

Chapter One: Breaching the Inner Sanctum

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Chapter One Breaching the Inner Sanctum

In the middle of August 1932, a scene played out on movie screens, the likes of which American film audiences had never seen before. The sequence is so funny, fast-paced, and irreverent that it is difficult to see the social commentary churning beneath its surface. This begins some twenty-four minutes into the Marx Brothers' film *Horse Feathers* when we see a supercilious professor of the mythical Huxley College (Robert Greig) bedecked in a Ph.D. robe and tasseled graduation cap as he delivers a lecture on anatomy. His students are attired in stylish dresses and sport coats and segregated by gender, with most of the men on his left and the women on his right. As the professor talks and reads from a textbook, the attendees sit passively, silently, and obediently, some with their hands folded. They take no notes and they have neither pens nor notepads at their disposal. The professor lectures, spooling out authentic-sounding gobbledygook, saying, "At that we see that the function of the respiratory system is to transmit oxygen into the bloodstream. This process, which is called osmosis" Before he finishes the sentence, however, the school's new president, Quincy Adams Wagstaff (played by Groucho Marx), opens the door, sticks his head in the room and says, "Have they started sawing a woman in half yet?" The professor welcomes Groucho and asks what brings him to the classroom.

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Groucho replies, “A bicycle, but I left it out in the hallway.” Before the professor can say anything else Groucho continues: “Have you got two empty dunce chairs? I brought you two empty dunces.” He swings the door open and in walk Baravelli, a local bootlegger, and Pinky, the local dogcatcher, played by Chico and Harpo Marx, respectively. Despite a directive from Grieg that the two take seats on the men’s side of the room, the newcomers immediately go to the women’s side, kiss two of the ladies on their faces, and throw punches at each other before settling into their chairs.

As the professor lectures, he paces the room and Groucho follows, puffing on a cigar, blowing billows of smoke in the professor’s face, and continually interrupting. Finally, Groucho asks, “Is all this stuff on the level or are you just making it up as you go along?” The professor says, “Why, everything I’ve told you can be found in the simplest textbook on anatomy. I’m sure my students will bear me out.” At this, Chico stands and yells, “We bear you out!” and he and Harpo physically shove the professor out of the room before returning a few seconds later. Groucho then takes over the class, picks up a wooden pointer, and warns the students: “And let that be a lesson to all of you. This school was here before you came and it will be here before you go.”

As if continuing where the professor left off, Groucho pulls down a chart of the human organs and nervous system and says, “Let us follow a corpuscle on its journey.” He ducks behind the desk, grabs a newsboy cap and valise, and acts as if he is leaving. “Oh, my mistake,” he says. “I thought I was a corpuscle.” He goes on, spooling out his own brand of gibberish: “As you know, there is constant warfare between the red and white corpuscles.” He calls the students “baboons” and asks them, “What is a corpuscle?” Chico stands and says, “That’s easy. First is a

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captain, then is a lieutenant, and then it's a corpuscle." Unamused by the answer, Groucho says, "That's fine. Why don't you bore a hole in yourself and let the sap run out?"

Groucho points at a chart of bodily organs on the wall and says,

"We now find ourselves among the Alps. The Alps are a simple people living on a diet of rice and old shoes. Beyond the Alps lies more Alps. And the lord alps those that alps themselves. We now come to the bloodstream. The blood rushes down to the feet, gets a look at those feet, and rushes back to the head again. This is known as auction pinochle."

