "Groucho" to the widow's millions.

<sup>3</sup> Even though Zeppo appears in two films that feature young lovers in jeopardy—*The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*—he has no real interaction with them worth commenting on. Therefore, it is not inappropriate for me to refer to the Marx Brothers as a "threesome" or "trio" when discussing their relationship with the lovers.

inadvertently causing the young lovers as much trouble as the villains. Chico is also the voice of the narrator, and his job is usually to explain the plot to Harpo, or remind the audience what is at stake after a long string of comic sketches has just finished (during which time the lovers have been off-screen) and it is time to jump-start the stalled storyline. This role for Chico works beautifully in *A Day at the Races*, where Chico's affection for both Gil (Allan Jones) and Judy (Maureen O'Sullivan) is totally believable and adds great heart to the film thanks to his pitch-perfect performance. On the other hand, this more gallant version of Chico's con-artist character doesn't work at all in films like *Go West*, *At the Circus*, or *A Night in Casablanca*, where—thanks to a combination of poor writing, editing, and directing—it isn't clear how "Chico" met the young lovers in the first place or why he takes any interest in them at all.

Harpo's motivations in helping the young lovers are not often as spelled out as Chico's. Sometimes Harpo seems to be helping the couple simply because Chico likes them, and Harpo is drafted into the effort to help them because he's friends with (or a brother to) Chico's character. At other times, Harpo seems smitten by the troubled young lady in question, and wants to see her wipe away her tears and smile at him (as in his very touching scene with Mary Eaton in *The Cocoanuts*). Perhaps most often, Harpo is motivated by the idea that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," since Harpo often has reasons of his own to dislike the villains in each film. (For example, he may happily kidnap Lassparri in *A Night at the Opera* because Lassparri used to beat him up, not just because Lassparri happens to be making life difficult for the heroic couple.) It is also important to note that the Puckish Harpo is frequently an agent of chaos for its own sake, and his pranks sometimes get the young lovers into deeper trouble than they were in before. After all, Harpo is the one who loses a real estate deed the lovers need desperately in *Go West*, and he inadvertently gets Annette thrown in jail in *A Night in Casablanca* (1946). Still, he always feels guilty enough to undo the damage he caused, and solve the rest of their problems in addition by the end of the film.

This destructive tendency of Harpo's aside, he is often portrayed on film as the "cutest" and most affectionate of the three brothers. For example, Harpo is often accompanied by exotic pet animals or little children, and he is the most likely to make friends with marginalized peoples, such as Native- and African-Americans. In fact, these peoples are the ones who are fastest to see past Harpo's hobo-exterior into the magical power within, as in *A Day at the Races*, when the poor blacks identify him in song as the musical Archangel Gabriel, and in *Go West*, when the Indian chief pronounces him a true "medicine man." In addition, a musical number in *At the Circus* dubs Harpo "Swingali," a name that declares him a Svengali-like master of swing, and applies still more supernatural symbolism to Harpo. Whether or not Harpo is an angel in these

early films, there is always more to him than meets the eye. He is like the can of sardines with stolen diamonds hidden inside it featured in *Love Happy*. Only the wisest or warmest characters can see the beauty within him, and they are the ones who Harpo is most likely to go out of his way to help.

Of the three brothers, it is perhaps hardest to see Groucho in the mold of guardian angel because his one-liners are so uniformly scornful. However, some of the films are quite good at hinting there is a sentimentalist hidden beneath his prickly exterior. If Chico is most often moved to help the young couple in question out of loyalty to the man, Groucho is more often motivated by attraction to the woman. Since the readily apparent age-difference makes a romance between the middle-aged Groucho and the ingénue unlikely, he does not do much beyond flirt gently with the young woman, perhaps give her a puppy dog look, and then he tries to secure her happiness by arranging a marriage between her and her true love. Once again, this characterization of Groucho is most successful in *A Day at the Races*, probably because Groucho was apparently attracted to Maureen O'Sullivan in real life, and his genuine attraction to her can be seen in brief but important moments on screen.<sup>4</sup> This attraction is what makes it believable when his Dr. Hackenbush considers confessing that he is a fraud to O'Sullivan's Judy Standish, and when he risks being arrested by staying at her side when he should be running for the hills. When Dr. Hackenbush says to Judy, "For you, I'd make love to a crocodile," he means it.

