Disability and Comic Violence in There's Something About Mary

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There's something about my mixed reaction to the 1998 hit romantic film comedy *There's Something About Mary* that I find vexing - and it is not the film's notorious gross-out humor (most of which I did find funny). During my first viewing, I laughed out loud, delighted in the nasty sight gags, got angry nearly to the point of tears, and left the theater feeling oddly vulnerable. Mostly, I was disturbed by the film's relentless ridicule and violence toward people with disabilities. My conflicting feelings about the film reflect those found in the larger disability community.

On the one hand, positive reviewers like Mark Ravenscraft proclaim that the film is an "equal opportunity offender" that "mainstreams" people with disabilities by including them among those offended (9A). On the other hand, negative reviewers like Kathi Wolfe argue that this film specifically targets people with disabilities because of their identities and reinforces pernicious stereotypes (9A). I would add that far from mainstreaming characters with disabilities, There's Something About Mary further marginalizes them by resuscitating dying century-old stereotypes with shock treatment bursts of comic violence, reviving notions of people with disabilities as eternally dependent, innocent, and child-like, and, conversely, violent, mean-spirited, and vengeful.

An analysis of *Something About Mary* is more complicated than a dismissive romp through negative imagery, though. At the same time that the film deploys negative stereotypes, it also parodies how mainstream film uses characters with disabilities as catalysts for sensitizing male-chauvinist heroes - what Fred Pfeil calls "Sensitive Guy" films. Films such as *Hook*, *The Doctor*, *Regarding Henry*, and *The Fisher King* seemingly depict the transformation of insensitive, career-obsessed men into sensitive, family-oriented ones. Pfeil argues, though, that these films deflect threats to white male hegemony by idealizing "sundry Others," casting them as noble savages with valuable lessons to teach (38). The men end up even better than they were before: still in power at work and home, but ruling with a velvet glove rather than an iron fist (49).

While Pfeil does not explicitly address it, disabled characters finally catalyze the transformations in every film he analyzes. These films' patriarchs confront, conquer, and incorporate disability in a process that serves to invigorate, rather than challenge, male hegemony.

My laughter during *There's Something About Mary* stemmed from the film's exposure of the Sensitive Guy as a fraud: a masochist, who manipulates women and people with disabilities to get his way. Despite this film's exposure of the wolf in sheep's clothing, I will argue here that, in the end, the film's use of comic violence perpetuates the same stereotypes that it parodies.

The plot of *There's Something About Mary* is driven by the trials and tribulations of awkward, sensitive-guy hero, Ted (Ben Stiller), as he seeks first to find and then woo his long-lost high school sweetheart, Mary (Cameron Diaz). Their romance begins when Ted helps rescue Mary's mentally disabled brother Warren (Earl Brown) from cruel schoolyard bullies. The two embark on one extremely memorable date. Before the date even has a chance to get underway, Ted accidentally zips up his privates after using the bathroom and is taken away by ambulance. Mary moves away shortly after the incident, and Ted, now a thirty-something adult, wants to find the only true love he has ever had. In his way, though, are numerous obstacles: a series of comic, violent mishaps and a motley crew of competing suitors/stalkers including his supposed best friend Woogie (Chris Elliot), private detective Pat (Matt Dillon), Mary's patient Tucker (Lee Evans), and football player Brett Favre (played by the legend himself).

Early on, we catch a glimpse of what that special "something" about Mary might be. She is an odd mixture of "mommie" and "manly," feminine and masculine. She is strong, impossibly beautiful, compassionate, generous, even saintly. Her "Saint Mary" qualities are foregrounded by her

treatment of people with disabilities and the down-and-out. She cares for Warren and his buddies, feeds the homeless, and befriends her lonely, elderly neighbor as well as her former patient, Tucker. When Mary interacts with these characters, she is usually back-lit, emanating a halo-like glow around her blonde hair. At the same time, Mary comfortably occupies the male domain: she is a sports buff and a successful orthopedic surgeon (a particularly male-dominated field of medicine). Everyone seems to fall under Mary's spell, each suitor presenting himself in some way more "sensitive" to win over this sports-loving saint.

Mary's characterization does two things. First, Mary is established as a kind of sadist - or a "sadist-by-proxy" (the more a character is impaired or abused, the more she is attracted to him) - which provides the comic situation for the various suitors' competitive masochism. Re-framing the hero's trials and tribulations as a form of masochistic pleasure calls into question the traditional Sensitive Guy's motives. Is the transformation to sensitivity sincere or a carefully calculated performance? Second, Mary's potentially threatening infringements into male territory are benign, since her participation in the male domain is surface-level at best. She wears a mini-dress and heels as a surgeon and fails to diagnose faked injuries. Mary's characterization as a liberated female sadist-by-proxy is an exaggeration of the strong, capable female partners in Sensitive Guy narratives who, according to Pfeil, must be reigned in to keep male power intact (49).

