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May 18, 2005

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

“When I Get Home, I’m Fixin’ to Stay:”

Gender and Domesticity in

Post-World War II Musical Westerns

By  
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South Hadley, Massachusetts

April 2005

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Mom and Dad, who made fun of me for watching *Calamity Jane* but probably sang “Whip-Crack-Away” reverently when they thought I couldn’t hear them. Also, thanks for raising me.

Thanks to Robin Blaetz for, like, everything.

Thanks to Mary Renda for pushing me to think better and write better.

Thanks to Paul Staiti for time and advice.

Thanks to Hampshire College, Bob Rakoff, and Susan Tracy for offering a class on the American West in my first year.

Thanks to friends who watched musical Westerns and read drafts and offered suggestions and support and tissues and shoulders: Aislinnmarie Rocamora, Sharon T. Smith, Abby Burns, Yifat Tamir, Monique Bankey, Emily Barrett, Rose Levine, Vanessa Di Cecco, and Elizabeth Oshel. Bless yore beautiful hides.

Special shout-out to the sisters in the struggle who commiserated with me:

Karuna Johnson, Jen Leahy, Ashley Brown, Laura Khor, Emily Welch, Alix Martin, and certainly not least, Ashley Mathis, my Dalmatian sister in unity.

Extra-special shout-out to Kim Elizabeth Baker, who talked me down from my many crises instead of hanging up when she heard me hyperventilating over the phone. That karma will come back around to you, I promise.

Final and heartfelt thanks go out to Howard Keel, from whom all blessings flow.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **“THERE’S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS:”**

#### **AN INTRODUCTION TO MUSICAL WESTERNS IN THE POSTWAR ERA, 1946-1955**

In 1978, nationally-known film critic Bosley Crowther reflected on fifty years of filmmaking in his book *Reruns*, a compendium of reviews of his favorite films. In his review of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), he wrote that “Hollywood, despite all the tempting material that could be found in the legends of the settlement of our country and the expansion of the frontier, has only infrequently undertaken the celebration of American folk themes in musical comedy.”<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* critic could only remember two such films that he considered “first rate:” *Green Pastures* (1936) and *Seven Brides*.<sup>2</sup> Either Crowther’s memory was lacking or his definition of “first-rate” was a strict one. In fact, Hollywood has presented a host of musicals incorporating America’s most potent folk story: the predestined march westward. The bulk of these films were released in the immediate postwar era, between George Sidney’s *The Harvey Girls* (1946) and Fred Zinneman’s *Oklahoma!* (1955). As Crowther notes,

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<sup>1</sup> Bosley Crowther, “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers,” in *Reruns: Fifty Memorable Films* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1978), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Crowther, 92.

Westerns have been popular since the first days of cinema, so is it perhaps peculiar that comparatively few film studios or artists have seized the opportunity to musicalize the great American genre.<sup>3</sup> The scarcity of musical Westerns only makes it more significant that so many appeared in the decade after the end of World War II. After V-J Day, there was a spike in the production of historical musical Westerns, all of them with either a female lead or a star couple. This was not an accident. These films – at the nexus of the culturally important Western genre and the seemingly innocent but potentially subversive musical genre – tell us a great deal about the gender anxieties of the postwar era, the solutions that popular culture offered to assuage or address those anxieties, and the limits of those solutions.

Through close readings of several musical Westerns of the late 1940s and 1950s, this project will explore the following questions: What happens to the conventions of the Western when it becomes a musical? How do the musical, which is concerned with the formation of a heterosexual couple, and the Western, a genre primarily concerned with masculinity, together construct gender? And finally, what can this intersection of genres tell us about gender relations and expectations between 1946 and 1955?

I argue that the rash of musical Westerns in the immediate postwar period responded to disruptions in gender ideology caused by World War II. Wartime production needs required unprecedented manpower, and in the absence of men,

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<sup>3</sup> Crowther, 92.

womanpower. But as the war drew to a close, women were encouraged to take up their place in the home, and films and other cultural apparatus worked to construct an ideology of the postwar period that envisioned the home as the center of American life.

Musical Westerns play out these shifts at the intersection of the musical and the Western. These shifts are most visible in the films' treatment of women. Although the tradition of musicals is one that includes prominent space for men and women, the Western is a decidedly male genre. To inject a woman into it, to allow her to take up space and perform, changes the primary concern of the Western. In postwar musical Westerns, the threat to civilization is one of gender performance: only the appropriate performances of gender will close the narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Although musical Westerns helped to construct the dominant domestic ideology of the postwar years, they also reveal a profound anxiety around accepting "the domestic" as an ideal – for men or for women. This discomfort is strikingly evident in musical Westerns because the intersection of the genres is particularly revealing. The strictures of the Western allow for easy recognition of the breach of those strictures, and the freedom of the musical allows for these anxieties to be brought to the fore because the musical's excess camouflages

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in prewar "A" musical Westerns, female intrusion on these Western conventions is not the major problem. For example, in *Girl of the Golden West* (1938), Nelson Eddy is a Mexican bandit (he was adopted), and his lawlessness is the threat. His love for Jeanette MacDonald, an independent saloon owner, inspires him to give up banditry so that he may marry her. But the plot is a familiar Western one: civilization is threatened by forces opposed to law and order. It is not overtly concerned with shifts in gender performance resulting from intrusion of the musical.

them. In this chapter, I will outline the major conventions of the Western and the musical, paying particular attention to how gender is constructed in each genre. In the final section, I will bring the genres together, explaining more fully the postwar boom in musical Westerns and how they worked in relation to the dominant domestic ideology in the decade after World War II.

#### “Lost My Heart in the Black Hills:” American Culture and Western Conventions

The Western is perhaps the most culturally resonant and historically significant film genre because it is focused on the conflict on the frontier, a conflict that is central to American ideology. The connection between the American West and national identity was articulated by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 at a historians’ conference at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner declared that the frontier was closed, but that in the history of the frontier we could find the national character defined. In his own words, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”<sup>5</sup> Turner argued that America was constantly remade on the frontier. When a man is forced into the untamed wilderness, Turner argued, the man grows stronger, and “[l]ittle by little he transforms the wilderness...[and] here is a new product that is

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 1.



*American*” (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup> This progression was also a transition from “savagery” to civilization, for as the man was re-born, so was the land tamed. In Turner’s narrative, these first pioneers were followed by farmers, then business entrepreneurs, and finally, government. In addition to the American man, democracy was born on the frontier.

As historian Richard Slotkin argues, Turner was not the first person to articulate these ideas – their roots are in the 1840s declaration of “manifest destiny” and its ideology. In addition, many of Turner’s ideas had been passionately expressed by his contemporary, a Dakota rancher and sometime-politician, Theodore Roosevelt. But Turner, a historian, was highly influential in the study of history; he created a narrative of American history that is still used to structure school textbooks. And although Turner’s history has been contested and discredited by more recent historiography, the ideology of the West that he articulated remains a powerful force.

Turner’s influence was considerable, but he did not develop the myth of the frontier by himself. Popular culture and mass media helped to turn a frontier thesis into the great American dreamscape. In terms of the frontier, the line between history and myth was always a blurry one. The historical conflict on the frontier was mythologized even as it was played out. Buffalo Bill Cody, who had worked as a scout in the West, was romanticized in print by dime novelist Ned Buntline and turned his own exploits into entertainment around the world, as he

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<sup>6</sup> Turner, 4.

toured with his “Wild West” show through the late 1800s. Slotkin believes that by the final years of the Wild West in the 1910s, the shows no longer played the same note of historical authenticity that Cody had worked toward in its beginnings. Slotkin writes that the “Farewell Performances:”

reveal the extent to which the Myth of the Frontier had become independent of the historical reality that produced it. In Cody’s farewell tours, that nostalgia for the “Old West” that had been the basis for his first success gave way to a new form of the sentiment: a nostalgia not for the reality, but for the myth – not for the frontier itself, but for the lost glamour of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.<sup>7</sup>

Through the late 1800s and through the 1900s, the myth of the West, actual history irrelevant, was spread through magazine articles and pamphlets, in dime novels and through more expensive paperbacks, in film, and on television. The media, like Cody and his audiences, yearned not for the frontier, but for the wild West, whether it was produced by Buffalo Bill or a Hollywood studio.

As Cody made his grand farewells, the movies made their grand entrance. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Western films have been one of the major outlets for creating and maintaining the myth of the West. One of the earliest narrative films was Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), produced in New Jersey by Thomas Edison’s studios. It tells the story (in less than fifteen minutes) of a group of bandits who hold up a train, rob the passengers, attempt a getaway, get caught, and die in a gunfight in the woods. In addition to being a technological breakthrough (it featured multiple camera set-ups, multiple shots, and cross-cut scenes from different locations), it used many of the Western

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 87.

conventions now familiar to us: a hold-up on a train, a posse on horseback, the final shootout, and the issue of violence threatening encroaching civilization.<sup>8</sup> These conventions are still being played out 100 years after *The Great Train Robbery*, after a century of reinventions and resurgences of the genre. Westerns were all the rage in the silent years, but saw a decline in popularity when the Depression hit. The genre found new audiences in the mid-1930s with the advent of the singing cowboy, and the Western became “B” studios’ staple production in the 1940s. They grew more serious and self-aware after the war and were deconstructed in the 1960s and 1970s. It sometimes seems like Kevin Costner single-handedly has kept the Western alive in the last two decades, between *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Wyatt Earp* (1994), and *Open Range* (2003). But his films are only a few among many others, including Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1991), Billy Bob Thornton’s *All the Pretty Horses* (2000), Steve Miner’s *Texas Rangers* (2001), and Ron Howard’s *The Missing* (2003). Television continues to be an outlet for Westerns, from television movies like *Monte Walsh* (2003) starring Tom Selleck, to HBO’s well-received series drama *Deadwood* (premiered 2004), which retells the exploits of denizens of that town, including Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane. The Western may appear to ride off into the sunset for periods, but it always returns.

Film Westerns have changed over time, but the Western remains one of the most concrete film genres, with a large catalogue of visual and narrative

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<sup>8</sup> For more on *The Great Train Robbery* and early cinema, see Robert Sklar’s *Movie Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 24-27.

conventions. Their iconography makes them instantly recognizable: desert mesas against open skies; a farm house on a lonely plain; wide, dusty streets lined with wooden storefronts; and vistas shot in long shots with long takes. Westerns' narratives may deal with the conflict between ranchers and farmers, between Native Americans and the cavalry, or between a federal marshal and a band of outlaws. No matter the specifics, the goal of the story is invariably the same: to establish civilization in a contested frontier area. Civilization is nearly always constructed as white Protestant civilizations where white men and white women may live in safety under the rule of law. The signifiers of this definition of civilization seldom vary, and include churches, schoolhouses, and, especially, (white) women.

Westerns are about male action. The rancher, not his wife, is responsible for civilizing the frontier. Consequently, the figure of the Western hero is hugely important – in films and in American society. We need only look to the cultural importance of John Wayne to see how his Western identity has had real consequences in terms of national policies in the twentieth century. Garry Wills writes, “Both friends and critics of American foreign policy in the 1960s and 1970s said it was afflicted with a ‘John Wayne syndrome.’ President Nixon thought that domestic affairs...could be straightened out by taking Wayne’s performance in *Chisum* as a model.” Wills adds that when Henry Kissinger

“attributed his diplomatic success to Americans’ admiration for cowboys who come into town alone, he was drawing on the Wayne legacy.”<sup>9</sup>

Because boys and men measured themselves against the images of Wayne and others, Westerns “created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century,” as Jane Tompkins argues. She writes, “The model was not for women but for men: Westerns insist on that point by emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal.”<sup>10</sup> Different critics have prioritized different facets of the Western hero. Martin Pumphrey has written about his “toughness,” Jane Tompkins has emphasized his “hard”ness, and Wendy Chapman Peak has argued that “success” is paramount to the protagonist. Taken together, they illustrate that the classical Western hero may be many things. He is: strong, capable, reasonable, rational, unpretentious, independent, strong but silent, proficient with a firearm, and law-abiding (to his own “higher” law if legislation prove inadequate). His primary duty is to help establish civilization by instilling order on an unstable frontier. He removes whatever threatens the establishment of civilization, usually through acts of violence. The threat may be an ethnic one (Indians or, less frequently, Mexican bandits) or a moral one (lawless outlaws or greedy railroad barons).

The classical Western hero carries certain meanings in American culture. As John P. Sisk wrote in a 1957 *Commonweal* article titled “The Western Hero:” “the

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<sup>9</sup> Gary Wills, *John Wayne’s America* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Tompkins, *The West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 17.