He turns away momentarily, and as he does, Harpo slinks to the front of the room, hangs a picture of a horse in front of the chalkboard, and goes back to his chair. When Groucho sees it, he points at the animal's hindquarters and says, "That reminds me. I haven't seen my son all day," before continuing with more of his pseudointellectual bloviation. He turns away one more time and Harpo again sneaks to the front and this time hangs a poster of a scantily clad woman over the anatomy chart. When Groucho sees this, he says, "Now, on closer examination—hmm, this needs closer examination. In fact, it needs a nightgown." He faces the class and in a stern tone says, "Who's responsible for this?" He singles out Chico and says, "Is this your picture?" Chico responds, "I no think so. It doesn't look like me." Groucho says, "Take it out of here immediately and hang it up in my bedroom. Okay then, out with it. Who's responsible?" Harpo—who does not speak—stands and appears to be bawling as he points to himself, confessing his mischief. Groucho tells him, "You must be punished." He points to a young attractive lady sitting in the front row and says to her, "Just for that, you stay after school." She protests that she has done nothing wrong and he replies, "I know, but there's no fun keeping him after school." He punctuates the remark with his trademark wiggling of his eyebrows, the implication being that he has something prurient in mind.

The lecture continues with Groucho reading from the same book the professor used:

"According to von Steinmetz, the eminent physiologist, a group of phagocytes . . ." and as he

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says this Harpo and Chico take out peashooters and begin blasting him with peas. He reads some more and as he does, he peers out the corner of his eye at the two incorrigibles. After a few more words, he takes out a straw of his own and the three characters launch into a full-blown peashooter war as the other students duck, run, and scamper out of the room. The scene ends when Groucho, acting like a child playing soldier, taps on an inkwell on the front desk as if he is sending a message via telegraph and says, “My left wing has been turned. My rear end has been cut off. But I’ll fight it out on these lines.” One of the missiles hits him and he clutches his head and says, “They got me!” as he pretends to fall backwards and die as the scene dissolves (*Horse Feathers*).

This sketch is a classic example of the madcap saturation comedy that has come to characterize so much of American humor since the 1930s. More important, however, these few minutes encapsulate what the Marx Brothers bring to the fore through their films, works that, by casting the brothers as ethnic rogues invading spheres of privilege, question fundamental ideas about America. On the one hand, with Chico representing the Italian, Harpo the Irishman, and Groucho the Eastern European Jew, the films paint a picture of an America that is multicultural by design, a nation that is the product of Enlightenment values such as the belief in the sanctity of the individual and natural rights. On the other hand, these films provide a stinging critique of an America that is, as University of Colorado film scholar Mark Winokur has noted, “Puritan-derived” (*Laughter* 1), a nation that is founded upon the values, attitudes, mores, and sensibilities inherited from seventeenth century New England colonists.

The connection with the “Puritan-derived” ethos comes through clearly in “The Anatomy Lesson,” where the setting is a classroom that looks more like a church than a lecture hall. The professor, with his robe serving as his vestment and his textbook serving as his Bible, functions

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more as a minster than as a teacher. The students, meanwhile, with their silent obedience, blazers, dresses, and folded hands, become his congregants and the room, like the Puritan churches, has the women on the right and men on the left. The professor's diction is refined and precise, as if he is the product of many generations of wealth and privilege reaching all the way back to England. Not only is he priggish in his dress, language, diction, attitude and behavior, but the students are dapper, manicured, all apparently of Northern European extraction, and—judging by their polished demeanors during the worst years of the Depression—the beneficiaries of old money and therefore the wealth that the Puritans saw as a sign of God's blessing. Rather than engaging with the professor by taking notes or asking questions, the students sit passively, silently, and obediently, and the suggestion is that they know they need only go through the motions before being granted entry into comfortable upper-class lives. The implication, then, is that they unquestioningly count themselves among the elect, that is, those people the seventeenth century New England colonists believed had been hand-chosen to live in Paradise by God Himself, people like the Apostles, John Calvin, Mary Magdalene, and Puritan leaders Cotton Mather and John Winthrop, who served as governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony in its early years.

Furthermore, the setting of the college classroom is an appropriate trope and thus adds another layer to the commentary. Spheres of higher education, after all, have historically served as centers of innovative thinking, scientific advancement, and new ideas that provide a society with cultural, economic, and intellectual prestige and momentum. When all these images are taken together, they, along with the scene's formality, become the Puritans' vision of America in microcosm. It is a rigidly structured world that belongs to the blessed few. Whether or not the

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students are religious, they nevertheless clearly represent the Puritans and their ideological descendants, the Protestant Elite.