The main function of the characters with disabilities is to parallel and amplify Ted's vulnerability, a quality that initially provides obstacles to winning Mary, but that eventually makes him the most successful suitor. The film contains numerous characterizations of people with disabilities, and too many acts of violence and ridicule against them to count, not to mention violent acts motivated by homophobia and misogyny. In this essay, I want to focus on the most significant interactions between Ted and the disabled characters: his close connection with Warren, his confrontations with random cripples, and his rivalry with Tucker.

The first relationship I want to explore (between Ted and Warren) is the most visible, so it bears extended analysis. Warren - and by extension, Ted - is a time worn disability film stereotype: the Sweet Innocent. Film scholar Martin Norden explains that the Sweet Innocent is often a disabled child (think Tiny Tim) who depends on others for his or her every need. Furthermore, this defenseless character acts a barometer of morality, bringing out the protectiveness of every good-hearted, able-bodied person, and the true evil of miscreants (33). The Sweet Innocent's protector is often a beautiful ingenue. It is hardly a stretch to read Warren as the Sweet Innocent and Mary as his ingenue caretaker. Warren, though an adult man, is portrayed as an awkward child. He wears high-water jeans, boyish t-shirts and tennis shoes, ambles about with a teetering gait, and looks at the world with wide-eyed wonder. He is also treated as an innocent, if naughty, little boy. Also a barometer of morality, Warren's reactions to Mary's suitors determine whether she will find them eligible for her attentions. She dumps her only other serious boyfriend, Brett, when he is accused (falsely, we later learn) of considering Warren a burden. At the end of the film, Mary chooses Ted over Brett (who has reappeared) partly because Warren likes Ted best.

Warren's disability and Ted's sensitivity make them magnets for every conceivable violent gag imaginable. Comedy theorists Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik explain that serial, violent gags symbolically castrate, infantalize, and disempower the hero (60). As Ted repeatedly suffers violent mishaps, he becomes more and more allied with the child-like state of the Sweet Innocent. Many of the violent gags are direct assaults to Warren and Ted's manhood. For example, schoolyard bullies trick Warren into asking kids if they have seen his "wiener" instead of his baseball, which prompts other kids to beat up him up. Ted is analogously shamed when he zips his "frank and beans" into his pants. Both Warren's wiener and Ted's "frank and beans" are unprotected, susceptible to assault and humiliation. Pfeil offers that Sensitive Guy heroes must "spend some purgatorial time in the virtually powerless position of a child," an experience that teaches the chauvinist to connect with his inner child (45). *Something About Mary* parodies this convention. When Ted is reduced to a child-like state, he is violently abused and does not appear to learn anything. He just becomes more pathetic as each

mishap seems to intensify his masochistic pursuit of Mary.

Not only does Warren's disability parallel the threat to Ted's masculinity, but it magnifies his powerlessness as well. Warren, as a Sweet Innocent, cannot be held accountable for his behavior, and often inadvertently behaves violently toward Ted. Warren becomes enraged when anyone touches his ears. When Ted mistakenly violates Warren's "ear space" on the fateful prom date, Warren beats him to a pulp. Even though Ted is bleeding from the attack, Mary's family consoles Warren as the victim and berates Ted as the perpetrator. The fact that Ted becomes most susceptible to violence when he's "performing" sensitivity for Mary parodies the scenarios in Sensitive Guy films in which acts of kindness toward the disabled character add to the hero's power rather than subtract from it.

The problem with using the Sweet Innocent stereotype to emasculate Ted and thereby mock the Sensitive Guy film genre is that the people with disabilities are disempowered along the way. Norden explains that Sweet Innocent stereotypes are "classic manifestations of mainstream society's need to create and then 'service' a charity-worthy underclass to enhance its sense of superiority" (36). When people with disabilities are portrayed as unfortunate victims of fate instead of a minority class, they are kept in their place as recipients of charity, not civil rights.

In addition to the Sweet Innocent, the film also invokes the "Obsessive Avenger" stereotype to humiliate Ted. This disabled character type is the exact opposite of the Sweet Innocent. Norden describes him as "an egomaniacal sort, almost always an adult male, who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement and/or violating his moral code in some other way" (52). In one scene, which serves no purpose in furthering the film's plot, a nameless electric wheelchair-user (identified only as Ted's boss' brother) abuses Ted's good nature when he helps him move into a new apartment. While Ted lugs a heavy piece of furniture, the "wheelchair guy" accuses him of being an "insensitive prick" because Ted complains about his back in the presence of a man who cannot walk. The scene ends with the wheelchair guy buzzing off into the dark, misty night with a bumper sticker on the back of his chair reading "How's My Driving? 1-800-EAT-SHIT." The fact that Ted takes orders not only from his boss but his boss' disabled brother makes him appear even more powerless. The Obsessive Avenger stereotype, while opposite of the Sweet Innocent, also functions to keep disabled people in their place as charity victims. By portraying disabled people as "ungrateful" and even vengeful, they are excluded from the mainstream through fear as well as pity.