### **Marxist Altruism Up Close: Interpreting *The Cocoanuts*, *A Night at the Opera*, *The Big Store* and *Love Happy***

*A Day at the Races* was one of the most dramatically satisfying Marx Brothers films to feature a financially strapped romantic couple. However, it was not the only one to get it right. Having discussed, in broad strokes, the nature of the recurring romantic subplot, and the fairly constant roles the brothers' characters play in the fate of the concerned couple, I will now examine in detail the four films that, in addition to *A Day at the Races*, were successful at making the romantic leads likeable and interesting: *The Cocoanuts*, the first extant Marx Brothers film; *A Night at the Opera*, one of the best of the "couple" movies; *The Big Store* (1941), the finest of the late Marx Brothers films, and *Love Happy*, the film that comes closest to casting the Marx Brothers as actual supernatural beings.

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<sup>4</sup> See the interview with Maureen O'Sullivan in the "On Your Marx, Get Set, Go!" documentary included on the 2004 Warner Home Video DVD release of *A Day at the Races*.



In *The Cocoanuts*, the young lover characters include Bob Adams (Oscar Shaw), a clerk in Mr. Hammer's "Hotel Cocoanut" with ambitions of becoming a self-supporting architect, and Polly Potter (Mary Eaton), heir to the Potter fortune. Naturally, Polly's wish to marry a clerk, whatever his ambitions, has scandalized her mother (Dumont), who believes that: "One who clerks, Polly, is a clerk, and that settles it." Mrs. Potter would prefer that her daughter marry the well-born Mr. Yates, not knowing that Yates is bankrupt and hopes to marry into money to erase his debts. Despite Mrs. Potter's reservations, Adams is, indeed, on the verge of achieving success as an architect. He has found a way to develop seemingly worthless land in Florida by designing a building that blends with its hilly surroundings. He plans to buy the land at Mr. Hammer's (a.k.a. Groucho's) real-estate auction, transform it, and resell it to millionaire investor John Berryman. Yates works to thwart Adams, first by bidding against Adams at the land auction and then by framing Adams for the theft of Mrs. Potter's valuable necklace. However, Harpo unexpectedly foils both of Yates' efforts to ruin Adams. Harpo comes to Adams' rescue during the auction when, seemingly for no reason, he knocks Yates unconscious with a cocoanut just as Yates was about to win the bid for the land. Harpo also helps Chico break Adams out of prison and is ultimately responsible for clearing Adams' name.

During the brief period when Adams is in jail, Mrs. Potter tries to force her daughter to marry Yates, and organizes an engagement party to celebrate. The Marx Brothers are outraged at this action (arguably the most destructive move one of Margaret Dumont's characters makes in any of the films), and do what they can to disrupt the engagement party until Polly has time to gather the information she needs to publicly unmask her fraud fiancé. Since everything winds up working out for the good guys—Adams' plans to win a contract with Berryman succeed, and Mrs. Potter gives her blessing to their marriage—the ending is somewhat contrived. However, it is satisfying because the young lovers are likeable characters worthy of audience sympathy. Adams exudes integrity, is brave in the face of adversity, and finds the Marx Brothers as funny as the audience does. Polly, for her part, is willing to defy her mother's wishes, believes in Adams even when he is damned by the evidence, and gets to sing some catchy Irving Berlin songs.

With the exception of *Animal Crackers*, the staple "young lover" characters are not featured in the remaining Paramount films, but appear again in the MGM production *A Night at the Opera* as characters played by Kitty Carlisle and Allan Jones. In the film, rising Italian opera star Rosa Castaldi (Carlisle) is separated from her lover, the broke tenor Riccardo Baroni (Jones), when she signs a contract with the New York Opera Company and moves to America. Rosa hopes that the head of the company, Herman Gottlieb, will sign Baroni as well, especially since Baroni is secretly more talented than Gottlieb's current

star tenor, Rodolfo Lassparri, who has secured \$1,000 for each performance. Unfortunately, a marquee name matters more to Gottlieb than talent, so he will only consider offering Baroni a contract "when he's made his reputation." So it appears as if all seems lost for our young lovers, until Chico gets involved.

*A Night at the Opera* is the first Marx Brothers film to introduce a new character-type for Chico—the old friend and loyal employee of the heroic male lead. The film establishes that Chico's character went to the same music school as the handsome beau, explaining why he feels a kinship with the young man and why Chico is invested in helping him in his career and love life (an idea that would return later, in *The Big Store*). In *A Night at the Opera*, Chico plays Fiorello, a musician who opposes an unjust classical music scene in which elitist patrons of the arts and vain performers suck all of the true life and beauty out of "the Arts," thereby co-opting the idea of "Opera" as a status symbol while keeping true performers and music lovers such as Baroni out in the cold. So, when Fiorello fights to gain a contract for Baroni, he is not only helping rescue his friend from the poorhouse, but is working to save the arts from snobs. Emblematic of the problems with the upper-classes staking exclusive claim to the arts is Mrs. Claypool, a member of the *nouveau riche* who wishes to buy her way into society by investing \$200,000 in the opera while showing little interest in music for its own sake. And, of course, there is Lassparri himself, the vainglorious star who refuses to sing for an adoring public unless he is being paid for it, and who is contemptible enough to have Rosa fired when she refuses to submit to his lustful advances.