Hero is a critic of society...He is a value-bearer, a measurer, a dramatic commentator on any age that finds him a compelling figure.”<sup>11</sup> Variations from the type of masculinity exuded by John Wayne or Randolph Scott in the 1930s and 1940s may be read as commentaries on masculine agency in those periods. As many Western scholars have noted, trends in the postwar Western reflect anxieties around postwar masculinity and the male hero. From a sheriff who finds that the community he fought to establish may not be worth the effort (*High Noon*, 1952), to a cowboy whose obsessive hate alienates his compatriot and the audience (*The Searchers*, 1956), to a man whose drive for revenge ends with a shootout during which he kills his own brother (*Winchester '73*, 1950), the Western heroes who appeared in the 1950s seemed more troubled, more complex, less certain, and less incontrovertibly *right* than they had appeared before. The uncertainty of the conventions around the Western hero grew more unstable as decades passed; films like *The Wild Bunch* (1969) had violent, insecure, unsuccessful Western heroes who were, truly, not heroes at all. *The Wild Bunch* and its “anti-heroes” signaled the destruction of the genre as pre-war audiences knew it.

In contrast, audiences before and after the war would have found little difference in the characterizations of women in Westerns. In nearly all Westerns, female characters are consigned to the periphery of the film. Their influence on the narrative is limited, but their presence in the genre is crucial. As director

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<sup>11</sup> John P. Sisk, “The Western Hero,” *The Commonweal* 66 (12 July 1957): 367.

Anthony Mann has said, “without a woman the Western wouldn’t work.”<sup>12</sup> There are a number of ways in which women function in classical Westerns that make them indispensable to the genre. Women are most valuable to the Western as symbols representing civilization – or the lack thereof. The women in a town are indicative of how far a town has progressed. The right kind of women contribute their labor to instill civilized society, as Westerns define it, and to enable male action: they are the cooks, the homemakers, the child-rearers, the educators, the churchgoers, and the clothes-menders. Towns with the wrong kinds of women (prostitutes/saloon girls) are generally lawless towns, places where real civilization has yet to come. The same is true for towns with ethnic women. Native American women or Latina characters signify territories that still need taming.

Less concretely, although just as critically, the woman in the Western distracts from the homoerotic relationship between men in these films. As Jane Tompkins points out, “Female ‘screen’ characters, who are really extensions of the men they are paired with, perform this alibi function all the time, masking the fact that what the men are really interested in is one another.”<sup>13</sup> With the notable exception of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, the most memorable and enduring Western duos are male-male. Consider Montgomery Clift and John Wayne in *Red River* (1948), Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette in dozens of films, William Boyd as Hopalong

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<sup>12</sup> Pam Cook, “Women,” in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 241.

<sup>13</sup> Tompkins, 40.

Cassidy and Andy Clyde as California Carlson in their series of Westerns, and, of course, Paul Newman and Robert Redford as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Even Roy Rogers appeared in more films with his sidekick Gabby Hayes than he did with his wife. In the highly-charged homosocial and homophobic world of the Western, women deflect the possibility of homosexual panic on the part of the (male) spectator.

There is a clear and crucial dichotomy, seldom breached, concerning female characters in Westerns. Sandra Kay Schackel writes of the two major types of women found in Westerns: “woman as nurturer/civilizer and woman as femme fatale/vamp,” variations on the familiar virgin/whore dichotomy.<sup>14</sup> (These categories describe white female characters, although Latina women will often appear in the latter category.) Woman-as-civilizer may appear in several guises: farmer’s daughter, rancher’s wife, schoolmarm, or cavalry wife. These are good women, the women the Western hero fights to protect and chooses to stay with and marry (if he chooses to stay in town). The hero may dally with the other type of woman, but even if she is not run out of town or killed off for her sins, he will never choose her. The Western hero must always choose civilization and therefore he must always choose its unsullied representative, the woman-as-civilizer.

Although the place of women in Westerns is vital to the genre’s set of meanings, the existence of women – even, and especially, that of the “good

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<sup>14</sup> Sandra Kay Schackel, “Women in Western Films: The Civilizer, the Saloon Sister, and Their Modern Sister,” in *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film*, ed. Archie P. MacDonald (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 197.



woman” – is fraught with conflict. As representatives of civilization, they are what the male hero fights to maintain. Male heroes work to create a safe community in which good women can live. But within the logic of the Western, the arrival of civilization is not necessarily a change for the better. Edward Buscombe writes that stories of the West are “suffused with a rosy tinge of nostalgia.”<sup>15</sup> Consequently, there is an anxiety inherent in Westerns that the hero will create (or already has created) civilization. At some level, women are to blame for ruining all of the fun of the frontier, because eventually the male hero will create a community wherein he will have no place. Westerns fear a world like the one Sisk described in the 1950s, a world that is so domesticated that it must tell stories that create a mythic past that celebrates unfettered individualism. Note the treatment of women from temperance leagues, the ultimate “women’s issue” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in films from 1939’s *Stagecoach* (the dour, unattractive women who run the prostitute-with-a-heart-of-gold out of town) to *The Wild Bunch* (where temperance women are bullet shields).<sup>16</sup> As much as Western heroes are caught up with the good woman, he must remain distinct from her, lest he become domesticated and lose all of those qualities that make him so attractive.

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Buscombe, “The Western: A Short History,” in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe (New York : Atheneum, 1988), 52.

<sup>16</sup> In the actual history of the United States, the temperance movement was about much more than alcohol. Many temperance activists, like Susan B. Anthony, were also feminists. These women believed that prohibiting alcohol would benefit women by inducing men to bring their wages home to their families rather than spending them on liquor. They also believed that limiting alcohol consumption would decrease the prevalence of domestic violence. See Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 125-130.

“Everything about It Is Appealing:” The World of the Musical

The musical, as a film genre, does not immediately appear to have the historical, social, and political gravity that the Western does. While Westerns may be recognized by distinctly American iconography and narrative themes (desert setting, sheriff tames a town), musicals are recognizable by their disruption of the narrative – they halt the story with musical numbers. The musical is fluid; it may span other genres, sometimes overtaking other generic qualities. For example, a gangster film may be a musical (*Guys and Dolls*, 1955), a war film may be a musical (*South Pacific*, 1958), a melodrama may be a musical (*A Star Is Born*, 1954), and, of course, a Western may be a musical.

Like Westerns, musicals have American roots, although these roots are traceable through the development of the form rather than through the development of the nation. The musical developed from various sources, including vaudeville, opera, and theater.<sup>17</sup> The American stage musical *Show Boat* in 1927 marked the entrance of the musical as it is best known today. That show, produced by Oscar Hammerstein II (before the entrance of Richard Rodgers) and with music by Hammerstein and Jerome Kern, was the first musical to combine a dramatic story with relevant music. This was a radical departure from previous musical theater, which had been made up of musical revues. Revues had no plot;

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), 185.

similar in structure to vaudeville, they featured a loose collection of songs, dances, and comic bits. The most well-known Broadway revues were the long-running *Follies*, produced by Florenz Ziegfeld from 1907-1932. When Kern and Hammerstein decided to tie their songs into a pre-existing plot structure (Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat*), they revolutionized the musical.<sup>18</sup>

The year 1927 was also an important year for the entire film industry. That year, Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, the first full-length picture with prerecorded sound. It was also a musical, starring powerhouse vaudevillian Al Jolson. The success of *The Jazz Singer* combined with the success of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's 1929 musical *The Broadway Melody* turned Hollywood from a silent industry town into an all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing one. *The Broadway Melody* in particular proved that musicals could be profitable and critically successful. The film won the second-ever Academy Award for best picture of the year, broke box office records across the nation, helped to secure studio investment in the new sound technology, and ensured the continued production of musical films.<sup>19</sup>

In analyzing the musical, form and visual style are more important than the narrative preoccupations of the particular film. The pleasure of musicals lies in their spectacle, in the way that they deny the logic of the commonplace narrative and foray into the impossible world of song and dance. The world of the musical

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the *Show Boat* revolution, see Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1987), 59-65.

<sup>19</sup> Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 188.

number is necessarily one of excess – it expresses emotion so powerful that it cannot be articulated in words but must be performed in music and dance. The mise-en-scene is a source of pleasurable excess, too. The best example of the musical’s use of mise-en-scene comes from *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952).<sup>20</sup> In “You Were Meant for Me,” the film self-reflexively constructs the spectacle that is necessary to the number and, by extension, the genre. When Gene Kelly leads Debbie Reynolds onto a soundstage to express his love for her, he sets the (sound)stage for his song, illuminating the backdrop (“a beautiful sunset,” he declares), switches on a fog machine (“mist from the distant mountains”), and turns on the powerful colored lights (“500,000 kilowatts of stardust”). Then he begins to sing. In this scene, the film reveals the mechanisms of Hollywood cinema, but it also reveals the importance of the mise-en-scene to the musical itself. Kelly cannot declare his love, and the number simply will not work, without the artifice that is self-consciously on display here. Despite the audience’s full awareness of the artificiality of the scene, the number works. Kelly’s revelation demystifies the genre only to remystify it again.

Because artifice and spectacle are central to the musical, the genre has earned the reputation of being a frivolous form of entertainment. But musicals are not without cultural significance. The musical’s excesses respond to types of lack in society, as Richard Dyer argues in his essay on “Entertainment and Utopia.” He argues that entertainment “is not simply the expression of eternal needs – it

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<sup>20</sup> *Singin’ in the Rain*, dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 103 min., MGM/UA Home Video, 1993, VHS.

responds to real needs *created by society*” (emphasis his).<sup>21</sup> Dyer argues that musicals respond to real societal deficiencies without answering them. He lists them: In response to scarcity, musicals display abundance. For the problem of continuous exhaustion, they offer boundless energy. Musical offer intensity for a dreary world, transparency in a manipulative society, and community for a fragmented population.<sup>22</sup> In doing all of this, he argues, musicals offer a vision of utopia that responds to societal ills but does not solve them. Dyer’s oppositions are sometimes visible in the structure of musicals themselves. To use Dyer’s example, Busby Berkeley’s *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) opens with Ginger Rogers and group of chorus girls attired in gold coins singing “We’re in the Money.” It is a vision, certainly, of excess and abundance. However, in the narrative of the film, Ginger Rogers, Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler and the rest are victims of scarcity; they are underemployed singers and dancers who have, in fact, very little of what it takes to get along.

In *Gold Diggers of 1933* as in other films, the musical number is not simply a means to progress the narrative but may contain meanings contradictory to the narrative. Musical numbers may reveal what the narrative hides. This may be intentional, as Abigail Feder-Kane points out when she notes the contradiction in Fred Astaire- Ginger Rogers films. She writes, “Musicals constantly assert that

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in *Hollywood Musicals, the Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Dyer, 36.

essential truths are revealed in performance.”<sup>23</sup> To borrow one of Feder-Kane’s examples, in a film like *Shall We Dance* (1937), Rogers and Astaire bicker and quarrel throughout the plot, but the “essential truth” of their relationship is revealed when the audience watches how gloriously they dance together.

Looking at musical numbers’ *unintentional* conflicts with the narrative is key to understanding how gender functions in musicals. Whereas Westerns offer strict and clear gender expectations, such performances are not so straightforward in musicals. The relationship between musical numbers and plot allows for different performances of gender. Here, the reputation of musicals contributes to the comparative freedom the genre allows. Because musicals are not perceived as “realistic,” (who breaks out into song, anyway?), they are not taken as seriously. Also, they are generally structured around a strict, traditional narrative that is undermined by the spectacle of the musical numbers. As Feder-Kane points out, writing on the conventions of the musicals: “As long as the plot went from the initial meeting of the couple to the final curtain with its obligatory hetero mating, it did not matter if the path taken to reach that ending was ‘straight.’”<sup>24</sup> That is, musical numbers may rebel against the traditional narrative that contains them, but their rebellion is in fact contained by the narrative.

The musical’s structure offers potential freedom from the strictures of gender, especially for female performers. Rick Altman describes the musical’s “dual-

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<sup>23</sup> Abigail Feder-Kane, “‘Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better:’ Transgressive Gender Role Performance in Musical Theatre and Film, 1930-1950” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Feder-Kane, 16.

focus narrative,” a way of storytelling distinct from that of other genres. The plot of a chronological narrative would normally tell one character’s story from beginning to end. But in a musical, Altman states, “the couple *is* the plot” (emphasis mine), and as such, the musical tells the story from both sides, giving space to both the male and the female.<sup>25</sup> As fans of Astaire and Rogers are no doubt aware, the story is practically irrelevant to the pleasures of their films; what matters are the two characters and that they dance. Westerns are about one man in the world, but musicals are about a man and a woman finding each other (and then losing each other and finding each other again). There is simply more room for women in musicals than in other genres because duality is central to the narrative structure of the musical.

Because the narrative will organize women back into hegemonic expectations, the musical numbers’ interruption of the “real plot” often allows women to perform powerfully, even outrageously, without consequence. (The straight Western or other male-centered genres like film noir would kill off disruptive women.) Feder-Kane points out several conflicts in the character of the female lead. First, the female character, although she will eventually become a wife and mother, is actually played by a paid performer who performs for the audience, denying the film’s containment of her. In addition, the actress’s “performance” is further illustrated again and again in the musical numbers. Her skill is brought forth especially as she moves from the narrative (showing her dramatic skill) to

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<sup>25</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 35.

the musical numbers (showing her musical skill). The numbers also often reveal the power of the actress herself – when Judy Garland sings, the audience knows that Judy Garland is singing, not Dorothy Gale or Lily Mars or Vicki Lester.<sup>26</sup>

Musicals, nevertheless, may be male-centered, and their narratives work within dominant gender ideology. The ultimate goal of a musical is marriage (certainly in classical Hollywood musicals), and female characters in musicals are generally expected to fill the role of wife and mother as soon as they are off-screen. As Feder-Kane notes, this could be seen as a strategy to negate the power that women have expressed throughout the film. If so, it is not necessarily a successful strategy. The pleasure of musicals lies, still, in the musical numbers, and that means that the audience derives pleasure from female power.