Consequently, when Groucho pokes his head through the doorway and makes his impudent comment, he pierces that sanctified bubble and indicates that he considers the room less a temple and more a vaudeville show. His very appearance underscores both his irreverence and the way he stands apart from the others. With his exaggerated eyebrows and mustache suggesting he is a hirsute Semitic, with his lensless eyeglass frames, snappy nonsensical rhetoric suggesting he is a pseudo-intellectual, with his suggestive facial expressions, with his ever-present cigar and clawhammer coat symbolizing an ill-conceived pretense of wealth, Groucho becomes the caricature of the money-grubbing, predatory, oversexed, pseudo-sophisticated, pseudo-intellectual Jew. Not only is he someone with no ties whatsoever to the Puritans, their mission, and their vision for America, but the suggestion is that he is not even a Christian. With his billows of cigar smoke, then, Groucho becomes one who poisons and even “stinks up” the air of the sacred realm. The intrusion does not stop there, however. The implication is that once in the inner circle, the Jew opens the door and invites in other “undesirables,” namely the conniving Italian, Baravelli, and the mute Irishman, Pinky, who represent—in caricature, no less—the Roman Catholics who were so reviled by the Puritans that Winthrop associated them with “the kingdom of Antichrist” (“Papers” 146).

Through scenes like this, the Marx Brothers attack the conception of America inherited from the Puritans, a vision that was handed down through the centuries and remains very much alive in the twenty-first century. In short, the sketch illustrates how tolerating the Other will eventually lead to his weaseling his way into positions of power and then inevitably to the dismantling of American institutions, attacks on Christianity, the destruction of the education

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system, and the filling of young minds with nonsense, all of which will reduce the society to chaos.

Throughout “The Anatomy Lesson” the brothers continue to amplify the threat, relentlessly taking aim at Puritan mores, folkways, and religiousism. When Groucho demands that the suggestive poster be removed immediately and that someone “hang it up in my bedroom,” for instance, he indicates that he, the replacement minister, will use the picture for masturbatorial purposes. By invading the women’s side of the room and kissing the ladies, Chico and Harpo not only threaten classroom order, but also suggest the Other will mate with the women and therefore “despoil” the purity of Anglo-Saxon gene pools. This is underscored when Groucho demands that a young lady stay after school for something “fun.”

The final eruption, therefore, illustrates two conflicting messages. First, it suggests the inherent dangers of allowing the non-Protestant Other into the sacred realm. Second, it illustrates the absurdity of that notion. This is because, by presenting themselves as caricatures, the brothers do not so much represent the Jew, the Italian, and the Irishman, but, rather, they personify naïve and ignorant but nevertheless prominent beliefs about the Jew, the Italian, and the Irishman. In this way, and unlike few others had done before and no others had done on a national stage, the Marxes are in fact attacking American xenophobia obliquely, using the tools of slapstick, hyperbole, caricature, and especially irony to force the nation to take a hard look at its underlying attitudes and conventions. Then, they add to this by making the characters fun-loving and relatable, especially to a 1930s fan base largely made up of first- and second-generation immigrant families struggling through a difficult economic climate.

The dynamics addressed so directly in “The Anatomy Lecture” play out in virtually every scene of all thirteen Marx Brothers films. They are, however, especially pronounced in the five

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made between 1931 and 1937, films that, when taken together, fuse into one narrative teeming with social commentary, a story about the role the Other plays in the shaping of America.

