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11 Homme-Com

Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy

Tamar Jeffers McDonald

QUESTION: which of these scenes is from a romantic comedy?

A man with irritable bowel syndrome goes on a first date. The woman chooses a restaurant with spicy food, which upsets his stomach. Balked from using the lavatory at the restaurant, the man, back at the woman's place, at last relieves himself messily in her bathroom, only to discover she has run out of toilet paper...

A man having sex begins to feel anxious. His partner insists on mutual climax, so he fakes it. Despite his orgasmic cry, the woman is suspicious, and questions him. He flees into the next room, tears off the empty condom and, as the woman enters, tries to fling it out the window. But the window is closed...

A man is preparing for his first partnered sexual experience. Erotically the woman massages his body, his legs, his feet. She bends her head and sensuously begins to lick his toes. Unfortunately the man is extremely ticklish. He tries to move his foot away, jerks his leg, and, involuntarily, kicks her in the face, causing a nosebleed...



ANSWER: they all are. What we might first find anomalous to our ideas about rom-coms in these three situations is their evident scatological and sexual emphasis. More fundamentally surprising is, I suggest, the fact that each synopsis begins with the words 'a man'. Surely contemporary rom-coms start, and end, with a woman, with her desires and dreams, her temporary frustrations and eventual fulfilment?

Certainly, the post-classical romantic comedy is usually associated with women: female concerns, female stars and female audiences are all

implicit in the term 'chick flick', and a glance at the majority of rom-coms available in cinemas and for home viewing bears out the dominance of women within the narratives and marketing. Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, Reese Witherspoon and Sandra Bullock have each built their careers on the success of various rom-com vehicles, although their success in escaping the confines of this genre and convincingly moving into roles outside the rom-com has been less uniform. New films continue to appear bearing the romantic comedy's hallmarks: female-centred narratives charting the rockiness of the road to true love, and including such well-used tropes as the initial mutual antipathy, the subsequent accord, the misunderstanding that breaks up the couple, the sacrifice or quest or embarrassing public gesture that stands as an apology and re-establishes the pair. Such tropes are variously discernible in late 1990s films such as *Clueless* (1995) and *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), in *Two Weeks Notice* (2002) and *Laws of Attraction* (2004) from the early 2000s and more recent movies such as *Because I Said So* (2007) and *Music and Lyrics* (2007). All of these place the woman at the centre, aligning themselves with her worldview even if occasionally allowing the narrative to undermine her.

The films that own the scenes sketched above – *Along Came Polly* (2004), *40 Days and 40 Nights* (2002) and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) – can be seen, however, as belonging to a relatively new offshoot of the genre. This contemporary grouping, which can be posited as beginning in the mid-1990s with *Swingers* (1996), shifts the emphasis in the narrative from the woman to the man, consciously opposing the currently dominant female-centred narrative through their presentation of texts focusing on male protagonists. These texts set out to explore and test the contours of the genre by repositioning the centre, rehearsing all the generic basics – dating rituals, feigned indifference, heartfelt passion – but making them new by considering them from a male point of view.

Does this collection of films, which might also include *The Tao of Steve* (2000), *Hitch* (2005), and *Wedding Crashers* (2005), really provide such an alternative take on the contemporary rom-com? While rehearsing the same old tropes as the now-traditional female-centred stories, this newer kind of rom-com for boys – what I will designate the 'homme-com' – does seem boldly different in its evident prioritising of the importance of the bodily, and particularly the sexual, elements within romance, the scatological and carnal motifs highlighted in the scenarios mentioned above.

William Paul (1994, 2002) has posited the increased popularity since the late 1970s/early 1980s of a strand of American film humour that he dubs 'Animal Comedy', occurring in films that employ 'gross-out' moments, such as *Animal House* (1978) and *Porcky's* (1982). Paul Bonilla, picking up on this theme, examines the elements of what he terms 'Hollywood Lowbrow': 'It often employs profane language and always employs farce based on scatological and sexual irritations; it frequently depends on parodic frameworks or vignettes to sustain its episodic narratives and it attempts to provide fun ...' (2005: 18).