Musicals defy expectations for men as well as women. Male performers' complex relationship to the musical film is based in the musical's complicated relationship to cinematic conventions around "looking." In her influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues that Hollywood cinema is constructed around the central dichotomy of the active male/passive female. In films, men are actors in the narrative and are in control of the "look," and spectators of both sexes are led through the film by the "determining male gaze." Women, on the other hand, are acted upon and are the object of the gaze; they are so eroticized that they "connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (emphasis hers).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Feder-Kane, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 62.



Mulvey's thesis, which functions in so many Hollywood films, is completely confounded by the structure of the musical, which necessarily puts both men and women in a position to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

Certainly, in musicals, women are constantly being looked at. Mulvey points to Busby Berkeley's films as examples of the objectifying male gaze.<sup>28</sup> Berkeley's musicals, with their unending, interchangeable, kaleidoscopic formations of chorus girls and pieces of chorus girls, do indeed fetishize and eroticize the smiling, motionless, passive females. Steven Cohan begins his article on Fred Astaire by tentatively agreeing with Mulvey: "because of its reliance on spectacle the musical would appear to be the genre most responsible for reproducing this reductive binary opposition of female performer and male spectator."<sup>29</sup> It would appear so. But as I have argued, musical numbers also emphasize female power, complicating the performer's presumed position as passive female. When Eleanor Powell dances between, around, and through more than a dozen spinning lassoes during "So Long, Sarah Jane" in *I Dood It* (1943), she is doing more than simply being looked at.

Cohan disagrees with Mulvey by pointing out that men are being looked at, too, and their relationship to the gaze in musicals is particularly complicated. Steve Neale has noted that male bodies are constantly on display when they are

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<sup>28</sup> Mulvey, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Cohan, "Feminizing the Song-and-Dance Man," in *Hollywood Musicals, the Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 87.

performing in musicals. Neale compares that display to the ways that Rock

Hudson is looked at in Douglas Sirk's melodramas from the 1950s:

Hudson's body is *feminized* in those moments, an indication of the strength of those conventions which dictate that only women can function as the objects of an explicitly erotic gaze. Such instances of "feminization" tend also to occur in the musical, the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way. [emphasis his]<sup>30</sup>

Cohan looks to complicate a simple reversal of Mulvey's thesis. Just as women are not simply the object of the gaze in musicals, he writes, neither are men. And when men become the object of the gaze, they are not necessarily "feminized," as Neale seems to say. Cohan looks at Fred Astaire's star persona and film performances and argues that rather than being placed in a "feminine" position in relation to the gaze, Astaire "stages an alternative expression of masculinity" within it.<sup>31</sup> Because male and female performances in musicals are both based in spectacle, Astaire can construct a type of masculine performance out of his relationship to spectacle.

For Cohan, Astaire's relation to the gaze is not erotic within his films, but this does not mean that male performers may not be on the receiving end of the erotic gaze by spectators. At times, even the highly masculinized Gene Kelly is made available to the desiring gaze, even if the gaze is not specifically marked as such in the film. Consider the extended ballet sequences of *The Pirate* (1948) or *An American in Paris* (1951). Kelly is the primary actor within these sequences and

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<sup>30</sup> Steve Neale. "Masculinity as Spectacle," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Cohan, "Gendered Spectacles" in *Hollywood Musicals, the Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 64.

is thus not “feminized” by passivity. But in both sequences, his wardrobe unashamedly reveals his athletic physique, his powerful frame, his controlled body. In *The Pirate*, he wears black shorts that reach mid-thigh and a black shirt with no sleeves; his arms and legs are bare as he leaps across the frame. The number is part of a daydream of an enamored Judy Garland, making Kelly the object of female desire. Within the dream, there are no close-ups and no point-of-view shots. The sequence is unmediated by any other character’s gaze, leaving the spectator free to choose his or her own subject-position. He or she may identify with him as an ego ideal, the position constructed by most classical Hollywood cinema. Or the spectator may make Kelly the object of his or her desiring, erotic gaze, a position that classical Hollywood cinema seldom intentionally constructs.

In musicals, then, masculinity may be constructed differently in relation to the gaze and thus may be constructed differently in relation to femininity. In a musical, it is much more difficult for men to maintain control of the gaze, and it is much easier – and even necessary – for them to be the object of it. The possibilities within and consequences of these exceptions to Mulvey’s and Neale’s theses have yet to be fully explored.

“Plen’y of Heart and Plen’y of Hope:” Musical Westerns in the Postwar Era

After the close of World War II, a series of musical Westerns appeared in movie theaters that displaced the lone male agent and provided either a female star or a star couple. Until the immediate postwar era, musicals with Western themes had appeared only sporadically from the major studios. After World War II, the studios were inspired to begin producing musical Westerns because of two factors: declining audiences and Broadway. In 1946, more Americans went to the movies than any other year in the history of the industry. But attendance began a steep decline in 1947. The imposing threat of television suggested that attendance would not rise again on its own, and studios sought other ways to bring people back into the theaters. Some methods were quite drastic (the ill-fated experiment Smell-o-Vision comes to mind), but before the industry grew desperate, they looked for established properties that would ensure a hit when translated to film.

In the world of musical theater in 1946, no property was more established than Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *Oklahoma!*, which had already run on Broadway for three years. But Rodgers and Hammerstein would not allow their show to be filmed until it had exhausted its run on the stage. (Indeed, Rodgers and Hammerstein would not allow their show to be filmed until they produced it themselves in 1955.) Hollywood was also doubtlessly inspired by the 1946 stage success, *Annie Get Your Gun*. Also produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein (but with lyrics by Irving Berlin), *Annie Get Your Gun* was another

musical with a Western theme, based on the life of sharpshooter Annie Oakley. Rodgers and Hammerstein did eventually sell the rights to *Annie Get Your Gun*, but it did not go into production until after the show closed in February 1949.

With these stage properties tied up, the studios began making imitations. The first postwar musical Western was not a stage success but a studio property that was made a musical after its producer, Arthur Freed, saw *Oklahoma!*.<sup>32</sup> Before MGM's *The Harvey Girls* (1946), the major studios had left musical Westerns pretty much to the smaller studios, which churned out hundreds of singing cowboy Westerns during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Despite the chronological proximity, there is little reason to think that the major studios were attempting to repeat the success of the singing cowboy films when they began production on their musical Westerns in the 1940s and 1950s. In truth, if the majors had wanted to capitalize on the success of the singing cowboy, they would have gotten their own, as Columbia did when it bought out Gene Autry's contract from Republic.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that the majors had never before added songs to a Western. Before the war, musical Westerns had appeared occasionally from the major studios. MGM starred Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald in *Girl of the Golden West* in 1938, and Paramount put Bing Crosby in *Rhythm on the Range* in

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<sup>32</sup> Hugh Fordin, *The Movies' Greatest Musicals Produced in Hollywood USA by the Freed Unit* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 153.

<sup>33</sup> And Columbia was not even one of the "Big Five" major studios – Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Warner Brothers, Fox, Paramount, and RKO. It is worth noting that singing cowboy Westerns are structurally distinct from the "A" musical Westerns, further indicating that the major studios did not copy the minors. Singing cowboy pictures stress action over romance. The love story exists, perfunctorily it seems, but there is a much more linear storyline (rather than dual/parallel) based around the male action.

1936. In 1930, even Joan Crawford sang in *Montana Moon* – although hearing Crawford sing may help explain why musical Westerns appeared so sporadically. In any case, the major studios did not invest in a major way in musical Westerns until after World War II.

When the studios did begin to produce musical Westerns, the films dealt with different themes than their non-musical companions. Straight Westerns dealt with law and order, with the establishment of a community through the control of violence. These musical Westerns were concerned with gender performance. In the postwar period, inappropriate gender performances are the threat to civilization. In straight Westerns, gender conflict is not a problem; Westerns designate proper and improper gender behaviors with remarkable clarity. They provide especially clear consequences for improper female behavior, up to and including death. Gender in postwar musical Westerns is not so clear-cut.

The films' uneasiness with gender is historically situated. Women entered the workplace in unprecedented numbers during World War II, but as the war closed, women were told it was their patriotic duty to give up those jobs to returning soldiers and return to the home. The transition of ideal feminine participation from the private sphere before the war, to the public sphere during the war, and back to the private sphere after the war, was not made without difficulty for women, and it required considerable effort on the part of the institutional forces that constructed those ideologies, films included.

In musical Westerns, inappropriate female behavior is contained but not curtailed, suggesting a recognition of the nontraditional female behaviors that had helped win the war on the home front and on the battlefield. The films ask the question of what to do with that female power, and they provide an answer: confine it to the home. Importantly, this solution is provided to both sexes. Musical Westerns argue that male power, too, should be expended in service of establishing a domesticated frontier, as mavericks like Wild Bill Hickok are attributed yearnings for a home, wife, and children.

These are not surprising narratives for postwar cultural artifacts. Many historians, most prominently Elaine Tyler May, have written about the cultural forces that encouraged men and women to discard their wartime roles and aspire towards the iconic images of the 1950s with which we are all familiar.<sup>34</sup> Women were encouraged to find happiness in a suburban home. Men were instructed to provide for that home and to join the great multitudes of men in gray flannel suits.

The influence of the Cold War gave the domestic ideal additional significance. In these years, the “nuclear family” was constructed as a bastion against communism; but it was also the site at which Communism could take hold. Overbearing mothers and spineless fathers produced weak sons, sons that were too feeble to stand up and fight against Communism or, even worse, were susceptible to Communist influence. In either case, the failure of the family unit was a threat to national security. In the national sense, then, the home was

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<sup>34</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988).

identified as the battleground on which the Cold War would be lost or won.<sup>35</sup> For individual Americans, May argues, the turn toward family and domesticity in the postwar years helped people feel protected from the uncertainty of the war years and the dangers of the Atomic Age. “[N]obody actually argued that stable family life could prevent nuclear annihilation,” May says. “But the home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok.”<sup>36</sup> The domestic space was not only a battleground; for many men and women recovering from the effects of war, it was also a sanctuary.

The domestic ideology is crucial to understanding the postwar years, but it does not tell the entire story of postwar America. Musical Westerns support the dominant domestic ideology, but they also speak to the contested nature of the ideology itself. Joanne Meyerowitz argues for a more complete view of 1950s mass culture in her essay, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” as she revisits the same type of popular magazines that Betty Friedan studied to write *The Feminine Mystique*. Meyerowitz argues that her sources “did not simply glorify domesticity,” opposing Friedan’s widely accepted interpretations and conclusions.<sup>37</sup> Meyerowitz finds that her articles celebrated women who had success in politics and other arenas of public service, not just in the home. She writes:

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 228, 237.

<sup>36</sup> May, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” in *Not June Cleaver*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1994), 231.



Most of these articles did not pose profound challenges to the variegated oppression of women. But they do differ significantly from most historical description of a postwar domestic ideology. The articles in this sample reveal ambivalence and contradictions in postwar mass culture, which included a celebration of nondomestic as well as domestic pursuits and a tension between individual achievement and domestic ideals.<sup>38</sup>

That tension is central to musical Westerns. The Western is a genre that glorifies individualism, but in these postwar musical films, domesticity is the key to community. The films argue overtly for a domestic ideal, but their internal tensions are nevertheless visible.

Musical Westerns work in two ways in relation to dominant ideology. On one hand, they serve to create and reinforce dominant ideology by offering narratives that romanticize or necessitate women's and men's places within the home. But the films also display an overt fear of the consequences of their own embrace of domestication. To varying degrees, they also reveal the difficulties with the ideal of domestic life and validate nontraditional male and female performance. Each film expresses its discomfort in different ways, and each offers spectators possibilities for escape from the potential oppressiveness of that ideal.

In Chapter Two, I discuss *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950) and *Calamity Jane* (1953). Both musicals feature female leads that do not conform to domestic ideology, but both films also functioned as part of the postwar movement to pressure women into the domestic ideal. By featuring female leads, they offer the female spectator a potentially liberating experience of identifying with female power onscreen. *Annie Get Your Gun* is particularly liberating because it takes on

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<sup>38</sup> Meyerowitz, 238.

the characteristics of the woman's film, another genre with plenty of space for women. In contrast, *Calamity Jane* is a more closed film because it characterizes femininity as a performance and naturalizes the desire for a particular kind of passive feminine performance.