Perhaps the most pernicious disability representation that this film revives is "The Fraudulent Beggar." According to Norden, this silent-film era character often caused outlandish chases when his fraud was discovered, and, on the darker side, provoked violent retaliation (15). Additionally, Norden argues that these films "said to audiences that physical disabilities were acceptable subjects for humor as long as the characters weren't really disabled" (16). Most popular a time in which Americans were obsessively concerned with "beggars, especially those with fake disabilities" (14), Norden argues that representations of Fraudulent Beggars cast doubt on whether disabled people were worthy of or genuinely in need of assistance in a society deeply in love with the "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps" narrative.

The character, Tucker, is a retread of the Fraudulent Beggar stereotype. At first, Tucker - a supposed successful architect who speaks with a high-brow British accent - appears to be Mary's concerned and loving friend. Before Tucker is revealed as a fraud, his supposed disability is shamelessly used as a cheap sight gag. Both times I saw this film, audiences laughed the first time Tucker appears on screen, as he merely walks toward Mary on his crutches. Apparently, some spectators found the image of a well-dressed, well-educated man walking with Canadian crutches with bent, stiff feet funny. Tucker's disability is clearly exaggerated for a laugh in Mary's office when he tries to warn her of Pat's true identity. As Tucker leaves the office, he drops his keys, prompting a long, drawn-out comic bit as he weaves and wobbles precariously on his crutches (a la Jerry Lewis) attempting to pick them up. He drops the keys again in the lobby, and the tired joke is recycled for another round of laughs.

We soon discover, though, that Tucker is a fraud, faking a broken back and undergoing treatment just to get close to Mary. Tucker's non-disabled status lets audience members who laughed at the character's disability off the hook. Even worse, his non-disabled status saves his life when Pat, intent on running his

rival down in his car, slams on the breaks when Tucker abandons his crutches and runs normally. Tucker, who's real name is (surprise) Norm, reveals to Pat his true identity as a non-disabled, American, pizza delivery boy, who, too, is in love with Mary. Pat and Tucker, then, become partners in crime in an effort to keep Mary and Ted apart. As a fake, Tucker's character mocks Sensitive Guy film's tendency to ennoble its sundry Others. Tucker's tactical use of disability to get close to Mary and to avoid suspicion undoes the innocent cripple stereotype so central to Sensitive Guy films.

Deploying the Fraudulent Beggar stereotype, though, resonates dangerously in our current social climate when the definition of disability is hotly contested. Court battles have been waged recently to determine who really "is" disabled (does AIDS, obesity, and cancer count?), and therefore worthy of civil rights protections that the ADA affords. Even when legally determined to be disabled, people with invisible impairments become suspect. For example, it is common to hear complaints in the hallways and in the media that accommodations for students with disabilities in academia are "undeserved" and that students who are not really disabled are flooding the classroom demanding "special rights."

In the end, the film's hero still manages to reign in the strong woman and subordinate the disabled characters, even though he really does nothing to make both happen. Neale and Krutnik point out that surprise happy endings in slapstick comedies often reveal that the hero has not gained competence, but merely a "change of consequence and fortune" (59-60). In this case, the sundry Others never really represent a threat to white male hegemony. Ted's triumph at the end of the film does not occur because he has learned to be sensitive or found his inner child as in traditional Sensitive Guy films. Instead, Ted's sensitivity is portrayed as a kind of manipulative masochism; he has power all along.

Given this film's marginalization of people with disabilities by using them solely as stereotypical dramaturgical devices to parody Sensitive Guy films, Ravenscraft's assertion that this film "mainstreams" people with disabilities seems overly generous at best. Had this film really mainstreamed these characters, then actors with disabilities would have been included in the film's leading roles. Could their exclusion signal the return of the mentality that it is o.k. to mock these characters since the actors are not really disabled? What if disability were portrayed as something other than a dramaturgical device? The mainstreaming argument might be more persuasive if people with disabilities were shown as anything other than targets of violence.

I have not even gone into the film's prominent treatment of mental illness or its numerous, disparaging references to disability, such as Pat's fabrication that Mary had become a "roller-pig," a wheelchair using, single mother of five, on welfare. With the Supreme Court's recent decision to narrow substantially the reach and power of the Americans with Disabilities Act, its hardly surprising that mainstream representation also puts disabled people back in their "rightful place."

Could the change in representation of characters with disabilities from patronizing sensitivity to comic violence mirror the mainstream's increasing anxiety over the power and visibility of disabled people? Ravenscraft writes in his review that laughter in response to *Something About Mary* has "liberated disability from the closet" (9A). I'm not so sure.

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