Bonilla sees such films as having a philosophical motive behind their attempts to gross out their viewers: their emphasis on the body, its urges and emissions, can be understood as an attempt to put increasingly alienated subjects back in touch with a corporeality subjugated to the demands of modern urban existence (2005: 20). The films of the Farrelly brothers can be seen as fitting both these paradigms, and may also be largely responsible for merging elements of slapstick, messiness and bathetic physical comedy with occasional tropes of the rom-com amongst other generic plunderings, as in their box-office hits *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *There's Something About Mary* (1998), *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000) and *Shallow Hal* (2001).

The homme-com seems to share some of Hollywood Lowbrow's insistence on the comedy derived from tumescence and engorgement, orgasm and ejaculate, and perhaps its motives can similarly be seen as intending to return the purely physical to understandings of romantic love. This new emphasis on the importance of sex and the body in all its messiness seems to offer a conscious rebuke to the standard form of the contemporary rom-com, which has been habitually downplaying the importance of sex for over a decade now. This essay will consider the rise of the homme-com and its increased emphasis on the sexual act. Examining the re-gendering of the genre's narrative alongside this new prioritising of the comic potential of the body, its drives and desires, the essay enquires whether this prioritisation is inevitably radical in either intent or achievement.

~ *You've got staid: the contemporary Hollywood rom-com* ~

Before moving to examine the new homme-com and what it seeks to reintroduce to the genre, it is necessary to revisit the contexts from

which such films arose, an excursion that illuminates the current dominant form of the rom-com, now associated with women.

As I have noted elsewhere (Jeffers McDonald, 2007), the Hollywood rom-com has moved through several cycles and evolutions since the coming of sound in the 1930s brought the screwball comedy and the rom-com tropes now familiar to us – the 'meet-cute', the initially antagonistic couple, the inevitable last-minute volte-face and reconciliation – to cinema screens. The particular form of the genre prevalent from the mid-1950s for about a decade – the so-called 'sex comedy' where sex was the terrain being fought over by the female and male protagonists – has been assumed to appeal more to female audience members because of the valorisation of female pre-marital chastity. Both Al Capp (1962) and Alexander Walker (1966 [1968]), for example, assume that female audience members are responsible for the success of the Doris Day romantic comedy vehicle. Close reading of the most popular films of the time, including *Pillow Talk* (1959), however, reveals that the assumption that the films display a battle over sex, with men desiring and women withholding it, is inaccurate: actually both male and female protagonists want sex, but women want respect too.

Pillow Talk presents its chic career woman heroine Jan (Doris Day) as equally desirous of, and equally prepared to use scheming to get, sexual union with the playboy hero (played by Rock Hudson). Where the characters differ is in the lengths they will go to get sex: he will lie about his identity and desires, she will not. This, rather than her horror at learning his carnal plans, is what triggers the temporary break-up of their relationship. The early 1960s sex comedies can thus be seen intimating that sex is important to both genders, a fact picked up and focused on by the next evolution of the genre, the radical rom-coms of the 1970s. Films of this decade, such as *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) and *Annie Hall* (1977) constantly stress that sexual fulfilment and pleasure, long acknowledged as significant to men, are vitally important to women also. These films show women asking for sex, enjoying sex, sometimes avoiding sex, but doing so at the dictates of their own bodies and desires, and not to please or appease their partners.

Despite the obvious impact of the feminist movement on these 1970s films and their assertion of sexuality's consequence to women, these texts were not contemporaneously perceived as being meant for female viewers only. *Variety* reviews of the time do not assume that *Annie*

Hall, for example, will find a natural audience in women, similarly 'gentleman's magazine' *Esquire* saw no anomaly in interviewing Woody Allen in depth about *Amie Hall* (F. Rich, 1972).