In Chapter Three, I argue that *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* tells two different stories at once: one that supports the domestic ideal and one that rebels against it. Through its conflicted narratives, the film offers a vicarious escape for men in the audience through the men onscreen. *Oklahoma!* is the focus of Chapter Four. In it, I argue that *Oklahoma!* reveals the precariousness of the domestic ideal by making the domestic ideal a central part of its ideal community, and then threatening that community. The final chapter, Chapter Five, attempts to explain why the sudden outburst of musical Westerns ceased abruptly after *Oklahoma!*

Through my research, I have discovered two areas of investigation that are sorely underrepresented in scholarship: the place of women in Westerns and the cultural contributions of the musical. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to a better, fuller discussion of these topics.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **“DOIN’ WHAT COMES (UN)NATUR’LLY:”**

#### ***ANNIE GET YOUR GUN, CALAMITY JANE, AND WOMEN AND READJUSTMENT AFTER WORLD WAR II***

The period of readjustment immediately following World War II was as difficult for women on the home front as it was for returning soldiers. During the war, women joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers. The need for manpower rose sharply after President Roosevelt declared war on the Axis powers in December of 1941, and it did not take the government or industrial leaders long to realize that there were not enough men to fill those jobs. Womanpower was the only answer to the nation’s labor problems. Prejudices against women in the workplace abated as the war made the working woman a national symbol of patriotism. It was a liberating time for working women: Women had access to a greater variety of jobs than before the war, working women in many industries were paid as much as their male counterparts, and women who were already in the workforce found new possibilities for upward mobility.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the war, nineteen million Rosie the Riveters had taken

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 6.

their place on assembly lines in shipyards and behind desks in government offices.<sup>2</sup>

After V-J day, readjustment shifted the make-up of the labor force dramatically as men re-entered the workforce and women were pushed out of the jobs they had held during the war. Some of the departures were voluntary. Some working women believed in traditional gender roles and had only expected to work as long as the war lasted. They wanted to return to their homes, husbands, and children. But many women wanted to continue working, and their departures were less than voluntary. Karen Anderson reports that in one plant, 98% of female workers polled expressed a wish to keep their jobs after the war was over.<sup>3</sup> Those women likely found it a more difficult task than they had anticipated. The end of the war meant that the demand for production of war materials dropped, and women were the first to be fired when rounds of layoffs began. “Men’s jobs” that women had done during the war became men’s jobs again, and employers began to make the same excuses for not hiring women that they had made before the war. Anderson says that in addition to other justifications, “employers once again claimed that their work was too physically demanding, too skilled, or too responsible for women workers to handle.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the economic constraints, many women did continue working, and female participation in the workforce actually increased after the war. Susan Ware

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, 162.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, 173.

writes that women worked for many reasons: some women liked the social interaction of the workplace, and many families needed the second income to buy the consumer goods that were deemed essential to the modern household. Not least, women workers continued to be necessary to the postwar economy in clerical and service jobs, two sectors that expanded after the war.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately for laborers, most of the new positions paid less than wartime work and offered less opportunity for advancement. Although women continued to contribute to the nation's economy during the readjustment period, the economic gains that women had experienced during the war years did not last into the postwar years.

Social pressures in addition to economic pressures made the postwar years difficult for women workers. Even before the war ended, propagandists began insinuating that working women were a detriment to home life. Maureen Honey highlights one advertisement from a manufacturing company that shows a cherubic little girl looking up to her mother, who is clad in the overalls of a factory worker. The daughter is asking, "Mother, when will you stay home again?"<sup>6</sup> This advertisement, which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1944, anticipated changing expectations around the appropriate place for women.

As the war drew to a close, the anxiety around married women's place grew particularly intense. The relationship between women and men was at the center of debates about readjustment. There was a general fear that women had gained

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 207.

<sup>6</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 124-125.

too much independence during the war, and that they would not be willing to take their place in the postwar vision of “normalcy” – a breadwinner husband and a domestic wife.<sup>7</sup> In advice literature, women were told that it was their duty to make their needs secondary to the needs of returning veterans. Susan M. Hartmann summarizes the prevailing thoughts of the day: “Civilians could never compensate veterans for their sacrifice. They could however discharge a portion of the debt by easing the veterans’ return to peacetime life.”<sup>8</sup> For married women, discharging their debt translated into relinquishing whatever independence they had gained from wartime work, if their independence threatened their husbands.

We can see at this moment the emergence of the 1950s version of the “cult of domesticity.” As America entered the 1950s the family became the most important image of the decade. Accordingly, the independent female became a figure of fear and suspicion rather than admiration, and the domesticated housewife became the ideal of American womanhood. Films participated in this shift in ideology, which Elaine Tyler May describes: “Two positive images of women had shared the limelight during wartime: the independent heroine and the devoted sweetheart and wife. After the war, as subservient homemakers moved into center stage, emancipated heroines gave way to predatory female villains.”<sup>9</sup>

In the middle period, however, independent heroines appeared. In two musical Westerns, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane*, the female leads combine

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<sup>7</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 230.

<sup>8</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, “Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women’s Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans,” *Women’s Studies* 5 (1978): 226.

<sup>9</sup> May, 67.

elements of the wartime and postwar heroines. Both films put real-life frontier women into a setting that is both historical and contemporary to the films. The characters live in the past but act out a postwar tale. Both films showcase powerful characters reminiscent of wartime heroines, and then transform them into the kind of sacrificing women that were deemed suitable for postwar life. They construct the domestic space (wedded bliss or, more literally, a home) as the ideal place for a woman. This was not achieved without some difficulty, and both texts are rife with contradiction. By looking at the films' manipulation of their female leads, we can see how *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane* dealt with postwar anxieties about a woman's place.

“A Man Never Trifles with Gals Who Carry Rifles:” The Difficulties of  
Containing Female Achievement in *Annie Get Your Gun*

Conceived in the postwar era, *Annie Get Your Gun* seeks to resolve postwar anxieties around the place of the emancipated woman by providing the same solution that propagandists provided: making it a woman's responsibility to devote herself to the success of her man. Despite its restrictive message, the film allows women the possibility of identifying with Annie in a liberating way because it breaks Western conventions and places a likeable, active female character at its center. In addition, through its manipulation of the musical and the

Western genres, the film takes on characteristics of “the woman’s film,” the genre of classical Hollywood that allows the most freedom for female spectators.

*Annie Get Your Gun* was originally developed in 1946 as a star vehicle for Ethel Merman by librettists Dorothy Fields and Herbert Fields. Irving Berlin, America’s most prominent songwriter, contributed the score. Its successful run on the New York stage prompted Hollywood’s interests in its prospects. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer gained rights to the project and assigned it to producer Arthur Freed and director George Sidney. Betty Hutton was borrowed from Paramount for the title role after Judy Garland, who was originally cast, fell ill. Howard Keel, an American baritone who had made a hit in another musical Western (*Oklahoma!*) on the London stage, was offered the male lead of Frank Butler, his first starring role in films. The release of the film version of the popular show was an auspicious event in the press; its premiere was accompanied by significant coverage, including layouts in *Life* and *Time*. It proved to be worthy of the attention; *Annie Get Your Gun* was the most financially successful musical film of 1950, and five years later, it still appeared on *Variety*’s list of “All-Time Top Grossers,” having made over four and a half million dollars during its first run in theaters.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Stanley Green, “Annie Get Your Gun,” *Encyclopaedia of the Musical Film* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981), 12. “All-Time Top Grossers,” *Variety*, 5 Jan 1955, p.59.



*Annie Get Your Gun* tells the story of Annie Oakley, a sharpshooter who traveled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West.<sup>11</sup> As Glenda Riley points out, neither Annie Oakley nor Buffalo Bill Cody was a Westerner; she was from Ohio and he was born in Iowa. Despite their birthplaces, Oakley and Cody worked together, through the late 1800s and into the turn of the century, to define the American West and its personalities through national and international tours of the Wild West.<sup>12</sup>

Annie Oakley was born into a family of poor farmers in Darke County, Iowa in 1860. When Annie was about fifteen years old, she visited her sister in Cincinnati. While there, she met professional sharpshooter Frank Butler, whom she beat in an exhibition shooting match. Butler apparently harbored no ill will at being bested by a woman; he and Oakley married the next year and began traveling and performing together. Butler eventually gave up sharpshooting in order to assist Oakley in her act and manage her career and business affairs. The pair joined the Wild West in 1885 and toured with Cody on and off until 1901.

Buffalo Bill and his Wild West, along with dime novels and later, films, helped write the history of the frontier. The show was enormously popular. At one point, it stopped on Staten Island for six months and played for up to 14,000

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<sup>11</sup> Buffalo Bill did not refer to his traveling troupe as a "Wild West show," despite the film's use of the term. According to Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, Cody wanted people to believe that he was bringing the *real* West to the East; his productions were not "shows" (67).

<sup>12</sup> Glenda Riley, "'Buffalo Bill' Cody and Annie Oakley: Romancing the West," in *Western Lives: A Biographical History of the American West*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 256.

people a day.<sup>13</sup> Despite its myriad and varied historical inaccuracies, the audiences believed in its claims to truth. Audiences did have reason to trust that the show was authentic; after all, it was credentialed. Prominent men from military history confirmed the accuracy of the Wild West.<sup>14</sup> Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and dozens of real American Indians appeared in the show. And not least, there was Buffalo Bill himself, famed scout, trapper, Indian fighter, and, of course, buffalo hunter.

The story of *Annie Get Your Gun*, the musical, bears only the most tangential relationship to actual events. In the film Annie is hired by Buffalo Bill after she beats Frank Butler at a sharpshooting contest. As Annie travels with the Wild West Show, she and Frank fall in love, but Frank's ego will not allow her to be a bigger star than he. Frank leaves Buffalo Bill to join Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show, but the shows cannot economically survive independently and must merge. But before the shows can unite, Annie Oakley and Frank Butler must be reunited. And before they can reunite, Annie must lose a match to Frank to show him that she is only "second-best" beside him.

*Annie Get Your Gun* is an atypical Western because no woman in a Western dominates the story of the film or what the camera sees as thoroughly as Annie does. The story is entirely hers; she is almost never off-screen. Of the thirteen musical numbers in the show, Annie sings ten of them. Further, Annie breaks the conventions of screen performance from her first moments on screen.

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<sup>13</sup> Riley, 264.

<sup>14</sup> Slotkin, 68.

Immediately after Annie enters, three musical numbers in quick succession establish her control over the screen, the story, and the audience. Her first song, “Doin’ What Comes Natur’lly,” is ostensibly sung to a hotel manager played by Clinton Sundberg, but as soon as the music begins, he is excluded from the frame. Annie and her siblings are centered. When the manager appears in the frame, his back is to the camera. Even when she shares the frame with the children, they remain still while Annie bounces around them, thus attracting and keeping the viewer’s attention throughout.

The second song is a ballad, “The Girl that I Marry.” The song belongs to Frank – that is, Howard Keel sings it – but the screen belongs to Annie. As the song begins, Frank is on the left side of the frame, partially obscured by shadow. Annie is in the center of the frame in full light, seated on a bench. Frank moves into the light to sit next to her, but from that point he remains relatively motionless. The viewer’s eye is drawn to Annie, still in the center of the frame, as she leans into and leans away from Frank, and otherwise fidgets as she reflects on the distance between herself and the woman that Frank sings about. He imagines a girl “like the kind that you see in picture magazines – sorta dainty, dimpled, and rosy.” Annie decidedly does not fit that description. She is dressed in what appears to be a sloppily-tailored potato sack, her face is not adorned with make-up, and her hair is unkempt. She squirms, embarrassed, as the song makes her self-conscious about her appearance. Through this number Annie is established as

the pivotal character; how Annie feels about Frank's ideal matters more than either Frank or his ideal.

Immediately following Frank's ballad is one of Annie's powerhouse solo songs, "You Can't Get a Man with a Gun." This number is a particularly striking example of Annie's control over the film because Hutton delivers her song directly to the camera. She does not, as Keel does later in "My Defenses Are Down," and as is conventional in musicals, deliver her solo to an imaginary audience located somewhere beyond the camera. Hutton breaks cinema's "fourth wall," includes the audience in the film, and establishes a relationship between herself and the audience members. Annie is the only character in the film who relates to the audience in this way.

Annie also controls the gaze of the film, which is a violation of the conventions of Hollywood cinema. At several points in the film when Annie sees Frank, her eyes widen, her mouth drops open, and her goofy look is accompanied by the nondiegetic high-pitched trill of several instruments. This happens the first time they meet: First we see a shot of Annie, awestruck, then a shot of Frank, smiling. Frank, motionless, is just to be looked at, and the audience sees him as Annie sees him. Undoubtedly, this sequence of shots is meant to illustrate the powerful effect that Frank Butler's magnificent presence has on Annie; its effect, however, is to make Frank Butler the object of the erotic gaze. These moments, where the audience sees through Annie's eyes, are jarring, and they disrupt the narrative.