Fiorello instigates much of the action of the story, first by tricking Otis P. Driftwood (Groucho) into representing Baroni and then by helping the tenor stow away on a steamship to the United States. Initially resentful of taking on the excess baggage of Baroni's problems, Driftwood eventually grows fond of both Baroni and Castaldi, and the disgust he feels for Gottlieb and Lassparri only cements his loyalty to them. The final segment of the film is essentially a comic replay of *The Phantom of the Opera*, with the Marx Brothers collectively playing the role of the Phantom to Castaldi's Christine Daae, spoiling a lavish production of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* until Gottlieb relents and grants the truly gifted singers—Baroni and Castaldi—the lead roles.

Both *A Night at the Opera*, and the following film, *A Day at the Races*, firmly establish the "Marx Brothers helping young couples in jeopardy" formula, but this formula is successful in each of the four early films that employ it, including *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*. Not only are these films funny, well-plotted, and well-directed, but the possibly distracting presence of the young lovers winds up not being distracting at all, largely because of the charisma of the young actors, especially Allan Jones, Kitty Carlisle, and Maureen O'Sullivan. However, in the next three films—*Room*

*Service*, *At the Circus*, and *Go West*—the young lovers aren't half as interesting as they are in the earlier films, largely because these later movies are just plain bad. It is amazing that the brothers managed to follow up their three best films with their three worst, but that is exactly what happened. There are a number of plausible explanations for this, although I am inclined to agree with Groucho's assessment that Thalberg's death really hurt the quality of their output.<sup>5</sup> However, it is also possible that, after wrapping production on seven movies, the studios had not only run out of original gags for the Marx Brothers but were fresh out of ideas for new wrinkles and permutations of the subplots reserved for the young characters. That having been said, while *A Day at the Races* is clearly the last "great" film the Marx Brothers made, it was not the last "good" film they made. In fact, *A Night in Casablanca* is great fun, if deeply flawed, and one might argue that *The Big Store* is really quite solid, and thoroughly underrated, despite some dodgy editing and rampant ethnic stereotyping.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, of all the late Marx Brothers films, *The Big Store* is the only one that features a troubled young couple worth investing in.

*The Big Store* opens with Ravelli (Chico), an instructor at the Gotham Conservatory of music who is teaching poor urban kids how to play the piano just like him (that is to say, *just* like him—they even "shoot the keys" like Chico). Ravelli himself grew up learning piano at the school and hopes to pass on all he has learned to a new generation of immigrant children, but the old place has fallen on hard times and creditors soon arrive to reclaim the instruments. Fortunately, Tommy Rogers, a famous singer, composer, and heir to the massive Phelps Department Store arrives on the scene, promising to pay off the school's debts and build a new conservatory in its place, complete with stained glass windows and soundproof practice rooms.

As a fellow conservatory alumnus, Rogers shares Ravelli's humble background and wants "kids like these to have the same opportunities I had." In fact, while Rogers was, at one time, the "toughest kid in [the] neighborhood," he has not forgotten his roots, and has even commemorated his East Side childhood by writing a "Tenement Symphony" that honors the urban poor—especially the Jewish, Italian, and Irish poor—and the cacophony of sounds they make in their apartment buildings, going about their daily lives, playing music from different cultures, and practicing their instruments. These are the same kids Tommy hopes to recruit in the new-and-improved music school he will build once he sells off his shares of the department store. It is also important to note that

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Mitchell, author of the *Marx Brothers Encyclopedia*, refers to this sentiment of Groucho's in the commentary track of the *A Day at the Races* DVD (Warner Home Video, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Still, I rather like the comedy Italians myself, and prefer them to their cinematic alternatives ... the gangsters in *Goodfellas*.

Tommy has no trouble continuing to date his childhood sweetheart, Peggy, who works in the music department of the store he owns, despite the potential raised eyebrows he might get for fraternizing with—as a villain scoffs—“one of the help.”