In the earliest of these films, *Monkey Business* from 1931, the brothers play four characters who stow away on a steamship heading toward New York. The film begins with Chico, Harpo, Groucho, and Zeppo hidden in barrels in the cargo hull. Soon, however, they take over the vessel by invading a chess game, state rooms, a barber shop, and even the control center that is the captain's quarters. By the end, once they have sneaked off the boat and into New York, they invade a posh and opulent party. Their next film, *Horse Feathers*, as discussed above, pokes fun at the fears of allowing the non-Protestant Other into universities. Their 1933 effort, and one widely regarded as their masterpiece, *Duck Soup*,¹ takes the invasion to the next level. Here Groucho's character is Rufus T. Firefly, an incompetent and fraudulent rogue who assumes the presidency of the mythical country of Freedonia and leads its people to war. In *A Night at the Opera* from two years later, Groucho plays a talent scout and personal business manager. Finally, in *A Day at the Races* from 1937, Groucho's character is a veterinarian who takes over the Standish Sanitarium, a fancy medical facility that has fallen on hard times. In other words, the threat the brothers illustrate and poke fun of expands with each successive film as they represent a more menacing encroachment upon the vision of America initiated by the Puritans and sustained by the Protestant Elite. First, in what appears to be a lark, they breach the physical borders of America itself and then the borders of economic stratification. From there, they worm their ways into the halls of academia, then the world of politics, then of business and the arts, and finally, the world of science.

To read the brothers' body of work this way lends a new profundity to their comedy as it reveals deeper dimensions of the individual jokes. Take, for instance, the pivotal scene in *Duck*

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Soup involving a heated argument between Ambassador Trentino of Sylvania (Louis Calhern) and Groucho's Rufus T. Firefly, a moment that parallels "The Anatomy Lesson" in the way that it depicts a breaching of a privileged sphere and leads to chaos, which in *Duck Soup* is the war scene that concludes the film. The setting here is that favorite Marxist symbol for the American Paradise, the party, in this case one being held at what looks like a country club, which is yet another symbol of privilege and segregation. Add to this that Groucho is intentionally uninvited when Trentino's confederate, Vera Marcal (Raquel Torres), destroys Groucho's invitation before it can be sent. Groucho manages to show up, anyway. Once there, he insults the ambassador, who turns and walks away from him. Groucho follows and the verbal jousting continues:

Trentino: You swine!
Groucho: Come again?
Trentino: You worm!
Groucho: Once more?
Trentino: You upstart!
Groucho: That's it! (*Duck Soup*)

At this, Groucho removes his gloves from his coat pocket and with them slaps Trentino across the face.

It is notable that the word "swine" does not trigger the most outrage, considering both Groucho and his character are Jews. This also gives rise to a more pertinent question: why does Groucho find "upstart" so insulting?

One answer is that "swine," like "worm," is a simple comparison to non-humans, and therefore old hat. "Upstart," however, can take on a variety of meanings. Connotatively, and in the context of the scene, it suggests somebody who starts up trouble, something which the Marx Brothers definitely do throughout all their films. A denotative reading, however, shows how Trentino is being classist, if not unabashedly racist, and definitely condescending. According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, an "upstart" is "one who has risen

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suddenly from a humble position to wealth, power, or a position of consequence,” especially in terms of social status, or one who claims to be “more important than is warranted,” descriptors that fit Groucho’s character rather well. Much the way the brothers violate geographical and legal borders in *Monkey Business*, much the way they cross sanctified borders in “The Anatomy Lesson,” Groucho in this scene is violating realms of power and privilege. He is an upstart because he is someone Trentino and his ilk regard as an ethnic vulgarian and a person ignorant of what they believe are well-established if not uncompromising social rankings. The suggestion is that Trentino sees Groucho as a person who has been purposely shoved to the side, resigned to a place where he should stay, and, once there, he should be grateful he has been included at all.

Groucho is having none of it.

Through moments like this, the Marx Brothers illustrate something that is wholly unprecedented in the world of American film comedy. Award-winning author Lee Siegel sums up the situation in his observations about Groucho that easily extend to the other brothers as well. He writes that the

comic’s role as an outsider is a modern development. Though early Greek comic playwrights practiced a frank-speaking style, the characters who delivered satiric truths occupied clear social niches in the play’s reflected social world. Satirists from Juvenal to Boccaccio to Swift, Pope, Byron, Bierce, and Twain dramatized social injustice, hypocrisy, the fathomless ambiguity of human nature, but they rarely, if ever, presented the spectacle in their work itself, of insulting pillars of society directly, let alone celebrated a fictional situation in which their characters created social conflicts themselves.