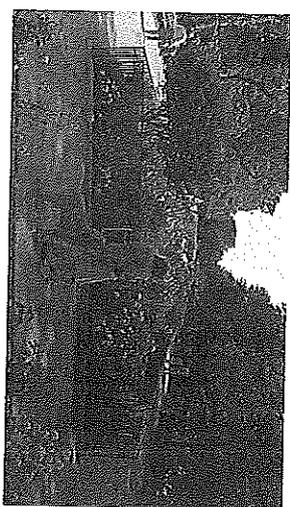
Unlike the radical rom-com, the films of the late 1980s and 1990s, which established the form of romantic comedy that still dominates today, were, however, both firmly centred on and associated with the female and forsook the emphasis on the importance of sex that had formerly been so prevalent. The insistence on gendering the genre's narratives, stars and audiences as all female inevitably couples the avoidance of sex with the female also. In this way, the most recent evolution of the rom-com - what I call the Ephronesque turn, as a way of noting Nora Ephron's influence as the writer of *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), writer-director of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998) and inspiration of many others - is responsible for abandoning the egalitarian standpoint on sex established by the radical rom-coms and returning the genre to the putative 1950s 'double standard'. When men wanted sex and women were exhorted to withhold it from them.

Visually, the Ephronesque films recycle elements from the radical rom-com: the almost inevitable location of love in New York City is there, as in the 1970s films (see Deborah Jermy, Chapter 1 in this collection). But where the later products of the genre differ is in the ideology behind these choices of locale. The radical rom-coms were committed to showing a more modern and thus realistic view of love, including its transience. Situating their love stories in the city, where most of the audiences for the films lived, was thus, in the 1970s, another way of acknowledging their new realism: if love could occur in this hyper-alienating environment, there was hope for us all. The Ephronesque film maintains this focus on the urban setting but avoids the previous underlying objective: now love may seem difficult to achieve but will inevitably easily conquer distance, antipathy, time, even death.¹

While, then, the current Ephronesque form is happy to plunder the 1970s films for inspiration, its most radical difference is to have abandoned the older form's commitment to affirming the importance of sex to both genders. This de-emphasis of sexual matters has extended across the current form of the genre since the late 1980s: if sex happens, it happens offscreen, but mostly it just does not happen. Sex is currently frequently portrayed in rom-coms as an immature pastime, a phase one goes through, which explains its greater prevalence in comedies aimed at teenage markets (such as the *American Pie* films). In *A Lot Like Love*

(2004), for example, the teen protagonists meet in an airport and almost immediately have sex on a plane; only later do they gradually fall in love. Giving in to the promptings of physical desire is thus associated with teenagers, with immaturity and relationship problems, while love and stability are associated with *not* having sex.

You've Got Mail epitomises many of the current problems of the genre, but none so much perhaps as the avoidance of sex. The female and male leads of the film, destined to be a couple by the conclusion, both have other partners to begin with, but neither pair is ever seen kissing in a manner other than desultory; although the couples go to bed together, it seems that in *You've Got Mail* all they do in bed is sleep, as matched scenes indicate. While this serves, alongside other hints, to bear out that Joe (Tom Hanks) and Kathleen (Meg Ryan) are destined for each other and not meant for their current, wrong, partners, it also establishes a frigidity the film cannot overcome. For if the wrong partners' wrongness extends to their lack of sexual compatibility with Joe and Kathleen, thus explaining why nothing is going on in the bedroom, the new couple must by contrast evince a passionate intensity in their relationship to underline why it is meant to succeed. But the film does not attempt this. The only intensity permitted Joe and Kathleen is their initial mutual dislike as business rivals. Once Joe has realised that Kathleen is also 'Shopgirl', his email pen-pal, he begins to be a kinder, nicer Joe to her and the energy of their encounters is instantly dissipated. The film indeed seems so uncertain of the appropriateness or desirability of physical contact that the couple's clinch is held off until the very,



11.1: The last image of *You've Got Mail*.

very last moment, when all secrets are aired and forgiven. Even then, the presence of Joe's dog in the scene makes the final picture less one of a passionately attracted couple and more one of a happily reunited family (see Fig. 11.1).