Annie literally takes control of the narrative, too. During one scene, after Annie and Bill have been separated for a while, Annie creates the dialogue of a scene that she imagines will take place when they meet again. In front of several members of the Wild West Show, Annie plays both parts, acting out Bill's remorse and her anger. "Then *he'll* say, "Now, honey.' And – and *I'll* say, 'Don't honey me! You thought I double-crossed ya'!... Why didn't ya' love me? Why did ya' leave? Why didn't ya' write?'" After Annie-Frank has shown enough remorse, Annie-Annie forgives him and they both say "I loves you." Although this scene does not actually play out between Annie and Frank in her terms, it is important that she is allowed the space to express her fantasies in front of the audience within the frame and in the movie theater.

The performance of actress Betty Hutton is crucial to the character of Annie. Hutton made her feature film debut in 1942 after success in a Broadway revue called *Two for the Show*. The onstage persona she developed was one of excess. Hutton bounced off walls and jumped on and off things and people.<sup>15</sup> The director and cameraman of her first film had trouble shooting Hutton. As *Time* magazine told it:

Betty complained to De Sylva [the film's producer] that the director and the cameraman were leaving her out of things. They politely explained: "We can't keep her in the camera." De Sylva...told the director to follow her all over the set if necessary. "You can't keep her quiet," he said. "You'll lose her."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> There are numerous stories of Hutton physically injuring her co-stars. She purportedly knocked actor Frank Faylen unconscious on the set of one of her films.

<sup>16</sup> "This Side of Happiness," *Time* 55 (24 April 1950): 71.

Hutton's uncontrollable high-energy performances were of the type, critics said, that audience members would either love or hate. These are the polarities of her performance as Annie, too – Hutton is not an actress who can be tempered.

Even the narrative of *Annie Get Your Gun* cannot contain Hutton as Annie, although it works very hard to do so. The primary message of the film is pretty straightforward; in fact, Annie sings an entire song about it within the first twenty minutes of the film:

I'm quick on the trigger  
 With targets not much bigger than a pin-point, a number one,  
 But my score with a feller  
 Is lower than a cellar –  
 Oh, you cain't get a man with a gun!

The film's lesson is one that Annie can articulate but cannot put into practice. Until the very end of the film, Annie believes that her skill with a rifle will eventually impress Frank so much that he will ask her to marry him. Narratively, this does not happen; Frank abandons the show when Annie's billing eclipses his own. In addition, the relationship between Annie's success in the show and her failure in love is reinforced visually throughout the film. This is illustrated most powerfully on the Wild West Show's return trip from a European engagement. On the deck of the boat, she reprises Frank's number, "The Girl that I Marry," which he sang to her when they met:

The girl that I marry will have to be  
 As soft and as pink as a nursery.  
 The girl I call my own  
 Will wear satins and laces and smell of cologne.

Annie begins the song in a mocking, booming voice, mimicking Frank's baritone. But as she continues, she breaks down, crying at her inability to be "a doll I can carry / the girl that I marry must be." She leans against the tour's wagon as she cries. The camera pans left, revealing the art on the side of the wagon: a painted picture of Annie in her sharpshooting outfit, the decorated text accompanying it heralding her as "the world's foremost lady sharpshooter." This shot locates the cause of Annie's sorrow: she has chosen to be the world's foremost lady sharpshooter instead of a doll that Frank Butler can carry.<sup>17</sup>

The ending of the film functions most powerfully to enforce the film's definition of the model relationship between a man and a woman. The film concludes with a re-match between the sharpshooters. "It's gonna be a pleasure to give you a lesson in marksmanship," Frank tells Annie. "You couldn't give me a lesson in long-distance spittin'!" she counters. As Annie and Frank trade shots, Sitting Bull, who has joined the troupe, conspires to sabotage her rifles so that she will lose the match. Annie insists on an un-doctored gun. But Sitting Bull advises her, "Keep missin', you win. Be second-best, Annie. You tell me – can't get man with gun. 'Member?"<sup>18</sup> Annie, realizing her mistake, intentionally misses her next shot. She concedes, calling Frank "the greatest sharpshooter in the world." Her

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<sup>17</sup> The real-life heroine would have been much closer to the fictional Butler's ideal. A critical part of her persona in Victorian-era America was that she retained her ladyhood despite being a performer. She refused to wear trousers or bloomers, refused to ride astride, and believed that women should be "married, domestic, benevolent, and a civilizing force." See Riley, 272-274.

<sup>18</sup> Midway through the film, in a truly bizarre number ("I'm an Indian, Too"), Sitting Bull "adopts" Annie as his daughter and initiates her into the "Sioux" tribe. The racial implications of their relationship are too complicated to discuss fully here. Preliminarily, I would suggest that Annie's "adoption" is the film's attempt to dissolve any possibility of a sexual or romantic relationship between a Native American man and a white woman.

generosity inspires Frank to propose, and the two Western shows combine. For the finale, Annie and Frank reprise “There’s No Business Like Show Business” as the casts of Buffalo Bill’s and Pawnee Bill’s shows circle around them.

The conclusion fights to contain Annie’s abilities, but it does not deny them. The song directly preceding the re-match is “Anything You Can Do,” a challenge song between Frank and Annie that reaffirms her competence before the match restricts it. “Anything you can do, I can do better,” the two insist to each other: Annie can buy anything cheaper than Frank, Frank can speak more softly than Annie, Annie looks better in Frank’s hat, et cetera. Although the song ends in a draw, Annie’s superiority is suggested visually through her wardrobe. She wears a red dress with a long train, its bodice sparkling ostentatiously with the medals she won in Europe, making her the brighter challenger. The final image of the song shows the two characters leaning into each other angrily, making Betty Hutton’s small frame more commanding and de-emphasizing Howard Keel’s size. The re-match does not argue that Annie cannot “do better” than Frank, but the film makes it clear that displays of female superiority create an unnecessary barrier to the heterosexual union that the musical requires.

There are major cultural issues at stake in the match, and the ending seeks to contain Annie’s independence and fully organize her into the patriarchal structure of marriage by restricting her skills and by relieving her of her financial power. In economic terms, the match determines the financial solvency of Buffalo Bill’s and Pawnee Bill’s shows. The two productions need to sell Annie’s medals to raise



the capital to merge. At the beginning of the match Annie has control over the future of the shows, but during the match, Annie makes a side bet with Frank, and she puts up her case of medals against his three. Thus, when she loses the contest, she loses her personal wealth and the economic power that she had over the two shows.

The re-match uses the visual imagery of the Western to reinforce the cultural importance of Annie's concession. The first match is held in Ohio on a platform built on top of packed hay. Low-angle shots reveal expanses of sky broken up by clusters of green trees. This match is located in the undeveloped (uncivilized) West. In sharp contrast, the second match is held in a venue outside of New York City, the most metropolitan of all American landscapes. The platform is built atop cement and the characters play in front of a backdrop of the not-so-distant city. The New York skyline, not clouds and trees, dominates the sky. Annie's capitulation is thus associated with national progress and civilized society, the motivation and objective of the Western.

Despite the constraints on female power placed on Annie by the film, *Annie Get Your Gun* is nevertheless open to readings against its oppressive messages. Although it is a musical, *Annie Get Your Gun* does not offer the unfettered vision of utopia to which Dyer argues that musicals aspire.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Annie and Frank's relationship features elements of dystopia, and it is precisely the film's

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<sup>19</sup> Dyer, 20.

inability to be open to boundless joy that makes it available to different female spectator positions.

This effect is similar to that of the woman's film. Feminist scholars have pointed to the woman's film of the 1930s and 1940s as places where women take control of the narrative in a cinema dominated by male action. Jeanine Basinger points out that the conventions of the woman's film of classical Hollywood are visible in any film that places a woman at the center. These films reiterate that "a woman's true job is that of just being a woman, a job she can't very well escape no matter what else she does, with the repression disguised as *love*."<sup>20</sup> This is certainly evident in *Annie Get Your Gun*, where the female lead must choose between her title as the best sharpshooter and her love for Frank Butler.

The relationship between the female spectator and the female protagonist is another distinguishing characteristic of the woman's film. While viewing these films, women in the audience can feel pleasure in watching a world where a woman is at the center. Recent criticism has argued that "through identification with stars and emulation of their image, female spectators may feel empowered and act out that feeling in their everyday lives."<sup>21</sup> In melodramas, particularly, the female spectator may identify her personal suffering with the suffering of the woman onscreen, gaining a sense that the sacrifices in her life are valued by the culture. This is not a completely liberating experience. Like all Hollywood

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<sup>20</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Summarized in Pam Cook, "No Fixed Address: The Women's Picture from *Outrage* to *Blue Steel*," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 230.

cinema, the woman's film is restricted by patriarchy, and the audience's identification with the female lead is a position bounded by those restrictions. Nevertheless, just as a mother may celebrate an illness because it gives her a few days' rest, so may a female audience member, underappreciated by the patriarchal realities of her life, celebrate a few moments of watching a woman at the center of a film. *Annie Get Your Gun* offers that kind of identification for the female spectator. Betty Hutton's Annie is a woman who breaks the conventions of musicals and Westerns as she creates and holds a space for herself within the film.

Central to melodrama's portrayal of female suffering is the sense that no matter which choice the female lead makes (and she will always choose love), she will never really be happy. Despite the utopian drive of the musical, *Annie Get Your Gun* provides the same discomfort through the character of Frank Butler, who is characterized as undeserving of Annie's devotion. Frank can be read as an undesirable choice for Annie because he violates the conventions of the Western hero, and those violations mark him as a problematic male character.

The audience can recognize that Frank is an inadequate Western hero from the moment he enters the frame. Immediately, he breaches the dress code. Frank arrives in the middle of the first song in the film, "Colonel Buffalo Bill." He is introduced by Charlie Davenport (Keenan Wynn), the show's manager, as "the world's greatest sharpshooter." He emerges from one of the cars of a train wearing a white suit and hat, his gauntlets dripping with fringe and

monogrammed with a “B” (for Butler). The green scarf he wears as a necktie is likewise pinned with an “FB.”

Frank’s entrance may be contrasted with that of Buffalo Bill, who makes his entrance on a big white horse, dressed in a brown suit. That is, he looks like a cowboy, and Frank Butler looks like a man playing a cowboy. Further, Buffalo Bill rides in on a reputation earned out in the West As the song describes him, he has “got the stuff that made the wild West wild.” Frank is decidedly tamer. His reputation as a sharpshooter, such as it is, is based in his proficiency at killing clay pigeons, not real buffalo like Buffalo Bill.

Frank Butler’s biggest violation of the Western’s definition of masculinity is his incredible ego. Ego is ever-present in Westerns, certainly. Being confident in one’s skill, and having skill to be confident in, are precursors to successful male action in Westerns. But the ideal Western hero is a man who is, as John Wayne says of Ricky Nelson in *Rio Bravo* (1959), “so good he doesn’t feel he has to prove it.”<sup>22</sup> Frank is not so secure. Frank not only makes a living proving how good he is, he acts out when someone better shows up (Annie). His ego is an ineffectual cover-up for his insecurities.

The film uses other male characters to emphasize Frank’s failings as a man. In order to keep the show in business, the manager tries to use Annie as a novelty act and puts up a poster of her that is larger than Frank’s. When Frank sees the poster, he speaks angrily to Charlie:

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<sup>22</sup> *Rio Bravo*, dir. Howard Hawks, 141 min., Warner Brothers DVD Video, 2001, DVD.

Frank: I told you to put her name up someplace, not to make a star out of her! That's ridiculous. She's only doing a couple of little tricks, isn't she?

Charlie: Yeah, Frank.

Frank: Isn't she?

Charlie: Sure. I don't understand you. You *like* her, don't you?

Frank: Sure, I like her. And I want to keep liking her!

The implication is that Frank will not love Annie if she out-does him, and the film's conclusion validates Frank's self-centeredness. But when Frank expresses his egotism, he is countered by Charlie, who cannot understand why Frank would not be happy for the woman he loves. Even Buffalo Bill, the character most closely identified with the authentic Western hero, expresses uncertainty about the worthiness of Frank Butler. Bill concedes that Frank may not be all he should be, but "the important thing is, Annie is in love with him." Although Frank is celebrated in the final scenes, and although it is clearly expressed that it is he whom Annie wants, *Annie Get Your Gun* establishes Frank's deficiencies throughout the film. By the time it arrives at its ending, wherein Frank and Annie are presumed to live happily ever after, the audience, and particularly female audience members, may feel some resistance to accepting the compromise.

It is likely that this possibility for multiple readings of *Annie Get Your Gun* contributed to the enormous popularity of the film. The film's own ambivalence played to a variety of audience positions. On its most obvious level, it satisfied audience members who felt that it was right for women to return to the home after the war. At the same time, those who resisted the pressure to make themselves

subject to the domestic ideal could respond to the film's discomfort with its own solutions.

“You’re a Fake, Calam!:” Natural and Unnatural Feminine Performance in  
*Calamity Jane*

Like *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Calamity Jane* features a legendary Western heroine and uses her to define appropriate female action and activities. Unlike most women in Westerns, *Calamity Jane* has a prominent place in the community, but the film is in conflict with itself about her place there. As a method of containment, *Calamity Jane* masculinizes the capable woman and reveals that performance of masculinity to be a fake. It recognizes femininity as a performance, too, but the film naturalizes women's desire for ideal femininity and punishes Calamity for not ascribing herself to that ideal.