Groucho, the product par excellence of Jewish displacement, was the first comic figure to explicitly appear in a social situation while clearly existing outside it . . . No other comedians of the time come close to the wraithlike sociopath Groucho portrays in the Marx Brothers’ best films. (121-122)

Consequently, the story arc that begins with the opening credits of *Monkey Business* and ends with the closing seconds of *A Day at the Races* poses questions that are as pertinent in the twenty-first century as they were in 1776 or the 1930s, questions like: What is America? Is it a

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landmass? Is it an idea? A set of ideas? Is it the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and the promises the God of Providence made to the Puritans? Is it Thomas Jefferson's eighteenth century post-enlightenment experiment? And if it is Jefferson's experiment, what are the findings?

If the brothers had settled only for being funny, their talents and entertaining anarchy may very well have been enough to secure their positions at the top of the American comedy heap. They did much more than this, however. They also ingeniously interrogated the triumphs and shortcomings of the American experiment, illustrating a dynamic that Vanderbilt professor Nancy A. Walker puts in perspective in the introduction to her book, *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*. She discusses how,

the ideals embodied in the promises of democracy are just that—ideals and not necessarily realities—a great deal of American humor, whether overtly political or not, has pointed to the discrepancies between the grand promises of equality, prosperity, and fulfillment and the actualities of socioeconomic class differences, discrimination, and corruption. One of the most common purposes of humor is to point out such distinctions, and American humor has provided a particularly fertile setting for this development. (8)

The brothers address such matters throughout their thirteen films by looking right down the barrel of America's broken promises and the sensibilities built upon the credos of the seventeenth century colonists. Yet, rather than attacking the hypocrisy, prejudice, and failings through rallies, boycotts, or political campaigns, they choose to tease them silly.

By simultaneously threatening and questioning the very nature of America this way, by humorously illustrating the ridiculousness of the idea that the inclusion of the Other will somehow lead the country to ruin, and by using the new medium of sound cinema to humanize the marginalized on a national stage—and by doing all this with fast-paced, irreverent, and ground-breaking humor—the brothers virtually obliterated established comic modes and then created a whole new template. Although Groucho once said the brothers were “just four Jews

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trying to get a laugh” (Mills 10), there can be little doubt that the Marxes’ body of work is rife with powerful political statements. In addition to moments like “The Anatomy Lesson,” the “upstart” exchange, and the satire that is the entirety of *Duck Soup*, numerous other scenes—the “Who Dat Man?” sequence from *A Day at the Races* among the most obvious—virtually beg for political readings.

By so intrepidly examining and critiquing the American ethos, the brothers, as Martin Gardner has pointed out, “were beginning to topple our cultural and social assumptions as no other comedians on film had.” He goes on, writing that while Charlie Chaplin’s “silent humor, as hilarious as it is, simply attacks our social habits with sweet innocence” the Marx Brothers are “hardly innocent” and thus become the “modern-day David battling Goliath” (Gardner 53). Consequently, to regard the Marx Brothers as mere comedians or to regard their films as mere comedies is to only understand half the story. The Marxist body of work also provides both a mirror and a prism by which to investigate the American mind, the American spirit, and the country’s long and conflicted history of inclusion with the Other. The films ask what the United States is at its core, how it got that way, and what it is becoming.

Notes

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ⁱ Venerable film critics tend to agree with this point. Roger Ebert has commented that the “Marx Brothers created a body of work in which individual films are like slices from the whole, but *Duck Soup* (1933) is probably the best” (see “Roger Ebert: Great Movies” at rogerebert.com). Tim Dirks on the American Movie Classics filmsite has written that the film is “the Marx Brothers’ greatest and funniest masterpiece.”

Chapter Two