Indeed, the film takes great care in developing Tommy's character, and in establishing a bond of affection between him and Ravelli (and, by extension, Ravelli's brother, Wacky). In an interesting segment, Wacky (Harpo), hopes to take part in the debut of Tommy's “Tenement Symphony,” but Ravelli says that Wacky's clothes are too shabby and low-class for him to participate. This condemnation from Ravelli leads Wacky to daydream that he is as refined and as acceptable to “the serious classical music scene” as Mozart, and he imagines himself dressed in 18<sup>th</sup> century Austrian finery, complete with powdered wig. In this surreal segment, Wacky clones himself into three different musicians, forming his own chamber music group, and plays a Mozart composition with appropriate jazz and hoedown flourishes to make it more accessibly “American” and “proletarian.” When the dream sequence ends, Ravelli appears to reassure Wacky that Tommy has found a way to let him play with the serious orchestra, so he needn't worry about looking shabby. Tommy doesn't care how Wacky dresses, only how Wacky plays his instrument, and that is the key to his character. This attitude is consistent with Tommy's quest to make classical music accessible to the masses, and to give kids from poor backgrounds a chance to turn to music as a career, or as a mode of self-expression, as an alternative to turning to crime (as Peggy's brother felt forced to).

Unfortunately, criminals have their sights set on killing Tommy and claiming the fortune he has earmarked for charity. Detective Wolf J. Flywheel (Groucho) is hired to protect Tommy from danger, but he spends more time romancing Tommy's rich aunt (Dumont again) than he does tracking down Tommy's hidden adversaries. But the loyal Ravelli and Wacky keep Flywheel on task and the three expose and defeat all of Tommy's enemies. Although some heavy editing in the final print of *The Big Store* cuts down to a bare minimum an important sequence when Tommy rescues Peggy from the villains, the film ultimately provides some of the most compelling material with the “standard” romantic couple, and offers one of the best motivations the Marx Brothers ever had in protecting the young lovers—a common cultural background and a shared love of music.

Harpo himself wrote the storyline for the final Marx Brothers film, *Love Happy*, which features Groucho as narrating detective Sam Grunion and characterizes Harpo and Chico (a.k.a. Faustino the Great) as nearly supernatural figures. While neither Harpo nor Chico are presented as angels *per se*, they are, at this point, only a step away from becoming the angelic characters featured in *The Deputy Seraph*. For the first time, the skill that Chico displayed at

interpreting Harpo's miming of information in *A Day at the Races* has been transformed into a sort of superpower. Chico is no longer just good at playing charades; he is a mind reader whose mental might goes as far as enabling him to understand the mute Harpo over the telephone. Meanwhile, hobo Harpo is presented as an even more magical figure than usual. While he has always had some control over the laws of physics, he demonstrates an even more impressive array of abilities than usual, including teleportation and the ability to breathe smoke and shoot fire from his lapel flower. He also makes frequent use of his trademark bottomless coat pockets. Most importantly, Harpo's home is shown for the first time, and it turns out to be a whimsical cave hidden in the brush in the middle of Central Park. With big wooden doors as an entrance, Harpo's home is decorated with impish artifacts, and features a penguin dressed like Harpo, candelabras, and a harp with a mattress over it that doubles as a bed.

The young lovers in *Love Happy* include Mike Johnson (Paul Valentine), the producer of a musical review whose main financial backer has disappeared, and Maggie (Vera-Ellen), the production's lovely ingénue. Along with the rest of the troupe, Mike and Maggie are working without pay until the ticket sales provide profits to live on. At the beginning of the film, Faustino joins the production, agreeing to work without pay like the rest of them, because he's "no ham." Unfortunately, the man responsible for the sets and costumes, Mr. Lyons, is tired of waiting for his fees and sends men to strip the stage bare. He suggests that he might be persuaded to leave the sets where they are if one of the show girls has sex with him, but Faustino gallantly intervenes, protesting that the young woman is engaged. Knowing that this will enrage Lyons, Faustino tries to win the disgruntled investor over by appealing to his sense of showmanship. The piano-playing Faustino discovers that Lyons can play the violin and convinces Lyons to join him in a gypsy-music duet. Lyons is moved to tears while they are playing together, and it seems as if Faustino has succeeded in granting the production a stay of execution. Sadly, Lyons is resolute, and the stage is stripped bare, leaving the production out in the cold.