By de-emphasising sex as a necessary part of romance, and focusing on women as the 'natural' heroines of and audiences for, such sexless rom-coms, these films have implied the unimportance of sexual fulfilment for women. They have also established the contemporary form of the rom-com as such a sex-free zone that they have inevitably created a space for the reintroduction of such themes. Hollywood, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and so the *homme-com* was born.

While these male-centred films can be seen, as I discuss below, as challenging both that the rom-com is necessarily about women and that sex has no part in films of the genre, do *homme-coms*, however, maintain the idea that sex is a generally or exclusively male concern?

~ *The homme-com: romantic comedy for boys?* ~

One of the most noteworthy recent developments in the generally staid rom-com genre has thus been the emergence of a male-slanted text. *Swingers* set the standard in 1996: recently dumped Mike (Jon Favreau) moves to Los Angeles and is taken around town by his woman-mad friend Trent (Vince Vaughn). Mike is told that what he has been doing wrong is treating women like people. Trent educates him, teaching him the rules of being irresistible, such as, for example, asking for a woman's phone number and then not calling until at least two full days have elapsed. By the end of the film, however, it is Mike and not Trent who has met a woman who is interested in him, and the film concludes with her ringing him.

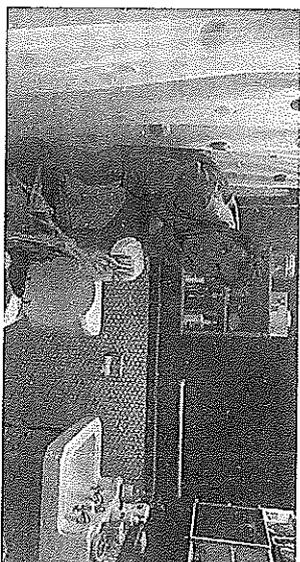
Adopting the perspective of the male instead of the female half of the couple, *Swingers* enjoys revealing that its central male characters worry about relationships, dating rules, makeout conventions, what to say and wear, just as women have been doing in rom-coms for so long. They also spend more time with their friends discussing how to get a woman than with any women they get, paralleling the trope of the supportive group of friends again found so often in the Ephronesque rom-com. The film therefore sets out to show that, while the common assumption that men think about sex a lot of the time is founded in truth, they are

also searching for real love just like women, the traditionally assumed audience and focus of the genre.

While *Swingers* reworks the common elements of the rom-com but places a man at the centre, later films in the sub-grouping of male-focused films have tended to add another ingredient to the recipe: the gross-out moment. This is an eruption of extreme and usually uncontrollable physicality into the narrative, and is the element that links films such as these new *homme-coms* with other contemporary comedies that, as noted, have been categorised as 'Animal Comedy' (Paul, 1994) or 'Hollywood Lowbrow' (Bondla, 2005). A handful of moments from the *homme-coms* illustrates the persistence of excrement, urine and ejaculate as recurring tropes. *Along Came Polly* features the hero's attack of irritable bowel syndrome recounted above (see Fig. 11.2).

Explosive diarrhoea features again in *Wedding Crashers*, when it figures as the punishment of an arrogant character who has angered the central male duo John and Jeremy (Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn). *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* includes scenes of visible physicality prompted by erections, urination, masturbation and, most difficult to watch, defecation.