*Calamity Jane* entered production after Warner Brothers saw the success of MGM's film. (One reviewer described it as “sort of a poor man's *Annie Get Your Gun*.”<sup>23</sup>) The dependable David Butler was assigned to direct and Warner's biggest musical star, Doris Day, was signed on as *Calamity Jane*. To ensure audience association with that previous blockbuster, the studio borrowed *Annie*

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<sup>23</sup> “*Calamity Jane*,” *America* 90 (12 December 1953): 305.

*Get Your Gun*'s Howard Keel from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to play Wild Bill Hickok.

*Calamity Jane* is the musical telling of a romance between two Western figures, Calamity Jane and "Wild Bill" Hickok. The two are residents of Deadwood, South Dakota, a mining town that is desperately in need of a performer for its resident saloon, the Golden Garter. The owner, Henry "Millie" Miller, sends for an actress whom he assumes to be Frances Fryer. When the male Francis Fryer appears, Millie has him perform in drag, but the act is discovered. In order to keep the men from tearing the saloon apart, Calamity promises that she will deliver to them the big-time actress Adelaide Adams. Calamity travels to Chicago, where she meets Adelaide's dresser, Katie Brown, in the star's dressing room. Katie, having long yearned to be on the stage, pretends to be Adelaide Adams and returns to Deadwood with Calamity. On stage, though, Katie cannot perform like the real star, and she breaks down. Calamity and the men encourage her to try it her own way, and she is a sensation.

Katie quickly becomes the belle of the town, attracting the affections of Wild Bill Hickok and army lieutenant Danny Gilmartin, much to the chagrin of Calamity, who is in love with Danny. Calamity sees Danny and Katie kissing at an army ball and, in anger, picks up a gun and shoots a glass out of Katie's hand. In the saloon the next day, Calamity stops the show and warns Katie to get out of Dodge (so to speak). Katie pulls a gun from the audience and tells Calamity to hold up her glass. A shot is fired, the glass shatters, and a shattered Calamity runs

out of the saloon. Bill follows Calamity out and tells her that *he* shot the glass out of her hand because she “needed a lesson.” As the two commiserate over their lost loves, they discover that they are actually in love with one another. When Calamity finds out the next day that Katie has skipped town, she rides out to stop the stagecoach and tells Katie that she will be marrying Bill, allowing Katie to return for her lieutenant. The final scene is the wedding of the two couples and their exit from Deadwood on their honeymoon stagecoach.

Like the book of *Annie Get Your Gun*, the story of *Calamity Jane* bears only a slight resemblance to history. In truth, substantive evidence about the life of the real Calamity Jane is difficult to find. She was variously known as Martha Jane Canary (or Canary), and sometimes Martha Jane Canary Burke (with or without the “e”).<sup>24</sup> It is certain that her early life was difficult and that she was on her own from her teenage years on. She probably married a man named Clinton Burke; her ghostwritten autobiography is signed “Mrs. M Burk.” They might have had a child together, but the little girl could have been the result of a previous marriage of Burke’s.<sup>25</sup>

In Western lore, the facts of Calamity Jane’s life are significantly less important than their impression. Calamity Jane was known mostly for being against type. She was a woman who wore men’s clothes, behaved “like a man,” drank with men, and openly slept with different men outside of marriage.

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<sup>24</sup>Roberta Beed Sollid, *Calamity Jane: A Study in Historical Criticism* (Montana: The Western Press, 1958), 50.

<sup>25</sup>Howard R. Lamar, “Calamity Jane,” *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of the American West*, ed. Howard R. Lamar (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), 147.



Throughout her life, she earned her own living. She followed the army and worked as a cook, she sold her story to anyone who would buy it, she acted on the stage (including a short stint with Buffalo Bill Cody), and she was a very good bull-whacker.<sup>26</sup> Calamity Jane gained some fame for nursing the ill during the smallpox epidemic in Deadwood in 1878. According to stories, she stepped in to treat smallpox victims when others were unwilling. One historian suggests that the story of Calamity Jane offering herself to the smallpox epidemic was the stuff of fiction, although it is likely that Calamity Jane probably took care of friends and “unfortunates” on many occasions.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that this element of Calamity Jane’s life story was extended and made prominent in the Calamity Jane legend in order to justify her “mannish” behavior.

James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok was a living Western legend before he ever came to Deadwood. He was nationally known for his varied skills and many roles: He was a marshal in Abilene, Kansas, a good scout, a superior marksman, a Union Army spy, a stagecoach driver, and when the occasion required it, a gunfighter.<sup>28</sup> His reputation was based largely on a legendary (and purely fictional) run-in he had with a group of outlaws known as the McCanles gang. A man called David McCanles and his gang of nine supposedly ambushed the unaccompanied Hickok at an isolated house while Hickok was out scouting. Inside the house, armed with only one pistol and a rifle (that totals seven shots

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<sup>26</sup> Sollid, 1. A bull-whacker was a teamster who traveled between mining towns.

<sup>27</sup> Sollid, 67.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph G. Rosa, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 1.

against ten men), Hickok shot and killed most of the members of the McCanles gang, beat the last three to death with his bare hands, and walked away with thirteen knife slashes and eleven pieces of buckshot in him.<sup>29</sup> In addition to his other exploits, Hickok's violent death cemented his story into Western folklore. On August 2, 1876, Hickok was playing poker when a lowlife varmint named Jack McCall shot him through the back of the head in Nuttall & Mann's No. 10 saloon. The cards that Hickok was holding were black aces and black eights, christened "the dead man's hand" in his honor.

The film is not interested in any of the truths of Calamity Jane's life. It barely acknowledges the backstory of the real woman in its characterization of her. The film thus implies that the struggles and successes of the most famous frontierswoman were not relevant to audiences in 1953. Still, within these constraints, the fictional Calamity Jane takes up more space in her musical than do most female characters in Westerns. She is the audience's introduction to the Deadwood community, and she is the central figure of that community.

Calamity Jane's centrality is established in the opening song, "The Deadwood Stage." The stagecoach is traveling across the Western plains, and Calamity stands and dances on top of the coach, climbs down to hang off of its side and sing, and, still singing, climbs back on top to urge the horses ("whip-crack-away!"). She is the main singer, has the only close-ups, and is continually scrambling and bounding in and around the frame. As the stage enters Deadwood,

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<sup>29</sup> Rosa, 233-238.

Calamity introduces the audience to her town. From atop the stagecoach, she shows the assembled citizens the goods that she has brought in to sell. She climbs down and continues the song into the saloon, where most of the action of the film will take place. She introduces the important characters of the town, including saloon owner Millie and Wild Bill Hickok.

Calamity Jane shares many characteristics with the traditional Western hero. Most critically, she works to keep the community intact. When Indians capture Lieutenant Danny Gilmartin early in the film, it is Calamity and not the men of the town who rides out to rescue him. She twice rescues the imperiled saloon owner, whose establishment is Deadwood's community center. First, she promises the townsmen Adelaide Adams so that they will not desert the saloon. Calamity saves the Golden Garter for the second time when Katie is unmasked. Katie breaks down and reveals that she is not Adelaide Adams and Calamity steps on stage to convince the men to give Katie another chance to perform:

A'right, so she ain't Adelaide Adams! She made off she was 'cause she wanted a chance to be a actress. And she thought mebbe we'd give her that chance. What's wrong with that, anyhow? We're all here on the same ticket, ain't we? All o' you butterin' hyenas came here looking for somethin' you couldn't find nowheres else, didn't ya'? You're all after that pot o' gold, and Katie here ain't no different.

Calamity is the moral voice of the film, and what she has articulated is the American dream. Under the weight of the ideology of the Western, the men calm down. Katie tries again, and this time she makes a big hit. When Calamity addresses the crowd of men, as in this scene, she is often positioned above the crowd, on a table or on the stage. The camera is often placed within the crowd.

The audience becomes part of the community, and we, too, look up to Calamity for leadership.

Calamity Jane has authority in her community, but the film is not primarily interested in how her authoritative actions help to establish civilization. Although there are traditional Western threats (Calamity twice encounters “wild Indians” whom she must scatter or subdue), the real threat to the Deadwood community is a lack of femininity. The film constantly undercuts Calamity’s power because its main interest is correcting her masculine deportment. In the world of *Calamity Jane*, the consequence of a woman being effective in the public sphere as something more than, say, a saloon girl, is that she must act like a man. In that same world, masculinity may only be effectively performed by men. Calamity’s power in the community and symbols of masculinity are closely tied (she attracts attention by firing her gun, for example). As the film demonstrates that her masculinity is a fraud, it also delegitimizes the control and power she has in the community.

Note that Deadwood does not lack women entirely. Calamity lives there, and women appear in “The Deadwood Stage” number. But the town women are matronly and middle-aged, dowdily dressed in bonnets and shawls. What Deadwood needs, specifically, is a saloon girl: a young, attractive, sexualized woman whom they can objectify. By the time the plot begins, the men of Deadwood have spent weeks buying cigarettes in a quest for a picture of the actress Adelaid Adams, who appears in the photograph in a low-cut, corseted

leotard and tights. Bill Hickok says of her: “She’s a hope, a dream, a vision.... Circe, Aphrodite, Helen of Troy. In this case, it’s Adelaid Adams.... She’s charming, lovely figure – everything that a woman *oughta* be.”

The real woman who appears in the place of the “vision” of Adelaid Adams is Katie Brown. The character of Katie Brown complicates traditional Western codes around female display in the public sphere. According to those codes, “good” women do not perform in saloons. Saloon girls are prostitutes in disguise, women of loose morals who must be ejected from the town or otherwise reformed. In *Calamity Jane*, Katie is allowed to perform her femininity in the public sphere because she is so clearly domesticated. Her character suggests that the saloon girls have to be ejected from straight Westerns not simply because they exist in the public sphere but because their sexual and economic freedom are threatening to the patriarchal constraints that the male heroes worked to put in place.

In this film, Katie is unthreatening because she is virginal, desires marriage, and is adept in the domestic sphere. She has a wholesome performance style, a style that the film compares favorably to Adelaid Adams’s more overtly sexual one. Adelaid is a big-city professional performer whose husky alto voice and full figure suggest a maturity that Katie’s reedy soprano and reedy frame do not. Katie is a success in the saloon precisely because she is *not* Adelaid Adams; Adelaid’s independence would have been intimidating. The men need a women they can objectify and who poses no threat to the dominant male hierarchy. As defined

within the film, the ideal woman is an attractive, passive, unthreatening, domesticated object.

Calamity, whose gender performance is far from ideal, learns femininity from Katie. The film addresses the problem of their opposed performances of femininity in “A Woman’s Touch.” Calamity’s dilapidated cottage, which the two share, is transformed by the domestic hands of Katie and Calamity. Calamity visually matches her ramshackle house at the beginning of the number; both she and her home are dingy, dirty, and, otherwise brown. In comparison, Katie is set apart from the cabin, dressed in a bold blue tailored dress. As they sing, they brighten up the house, and Calamity’s wardrobe similarly brightens. As the song enters its final verse, Katie notices that Calamity is still wearing trousers, and Katie looks through her trunk for more appropriate clothes. A curious Calamity tries on Katie’s hat, then picks up a pair of bloomers that she tries to wear as a jacket. Katie takes the bloomers away from Calamity, and the two-shot dissolves into a close-up of the bloomers, now worn by Calamity under the skirt hem that she lets drop. The camera tracks backwards into a medium shot of Calamity, who is happily adjusting her new outfit – dark skirt, white blouse. Her hair is curled and she wears visible lipstick and blush. Calamity walks toward the camera, which continues to pull back. She turns to look around the cabin, and as she spins with pride, she calls attention to both the changes in the cabin and the changes in herself. As she shows off, the music slows down and Calamity’s vocal tone changes; her voice is slightly higher and noticeably richer. This is the authentic

Calamity; we know because she looks and sounds more like the Doris Day with whom we are familiar. Katie enters the frame and for the first time a two-shot emphasizes their sameness rather than their difference.

This number helps mark one of the crucial differences between *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane*. In *Annie Get Your Gun*, the narrative was effective at closing Annie down, but through the musical numbers, women could identify with the irrepressible Betty Hutton and resist the narrative. In contrast, “A Woman’s Touch” is *Calamity Jane*’s most successful attempt at domesticating and containing its female lead. In this film, the musicals numbers serve to restrict Calamity at least as often as they showcase her power in a potentially liberating way. The conflict between the narrative and the numbers is less sharp than it is in *Annie Get Your Gun*, leaving less room for female spectators to escape the confines of the narrative.

Crucially, Calamity has to be “taught” to be a woman. The film reveals femininity to be a performance during “A Woman’s Touch” and other sequences. This revelation is not a criticism. Although femininity is a performance in *Calamity Jane*, the film presents the *desire* for the performance of its feminine ideal as a natural one. For example, there is no acknowledgement of the difficulties of this idealized feminine performance, as can be seen in *Annie Get Your Gun*. During a montage of Annie’s transformation from country urchin to sharpshooting lady, we see her held down, screaming, and forced into “feminine”

shoes. Calamity's transformation from "masculine" femininity to "feminine" femininity is as smooth as silk.