While Faustino fails, Harpo still has a chance of succeeding in saving the show. Harpo has been stealing food for the actors throughout their rehearsal schedule, inspiring the beautiful Maggie to begin calling him "my Robin Hood!"<sup>7</sup> On one of Harpo's food-gathering expeditions, he unknowingly steals a can of sardines that the villainous Madame Egelichi has used to smuggle the priceless Romanov diamonds into the country. Despite Egelichi's feminine wiles and menacing henchman (Raymond Burr), Harpo runs rings around the villains throughout the film. In fact, Harpo uses his magic powers to orchestrate

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<sup>7</sup> It isn't long before Faustino figures out that Harpo is in love with Maggie and that "The only thing you want - a beautiful girl is gonna smile at you."

a highly improbable happy ending in which Egelichi ends up financing the play and marrying detective Grunion, Harpo gets to keep the jewels, and the young lovers celebrate the successful staging of their musical revue.

If that isn't the work of an angel, I'm not sure what is.

### Troubled Young Lovers Today and the Continuing Relevance of the Marx Brothers Films

Since angels serve God, the ultimate patriarch and source of universal order, it would be reasonable to propose that angels are best understood as agents of the law and the establishment.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it would appear that, by exploring a view of the Marx Brothers as pseudo-angelic matchmakers, I am arguing against the interpretation of them as anarchic, subversive comedians and am presenting them as champions of the *status quo*. And yet, I am suggesting quite the opposite. I believe that the Marx Brothers represent a revolutionary form of guardian angel that protects young lovers because they are agents of change who will *shake up the status quo*.

When one considers the Marx Brothers as guardian angels, it is not important so much that they have halos or work for God or that they appear to be "pro marriage." What is significant is *who* it is they choose to help and *who* it is they align themselves against. When the characters played by Groucho, Harpo, and Chico deign to help young couples in trouble, it is because the funnymen feel a kinship to the lovers. That kinship may be because the lovers come from a similarly humble urban background, like Chico's character, or because they are iconoclasts or unappreciated artists, like Harpo, or because they represent a lost innocence that Groucho's character wishes he still possessed. Although individual examples may differ, the young lovers matter to the Marx Brothers' characters because they see themselves in the people they are helping.

To put it another way, the young couples are slightly more respectable doubles of the brothers themselves, and that is why they are interesting, even if they are sometimes awkwardly characterized or inelegantly shoehorned into the plot. Like the brothers, these broke lovers are taken for granted by the rich, abused by the neighborhood bullies, and closed out of job opportunities because they don't have the "right" pedigree. They're mutts, no matter how pretty they are. That is why it doesn't matter how well Baroni can sing or how talented an architect Bob Adams is—they are not socially acceptable because they don't have the breeding, the money, or the connections, just like, in certain circles, the

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Leonard Fallon's article "Angels" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson: Gale, 2003. (415-420)

Marx Brothers themselves would always be in danger of persecution for being Jewish. And the villains and hypocrites whom the Marx Brothers humiliate are the very same entrenched establishment racists and buffoons who are invested in keeping a stuffy and unjust social order intact, and who find themselves threatened by the new blood and the possibility of a better future that the young couples represent. So the Marx Brothers' characters strive to wrench control of the arts from snobs, put an end to marriages of convenience, and expose hypocrisy and pomposity wherever they find it, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of the young lovers they relate to.

As a child, I looked at the Marx Brothers as figures of inspiration who help young lovers in trouble. These days, as a young academic who has recently been engaged to a classical musician, I find myself once again taking a sentimental view of the Marx Brothers that I hope does not strip them of too much of their edge and grittiness. Ethnically, I am the great-grandchild of Italian immigrants who settled in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and my family has come a long way over the generations to establish themselves in American society. Consequently, I am hoping that times have changed enough that there are real opportunities for me to find acceptance in the academy. I also hope that my fiancé, a graduate of the Eastman School of Music who was recently not allowed to audition for clarinet positions opened at the San Francisco Symphony and the Ft. Worth Symphony because she had not yet made her reputation, will one day be heard and have a real chance at joining an elite classical music organization. Since we are just starting out as a couple, we are not all that much better off, either financially or in our careers, than the young lovers characters in the seemingly out-of-date (or not) Marx Brothers films. Certainly, we will both do our best to work hard, produce first-rate work, and hope that our efforts will be recognized and rewarded by those with the power to hire and fire us. However, if times have not changed very much, and we aren't given a genuine opportunity, then I know what the sentimentalist part of my personality will most hope for. I will hope that somewhere, somehow, the spirit of Chico will come to our rescue, and make sure that our modern-day Mr. Gottleibs will give us a fair chance.

And I think that Chico would be willing to help me out.

He'd like me. I'm sure of it.

After all, I'm a-the-same-a-nationality-a-lika-him.

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