I argue that the *homme-com* consciously blends this type of gross-out moment with the romance plot of the standard rom-com in order to get something new, male-centred and assumed to appeal to male audiences. It might also be suggested that such films are attempting to appeal to younger audiences too. While the Ephronesque rom-com is



11.2: Reuben's irritable bowel syndrome makes itself conspicuous on a date.

marketed to couples and to single women aspiring to be in a couple, the presence of messy slapstick moments and incidents of bodily humour in such films imply an immaturity of outlook that might profitably be coupled with literal chronological immaturity in audiences. Whatever the age of the audience, however, the comedy generated by the home-corn is likely to provoke mixed responses. By merging scatological and sexual foet with rom-com elements, the home-corn as end-product becomes an uneasy blend of tropes and techniques. Scenes intended to provoke the groan and laugh-out-loud response derived from gross-out sit next to more strand romantic moments that elicit quieter reactions: it is almost as if the sub-grouping's films have become schizoid in trying to juggle bodily excesses and excretions with tender emotional moments, to appeal to both guts and hearts.

One scene from *Along Came Polly*, which particularly seems to suffer from this split personality, can exemplify this problem. Recently jilted Reuben (Ben Stiller) is dragged to a party by his best friend Sandy (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and there re-encounters Polly (Jennifer Aniston), a girl he had known at high school. Polly and Reuben start flirting and Reuben is about to ask for her number when Sandy, who had wandered off, reappears and says they have to leave:

Sandy: Hey Reuben, I'm in a situation here. We have to leave now.

Reuben: Well, no, can't we stay a couple more minutes?

Sandy: Dude, no, this is serious. I just shared.

Reuben: I don't know what that means.

Sandy: I tried to fart, and a little shit came out, I just shared. S'alright let's go.

Reuben: You are the most disgusting person I have ever met in my life.

Sandy's confession provokes a mixture of responses. His use of the appropriate neologism 'sharting' is funny because the creativity involved in inventing the term somehow suggests it has been a necessary adjunct to his regular vocabulary. The embarrassment of the incident's timing, at a public and swanky event and its inherent messiness (Sandy walks to the lift in tell-tale stiff-legged way) all combine to produce a humorous scene, a moment of evident gross-out body comedy.

When Reuben dismisses his friend as 'the most disgusting person', two things are happening: Reuben is setting himself up to be the butt of the rebarbative moment of similar messiness later, and the film is

attempting to disavow its own obsession with excrement. But Sandy seems to be in the film to act as an id to Reuben's super-ego, that is to say, to embody the bodily urgencies Reuben's overly upright persona would happily forget. While the film itself attempts to produce straightforward moments of traditional romantic comedy – Reuben and Polly agree they are incompatible and should part, only to be found, in the next shot, passionately kissing – it also sabotages these attempts by inevitably linking them with body comedy, as when, following on from this kiss, Reuben is so over-aroused he does not even make his self-set target of five minutes of sex before orgasm.

Despite its uneasiness of tone, however, *Along Came Polly* does clearly attempt to revive the policy, begun in the radical romantic comedies of the 1970s but firmly eradicated since the rise of the Ephronesque rom-com, of using the sex scene as a locus of humour. Films like *Annie Hall* were aware of the importance of fulfilling sex to the success of the couple, and indeed to the well-being of both its members. Enabled by new ratings systems that no longer forbade the representation of the sex act itself, the camera in the radical rom-coms does not discreetly look away or permit a fade-out when the couple goes into a chinch. It watches. Thus the viewer learns in *Annie Hall* that Alvy uses the glow shed by a red light bulb in his seduction routine, and that Annie is often too uptight to have sex unless mellowed first by some marijuana. Not only are such moments of sex for comic value not included in the current dominant form of the female-centred rom-com, sex itself, as mentioned above, is hardly ever an occurrence and, when it is included, rarely shown. When the couple go into a chinch in *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), *Music and Lyrics*, and *Because I Said So*, for example, the camera watches them kiss but then discreetly pans away as they move to consummation. The sex scene is thus unseen: and it is certainly not made the matter for comedy.² In each of these cases the couple's intimacy is included in the narrative as the prelude for deeper feelings of betrayal when the (generically inevitable) break-up comes, rather than staged for the viewer as a comic occasion.