In contrast to femininity, masculinity is naturalized in *Calamity Jane* – for men, that is. The woman who attempts masculine behavior is unsuccessful *because* she is a woman, and masculinity is naturally inhabited only by men. What helps make masculinity seem natural is the presence of a genuine Western hero, Wild Bill Hickok, who does not have to work for his reputation or influence within the film because it existed before the film begins. As opposed to other musical Westerns (like *Annie Get Your Gun*), this male hero is not noticeably out of line with traditional Western male leads. The iconic Wild Bill Hickok arrives at the film with his reputation intact. He is introduced in a verse of "The Deadwood Stage:" "You're flirtin' with disaster when Bill Hickok's reputation you malign," sings Calamity. She is standing atop a poker table, looking down at Bill, whose back is to the camera. Calamity spins him toward the camera. He stands, and Calamity looks down to the floor then back up to Bill's face, emphasizing his impressive size over her diminutiveness. She sits in the chair he has vacated, and Bill drags her and the chair away from the poker table and away from the camera as he moves back into his more prominent place in the frame. His entrance defines their relationship throughout the film: Calamity pushes Bill's boundaries but ultimately finds herself no match for him, just as her inauthentic masculine performance is no match for his authentic masculinity.



The film emphasizes, too, Bill's assuredness in his male power, to which the Deadwood community responds. His natural masculine authority is in evidence in a scene that requires Bill to cross-dress. Near the beginning of the film, Bill declares that if Calamity brings Adelaide Adams to Deadwood, he will "come to the openin' dressed as a Sioux squaw a-luggin' a papoose." When he loses the bet to Calamity, he is compelled to attend Katie's first performance dressed as he promised. Everyone in the saloon laughs at him, but Bill is more in control of their laughter than Calamity, whose ineffective masculine performance makes her the object of derisive laughter in several scenes. In those scenes, Calamity fires her pistol and uses a whip to reestablish her authority. In this scene, Bill needs no more than a few words. Bill says, "All right, that's enough," and the men immediately stop laughing. A few moments later, Calamity cackles loudly, and she inspires the men to start laughing again. At that point, Bill is obliged to pull his gun to restore order. Although Calamity's rowdiness forces the more drastic measure, Bill's words alone are enough to command the community of men. His natural masculine authority penetrates the façade of women's clothes.<sup>30</sup>

Calamity Jane's continued laughter signals that Bill's humiliation is her fault, and she is punished for the transgression of making the male hero the butt of a joke. After Katie is found out and Bill realizes that he did not lose the bet after all, he lassoes Calamity from the balcony, creates a makeshift pulley, and lifts her struggling body into mid-air above the stage as the crowd in the saloon laughs.

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<sup>30</sup> I thank Mary Renda for this insight.

“I’ll git you for this,” she swears, but the fade to black closes the scene, and she never does git him. Thus Bill’s humiliation turns into Calamity’s and this scene turns into another method of containing her.

In Bill’s cross-dressing scene and throughout the film, how Bill uses his gun should be interpreted within conventions around the Western hero, for whom that instrument (and his horse) are his most important possessions. The male hero uses his gun only when he has to, in self defense or in defense of others. Using one’s gun without cause or with insufficient cause is the behavior of fools and villains in Westerns. When the male hero chooses to fire, whom he fires at, and what he fires for are deliberate actions in Westerns. Bill fires his gun only twice in *Calamity Jane*, and on both of those occasions he does it to contain Calamity. Early in the film, Calamity shoots at Bill’s feet when she thinks he has insulted her; Bill shoots her gun out of her hand and says calmly, “Why don’t you ever fix your hair?” Bill fires his gun a second time to allow Katie to “win” the showdown between her and Calamity at the climax of the film. When Bill does choose to act, his actions take on a special resonance because he *is* the Western hero. The audience understands, by the conventions of the genre, that he will not misstep. In both cases, Bill acts to establish civilization. He does not fight Indians or shoot outlaws, but he does authorize one kind of female performance over any others. Bill’s first shot implies that Calamity’s deviation from ideal femininity should be corrected by violence. Bill’s second shot determines the future of women in

Deadwood. Instead of upholding Calamity's forceful, active performance, Bill assures the survival of Katie's objectified, domesticated femininity.

In the years during which women were being encouraged to forget their activities during the war and do their part to make the domestic ideal of the 1950s a reality, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane* featured female leads for whom that transition was a complicated one. Both films offered marriage as the inescapable destiny for their female leads, but neither is fully committed to the domestic ideal. Just as spectators of traditional Westerns may have felt a loss when the cowboy rides into the sunset in the final reel, so might spectators of *Annie Get Your Gun* have felt a loss when Annie Oakley, the world's foremost lady sharpshooter, lays her gun down for a future with Frank Butler. *Calamity Jane* has the potential to be both freeing and repressive: female audience members may identify with the energy and authority of the woman onscreen, but through that identification, they are more likely to be successfully interpellated into a world of passive, domesticated femininity.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

**“CAN’T MAKE NO VOWS TO A HERD OF COWS:”**

**DOMESTICATED MASCULINITY IN**

***SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS***

On the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer soundstages in 1954, two musicals were simultaneously in production. On one part of the lot, the studio’s most respected musical talents were at work: producer Arthur Freed, director Vincent Minnelli, and dancers Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse were shooting an adaptation of the Broadway hit *Brigadoon*. On another part of the lot, flying under largely under the radar, producer Jack Cummings and director Stanley Donen were at work on an original musical adapted from a folk story about seven men looking for wives on the frontier. MGM had much less faith in that production. The buzz around the studio was that *Brigadoon* would be MGM’s next big musical hit.<sup>1</sup> The buzz was wrong. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, not *Brigadoon*, captured critical praise and popular attention for MGM that year. The musical Western spoke to American audiences in the 1950s in a way that Minnelli’s Highland fantasy did not. I argue that the film’s cultural resonance at that moment was based in its

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Donen, “Commentary by Stanley Donen,” *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, dir. Stanley Donen, 102 min., Warner Bros/Turner Entertainment, 2004, DVD.

stunningly successful integration of two rival narratives. In its primary narrative, the film endorses a domesticated masculinity. At the same time, its secondary narrative rebels against domesticity.

*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* is set in 1850 in the Oregon Territory. It concerns the seven Pontipee brothers, a set of red-headed backwoodsmen who live alone on their farm. The oldest brother, Adam (Howard Keel) heads into town to trade his goods and find a wife. After looking around town, he settles on Milly (Jane Powell), impressed by her skills as a cook and waitress in the town inn. Milly falls in love at first sight, and the two get married. Upon arriving at the Pontipee farm, Milly meets Adam's six brothers – a dirty, brawling lot – and realizes that Adam needs her to cook and clean and wash and mend, but is not in love with her. She nevertheless settles in to transform the farm into a respectable place and the brothers into respectable men so that they can find their own wives.

The brothers get a chance to meet women in the town at a barn-raising. Although they attract the women's attention, they end up destroying the barn in a brawl, turning the town against them. The brothers return to their farm lovesick. Seeing his brothers' loneliness, Adam suggests that they do what the Romans did with the Sabine women: take them. The boys head into town and kidnap the girls. On the way back to the farm an avalanche closes off the pass, trapping everyone at the farm until spring. Milly is outraged by the boys' behavior and sends them all, including her husband, to sleep in the barn. Adam, demoralized, runs off into the mountains and vows to stay there until the pass re-opens in the spring. By the

time spring comes, Milly has had a baby, Adam has realized that he really does love Milly and returns to the farm, and the women have decided that they do not want to leave. When the mob of the women's brothers and fathers comes to take them back, they all claim Milly's baby for their own, which leads to a sextuple shotgun wedding.

*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* resulted from an astoundingly eclectic assortment of artistic talent. Jack Cummings, nephew of production chief Louis B. Mayer, had overseen a number of musicals at MGM during his three decades at the studio, including the star vehicles of Eleanor Powell and Esther Williams. Stanley Donen had co-directed *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) with Gene Kelly under Arthur Freed and had not yet turned thirty. Although Donen was an accomplished choreographer, he sought out Michael Kidd to choreograph the dances. Kidd had choreographed extensively on Broadway, including work on the original runs of *Finian's Rainbow* (1947) and *Guys and Dolls* (1950). The inventive and energetic dance sequences became the centerpiece of the film, and the extended "Barn Dance" challenge dance is often featured in documentaries on film musicals. Other important contributors were composer Gene DePaul and lyricist Johnny Mercer, who supplied the music and words, respectively.

According to Stanley Donen, the studio considered *Seven Brides* a "B" musical (well, "B" for MGM), and accordingly, the film was given a strict budget, which prevented on-location filming and restricted most outdoor shots to the back

lots and sound stages.<sup>2</sup> Everyone involved was surprised when *Seven Brides* turned into one of the biggest popular and critical successes of the year. Contemporary reviews of the film were overwhelmingly favorable. Critics pointed to the film's exuberance, to its clever songs, and, especially, to its extraordinary choreography. *The Commonwealth* called it "one of those delightfully lyrical musicals with a refreshing kind of buoyancy that films are seldom able to capture in celluloid."<sup>3</sup> *Saturday Review* praised the songs' seamless incorporation into the plot and extolled the "[s]pirited, balletic" choreography of Michael Kidd.<sup>4</sup> Donen recalls *Seven Brides* as his most financially successful MGM film. "It was way bigger than *Singin' in the Rain*," he remembers.<sup>5</sup> *Singin' in the Rain*, which Donen co-directed with Gene Kelly, has received, certainly, more critical attention in subsequent years, but *Seven Brides* did indeed fare much better at the box office when it was released. Within two years after its premiere, the film reached number 44 on *Variety*'s list of "All-Time Top Money Films." On that list of 150 films, *Singin' in the Rain* did not even appear.<sup>6</sup>

In *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, the parallel sets of love stories and the conflict between the narrative storyline and the musical numbers illustrates more

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<sup>2</sup> It was actually unusual for musicals to be filmed outside of the studios (although nearly all Westerns involved some location shooting). Donen was a great believer in location shooting; in 1949, his own *On the Town* was the first Hollywood musical to be filmed on location. When Donen speaks of *Seven Brides*, he often expresses disappointment at the visual elements of the film, regretful that the film's budget did not allow him to film outside of the back lots. See the director's commentary and Donen's interviews in *Sobbin Women: The Making of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1997), both available on the *Seven Brides* two-disc DVD.

<sup>3</sup> "The Screen," *The Commonwealth* (13 Aug 1954): 463.

<sup>4</sup> "SR Goes to the Movies," *The Saturday Review* (7 Aug 1954): 27.

<sup>5</sup> Donen (2004).

<sup>6</sup> "All-Time Top Money Films," *Variety*, 4 Jan 1956, pp. 84, 86.

clearly than straight Westerns the internal paradox of Western ideology. *Seven Brides* begins where most Westerns (and most musicals and most classical Hollywood films) leave off: at the marriage. As a generic principle, Westerns shut down when the man embraces the woman so that the films do not have to deal with the fact that that relationship will eventually lead to the domesticated world in which the audience lives – the same world from which Westerns provide an escape.

In generic terms, *Seven Brides* deals with the problem of what happens to the Western hero after he gets the girl, when his independence becomes the casualty of oncoming civilization. In the film's terms, domestication is what happens, and Adam must learn to be a man in the home rather than on the range. It is a scenario that a traditional Western would not have allowed; the domesticated Western hero is anathema to the genre. But in this musical Western, before the film closes, Adam must relinquish the autonomy he exhibited prior to marriage when he was his own man, and he must instead accept his responsibilities as patriarchal authority within the home. That is not his brothers' trajectory. As if to compensate for the film's restriction of Western male independence through Adam, the brothers' story re-authorizes male authority within the home and over women.

Because it is set after the central couple is married, most of the action of the film takes place indoors, in the domestic sphere. The film thus redefines Western masculinity as it exists within the home, within a marriage, and within the family. Female characters were not the only ones who had to accept a gender identity



based in the domestic sphere in 1950s films. Home was established as the best place for men, too. If popular culture's ideal of femininity in the decade following World War II wore an apron over her housedress, the masculine ideal wore a fedora on top of his gray flannel suit.

“Gotta Be Right to Be the Bride for Me:” Adam, Milly, and Masculinity on the  
Domestic Frontier

The single most important image when thinking about ideal masculinity as it was constructed in the 1950s is the figure taken from Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. In the novel, middle-class and middle-aged World War II veteran Tom Rath works to balance the demands of his home life and the demands of corporate America. The man in the gray flannel suit was the norm of the 1950s, the middle-class ideal against which men were supposed to measure themselves. The man was a veteran of World War II or Korea, he returned home and joined the ranks of corporate working men, and he earned enough money to furnish his wife and children with a middle-class home, perhaps in one of the new prefabricated suburban housing developments.