Not all male-centred rom-coms feature the quest for no-strings sex, however: from *Swingers* onwards there has been a trope in such films to position a lascivious lead in opposition to a more romantically inclined buddy. Thus Trent contrasts with Mike in *Swingers*; *Along Came Polly*'s Sandy diverges from Reuben, and Andy's posse of randy male workmates in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* oppose his chaste outlook

Despite this initial dichotomy in available male positions - priapic versus pro-monogamous - the end result is the same, however. While the *homme-com* hero sets out to find true love, and the Lothario wants yet another roll in the hay, they both inevitably end up in monogamous relationships by the end reel. Starting their narratives with very different desires and goals, the men of these male-driven texts finish by realising the importance of the stable union. The contemporary female-centred rom-coms also conclude with the would-be permanent establishment of the heterosexual couple; narrative closure for this genre seems, at the moment, predicated on monogamy.

This insistence on closure-through-coupling sits comfortably, on the whole, with the traditional rom-com and those examples of the *homme-com* that present the romantic hero, but much less so with those films that begin by celebrating the ability of their central males to lead hordes of women into bed. Indeed, *The Tao of Steve* and *Wedding Crashers* go beyond suggesting their heroes lead their victims and openly admit they con them. John and Jeremy from the latter film use weddings as their hunting grounds: they crash weddings at which they know no one and manipulate the romantic charge associated with such events (ironically celebrating monogamy) in order to bed bridesmaid after bridesmaid. The film makes it clear that the pair are seeking not soul-mates but easy prey; by skilful editing that matches the men attending successive events and repeatedly performing the same sequence of actions (arriving and announcing aliases; toasting the bride and groom; cutting the cake; dancing) the film conveys the habitual and calculating nature of their behaviour. John and Jeremy prey on the romantic tendencies of single women, inspired by the weddings to yearn for their own, by performing actions that are calculated to convince the women they are nice guys. A montage shows the men achieving their goals: having succeeded in attracting the attentions of their prey, each man twirls his partner in a dance move that cuts directly to the woman falling back, topless, onto a bed. The successful performance of this routine earns them the desired easy sex.

Dex (Donal Logue), the hero of *The Tao of Steve*, has a different approach: he doesn't approach. The film enjoys revealing why Dex, who is obviously overweight, indolent and selfish, still manages to get the girls; he operates by a code of cool that involves really listening to women, being their friends and not making a pass. Women, Dex says, especially good-looking ones, are so used to being pounced on by men

that not pouncing makes them anxious. They then have to seduce Dex to make sure that they are still desirable.

While these films show the men enjoying the attentions of many women, they still each end up with just one at the film's end. The priapic excess that rules for most of the film must, seemingly, be abandoned in order for the resolution of the plot to be attained. The narratives then have to work quite hard (and at times to unconvincing results) to explain why the men should decide to give up their promiscuous and immature ways, in order to have meaningful sex with just one woman. As noted above, this is the inevitable end of the romantic *homme-com* 100, but there such conclusions do not run against the grain of the main action in quite the same way. In *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Andy has been seeking one woman to love and have sex with throughout the narrative; it is his pack of male friends that insist on ending his uninitiated status. As the camera pans around Andy's wedding ceremony, it takes care to pick out all these same friends now ensconced in couples or secure family units with children. Despite 90 per cent of the film's 116-minute running time being given over to these men's lusty and repeated attempts to get Andy some casual sex, in the final ten minutes Andy's wedding seems to confer sensible monogamous relationships upon all.³

While *Wedding Crashers'* protagonists are on a quest for no-strings sex, rather than for true love and understanding, as Andy is, this film's ending is no less neat and coupled. Indeed, given the amount of running time given to the men's machinations in pursuit of their numerous, largely undifferentiated, prey, it actually requires some torsion of credibility to achieve the alteration of John and Jeremy from cynical Lotharios to devoted monogamists. True, John has been established as the more dreamy and less insatiable hunter all along, as befits Owen Wilson's relaxed and mellow star persona. Jeremy, however, is much more stridently exploitative, again tying in with the established characteristics of the star playing him, Vince Vaughn. The viewer observes John tiring of his bachelor existence, so it is no real surprise to find him falling for one girl, Clare (Rachel McAdams), but the film seems to acknowledge its own strain when Jeremy too falls in love, with Clare's sister, Gloria (Sila Fisher), who is even kinder and more sex-mad than he is. The film ends with the four lovers/friends/relations reconciled - at, of course, yet another wedding - but the wrench in the narrative remains. The men's plot trajectory has moved from their desiring casual sex with endlessly replaceable females, to their wanting monogamous sex with just one

perfect woman, in other words, to a perceived maturation of desires. While the beginning and ending points of such films could therefore be seen as prompting contradictory impulses - bedding as many women as possible versus settled domesticity with just one - the films' attempt to reconcile these oppositions by aligning them with the characters' development, so that as the men grow wiser they seem 'naturally' to grow more monogamous.

~ Conclusion ~

Can we thus convincingly say that the *homme-com* offers film audiences an alternative take on the contemporary rom-com? Narrative closure within this new grouping of films is only achieved by a capitulation to monogamy, the same outcome promoted by the dominant form of the genre, the very films the boy rom-com appears to be contesting. Across both the sexier and more romantic strains of the male-centred rom-com, an amelioration of hedonism seems inevitable: again and again the heroes, the winners, are the men who give up their randy, irresponsible, immature ways, to have meaningful sex with one woman. The emphasis on the importance of sex remains, but the accent on plurality or seriality of partner, of experience, is eroded. We might therefore deny that there is a transformative urge at work within the male-centred comedy, positing instead that the increased emphasis on the showing of and dealing with sex is excused, recuperated, by the films' conservative conclusions, which endorse heterosexual monogamy as much as their sex-averse Ephronesque competitors.

Finally, I want to focus on the one key underlying point about these films that seem to form a new sub-group - that they are meant to appeal to men. If, as this essay has demonstrated, the *homme-com* seeks to reinject sex into the genre, and the *homme-com* is aimed at attracting a male audience, it logically follows that sex is being assumed to be a male interest, prerogative and goal. Male audience members may like to take issue with the fact that they are assumed to find toilet humour funny, to like slapstick and mess, to be obsessed with sex. Women viewers may in turn object to the notion that such topics are not fitting subject matter for them either to laugh at or obsess over.

In this way, the new-seeming inflection of the rom-com genre that targets and prioritises the male may be seen to be just as conservative

as the current sexless rom-coms. Both forms of the genre assume men want sex, and women withhold it from them, urging them to grow up and settle down. This inevitably recalls the double standard used to mandate men's premarital sexual experience and refuse women's rights to or desires for the same. Although the reintroduction of sexual topics to the rom-com is, arguably, necessary for its continued survival as a genre, it seems to me dangerous to allow the double standard to creep back into popular assumption, after the feminist movement and other political and cultural manifestations of the 1970s, including the radical rom-com, all did their best to banish it. This is what will happen, however, if we assign interest in sexual topics solely to men and thus exile the body and its urges and emissions to a sub-genre 'meant for' male audiences.

Director Judd Apatow has followed up his 2005 box-office hit, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, with *Knocked Up* (2007). This contains a scene between the married protagonists in which the man asks his wife, 'Shall we have sex tonight?' Her answer is a resounding negative - 'Yurghhh!' - worsened rather than tempered when she expands, 'I'm just really constipated right now.' Here we see components of body humour in conflict not just with the romantic but with the sexual, as if the earthy and gross-out elements of these films have begun to war with each other. Significantly, however, it is again the man who wants and the woman who withholds sex. While the returned emphasis on the body and on sexual urges that the male-centred rom-coms introduce may, then, be welcomed as returning the genre to some of the realism offered by the 1970s radical rom-coms, if this is inevitably associated with male urges and with female restraint, this new turn within the genre offers no more validation of women's rights to sexual desire and fulfilment than the Ephronesque comedies such films ostensibly oppose.