This norm brings into focus several of the tenets of middle-class masculinity in the 1950s. According to various popular culture sources, American men were supposed to be married, raise children, and work to take care of their dependents. Ideal masculinity was not based on the individual but was intimately tied to his

role as breadwinner, as husband, and as father.<sup>7</sup> *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* is a film that seems to fully accept the domestic ideal for men and women, but shows considerable resistance to it when examined closely.

Everything about a Western resists a domesticated society and a domesticated authority figure. In traditional Western terms, there is a difference between “civilizing” and “domesticating.” “Civilizing” belongs to men, and the range of possible civilizing behaviors in straight Westerns is broad. One may help to establish civilization by participating in any number of active, “masculine” behaviors: building a railroad, driving cattle to sell in burgeoning communities in need of beef, or leading wagon trains. Civilizing is not necessarily synonymous with domesticating behaviors, which may be defined as “female” tasks: cooking, serving, cleaning, teaching, et cetera. In *Seven Brides*, the primary civilizing influence and the primary domesticating influence are the same: Milly. And “domestication” is problematic in this film, even if it is presented as an inevitability.

*Seven Brides* moves the Western into the domestic space. Most of the film takes place either in and around the home or within Milly’s reach. Her job within

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<sup>7</sup> Domestic ideology constructed the image of the man in the gray flannel suit, but other types of masculine performance emerged the 1950s. The “Beat” and the “playboy” both refused middle-class values. Beats like poet Allen Ginsberg and writer Jack Kerouac protested against the rigidity of the corporate world, family life, and American consumerism. Hugh Hefner and *Playboy* magazine encouraged men to create a home to live in, but discouraged them from settling down with one woman. According to Barbara Ehrenreich, the playboy “loved women – large-breasted, long-legged young women, anyway – and hated wives” (42). For more on the Beats and the playboys, see Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983), chapters 4 and 5.

the narrative is to insist upon domesticated behavior from the men with whom she lives. She teaches them how men must behave in the civilized society that is quickly encroaching on them (and one that they, as settlers, have helped to bring about). She must teach Adam proper male behavior within a marriage, and she must teach his brothers the proper codes of behavior in order to obtain wives. The move into the domestic sphere reins the men in, for to live in this space they must submit to Milly's domestic order and modify their uncivilized (undomesticated) behavior.

On her first night in the Pontipee home, after cooking dinner for the family, Milly watches as the men grab for the food, ignorant of all decorum. "Haven't you any decency to wait for grace? You don't even know what I'm talkin' about!" she cries, astonished. After seeing her husband join the ruckus, Milly angrily upsets the table, sending food and men to the floor. The next day, Milly insists that the men will not eat again until they clean themselves and give Milly all of their clothes for laundering. The brothers initially resist, but their stomachs get the better of them. The next time the men sit around the table, they are clean and clean-shaven. They politely pass the food, not only because they want to please the cook, but also because they are physically constrained by the blankets that they have wrapped themselves in to protect their modesty. And thus we recognize, as we have seen before, the transformative power of a woman's touch – in this case, in addition to being decorative, it organizes and constricts.

Like the protagonists of *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Calamity Jane*, Milly takes up an inordinate amount of space for a woman in a Western. But unlike Annie and Calamity, the female lead of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, rather than being in need of domestication, exists more securely within the domestic sphere. This does not mean that she returns to the periphery of the narrative, where we would find her in a straight Western. She does not. However, although *Seven Brides* puts a woman in the important role of civilizing, it internally checks her power by equating her with “domestication.”

Even from the domestic sphere, Milly exerts considerable power over the men around her, inspiring more “civilized” behavior from all of them. Unlike Annie or Calamity Jane, Milly never steps outside of the realm of domesticity. Indeed, even though she works outside of the home in the first scenes, her work consists of mainly female-appropriate tasks, as defined by this frontier space. Adam meets Milly at the town inn, where she works as a cook and waitress for the men who frequent it. Milly is also associated with other signifiers of domesticated civilization within Westerns; she can read (education), and she owns and carries a Bible (Christianity). Although Milly is allowed to rule, the space within which she can rule is limited.

Still, Milly does not behave like the passive schoolmarm of so many Westerns. She is “spunky,” as one of the brothers (Gideon) describes her. She is also independent. Milly holds a job before she marries Adam, she makes a free decision to marry him, and she takes control over her new home despite its

challenges. Most importantly, Milly has ownership of herself. On her wedding night, Milly tells Adam that she will not sleep with him. She declares, “You don’t want a wife, Adam. You want a cook, a washer-woman, a hired girl. Well, a hired girl’s got a right to a sleepin’ space of her own....I’ll work alongside ya’, Adam. But I’m not sleepin’ alongside ya’.” Milly eventually relents, but not before she externalizes her feelings in a ballad, “When You’re in Love.” In short, Milly is no pushover; she is a powerful frontier woman.

Just as Milly both fits and does not fit the mold of the Western woman, Adam is both a familiar and unfamiliar Western hero. He is signaled as a genuine Westerner in several ways. When we meet him, we discover that he lives outside of the town, back where land still needs to be tamed. In addition, he is successful; he does what he sets out to do. “Haven’t set my mind to somethin’ yet but what I got,” he claims as he begins his search for a wife. Also, Adam sees the need to establish civilization and properly identifies marriage (the creation of the family unit) as a way to tame this hard land. But control is a quality of protagonists in Westerns, and Adam lacks the ability to regulate his world – his brothers are out of control, and he cannot figure out how to effectively interact with his wife.

The primary narrative of *Seven Brides* is the story of Adam’s personal growth. With Milly’s help, he grows into an effective Western hero within this domesticated frontier and gains a better picture of what civilization should look like. Milly’s influence is explicit; it is her song, “When You’re In Love,” that traces Adam’s trajectory from coarse backwoodsman to responsible husband and

father. The first time the song appears, it visually reinforces the outside/inside (frontier/civilization) dichotomy that the characters represent. Adam has climbed into a tree outside of his bedroom window, preparing to sleep there rather than let his brothers know that his wife has kicked him out of bed. Adam lounges on the left side of the screen. Milly is inside the bedroom, singing to Adam as she stands in the open window of the wall that separates them. Adam is in the shadows, his dark red hair and brown buckskin blending into the night. Milly, in a colorful shawl, is heavily backlit by the light of the bedroom. The audience's sympathy and understanding are with her, the woman on the inside who appears to resonate with the warmth of the home. By the time the song appears for the final time in the film, Adam has symbolically transitioned out of the isolation of the tree and into the community of the warm hearth.

“When You're in Love” can be heard nondiegetically when Adam returns from the mountains near the end of the film. This scene signals the end of Adam's transformation, as he accepts his role as patriarchal authority. Adam kneels over the crib and names the baby Hannah, taking ownership over his daughter. He expands his role as father to his role as male authority over anyone's daughter: “I got to thinkin' up there in the mountains, thinkin' about the baby. About how I'd feel if somebody came sneakin' in and carried her off. I'd string him up the nearest tree.” Note that Adam is not upset because he violates the girls' will; no, his thinkin' has caused Adam to see that the girls' abduction was wrong because he and his brothers did not respect the fathers' responsibilities as protectors

(owners?) of their daughters. Appropriately, this is also the scene wherein Adam expresses his love to Milly, signifying that Adam accepts his patriarchal role within his marriage, too. Adam quotes Milly's song back at her: "Milly, when you're in love, when you're *really* in love..." And in the final scene, when his brothers seal their unions at the shotgun wedding, Adam kisses Milly, too, symbolically marrying her again, this time blissfully aware of his responsibilities within the union. Adam, although literally in buskin and fringe, accepts the ideology of the man in the gray flannel suit. So do his brothers – but not without a fight.

“We’re Gonna Make Them Sobbin’ Women Smile:” Benjamin, Caleb, Daniel,  
Ephraim, Frank, and Gideon and Rebellion within Conformity

Like the domestic ideal for women, the “norm” of the man in the gray flannel suit did not come without anxiety. There was an incredible amount of fear about what over-domestication would do to American males. In *Manhood in America*, Michel Kimmel writes that both liberal and conservative writers worried that the masses of gray flannel armies were weakening the national character.<sup>8</sup> Right-wing author Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (originally published in 1943) reacted against the push for men to be a face in that crowd. Her novel argued that the only

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<sup>8</sup> Kimmel, 238-241.

way to be a strong, honorable, respectable man was to be an uncompromising individualist, to stand apart from the masses who pressure men into conformity. Liberal sociologist C. Wright Mills railed against the soulless corporate world that had captured so many American men. Within that world, he wrote, “The white collar man is the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act.”<sup>9</sup> For both liberals and conservatives, the corporate world repressed the American male, to both their detriment and the detriment of the country.

Men were forced to toil in corporate conformity because they were responsible for providing for a home and family, and their role within the home further oppressed them. Films from the 1950s offered evidence that the pressure on the breadwinning male was such that it imperiled his health. This was, of course, connected to female power. Steven Cohan writes, “High blood pressure, ulcers, alcoholism, boredom and depression, and heart disease all testified to the dangers of job-related stress or, as many writers interpreted it, to the breadwinner’s debilitation caused by his pushing too hard to satisfy his wife’s ambition and finance her consumerism.”<sup>10</sup>

This paradox was irresolvable: on one hand, a man was supposed to have control over the domestic space, and his control in that space proved his masculinity; on the other hand, his domestic ties had the power to weaken and

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<sup>9</sup> C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), ix, xii; quoted in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 240.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 56.



emasculate him. *Seven Brides* is occupied with navigating this paradox. As a film, it could not reject the norm outright. As Joan Mellen argues, male characters in film have never been able to rebel.<sup>11</sup> When we look back at the “screen rebels” of the 1950s, it does not take long to see that they did not mount a rebellion after all. James Dean, Natalie Wood, and Sal Mineo in *Rebel without a Cause* constructed a heteronormative, domesticated family unit among themselves when their own families failed them. They did not seek to destroy or offer alternatives to the norm; they just wanted one of their own. In 1956, psychologist Robert Lindner suggested that men needed to rebel but could not in their conformist society. He wrote, “Forced from without to conform, and from within to rebel, he makes a compromise: he rebels within the confines of conformity.”<sup>12</sup>

*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* “rebels within conformity” by both supporting and resisting domesticated masculinity. The brothers do not threaten to dismantle the domestic ideal; indeed, they appear to subscribe to it. But the film is not comfortable with their domestication (a Western cannot be) and the brothers’ violent kidnapping is its form of rebellion.

Adam’s trajectory tells the film’s ostensible message: errant men must settle down, build a home, and raise a family. But although Adam’s transformation is the framing narrative of the film, it is not the only narrative the film tells. It is not even, necessarily, the narrative that the film most believes in. In the relationship

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<sup>11</sup> Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 190.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Lindner, *Must You Conform?* (New York: Rinehart, 1956), 27; quoted in Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 191.

between Adam and Milly, the film validates Adam's acceptance of his domestic role as father and husband. But through the story of the brothers' marriages, the film resists the repression of male power that domestication requires. *Seven Brides* is not a film that serves as a warning against the domestic influence, but it does fight against domesticity, ultimately prioritizing uncivilized (undomesticated) male action over more civilized (domesticated) action even in the area – especially in the area – of courting.

The power of *Seven Brides* is that it disguises its own defiance. It constructs its disguise through the brothers' excessive performances of masculinity and through the film's all-too-successful legitimization of abduction and rape as acceptable courting practices. Because the brothers flagrantly violate the codes of Western heroes, the audience is signaled not to take them seriously. But the brothers' excess is precisely where the pleasure of the film is located; the brothers carry *Seven Brides*' energy. The musical responds to needs within society, as Dyer argues, and *Seven Brides* responded to the 1950s' need to experience a world in which domesticity and male power were not mutually exclusive.<sup>13</sup>

The six brothers are not exactly real men of the West, or of the Western. They are not "hard" and unmovable like the land. They are completely susceptible to Milly's influence at first and later to Adam's influence. They feel jealousy, pain, and loneliness, and are a near-parody of the cowboy's well-known shyness around women. This freedom within their characterization allows them to retain the

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<sup>13</sup> Dyer, 36.

backwoodsman image that their geographical and historical space allows; and at the same time, it allows them to perpetrate a kidnapping without the act feeling too threatening.

Unlike Adam, the brothers do not need to learn the value of marriage; at least, that is not the lesson that the film teaches them. The six lonely, frustrated backwoodsmen must learn the proper behaviors of civilization if they intend to get wives. Milly immediately sets out to help the brothers find their own girls. She explains that they cannot brawl their way into marriage. “When you meet a girl, don’t grab her like she was a flapjack!... You’ve got to court a girl to get her,” Milly says. This introduces “Goin’ Co’tin’,” a number wherein Milly shows the boys the social machinations of courting: how to play the game (domesticated) society’s way.

At the barn-raising, the men try out Milly’s strategy. Her strategy is immediately successful, and the boys do get noticed by the girls in town. But the brothers brawl, destroy the barn, and walk away empty-handed. Eventually, the adoption of Milly’s social graces only causes the men more problems, because inherent in Milly’s courtship procedure is the interim loneliness, the agony of waiting that is expressed in the brothers’ “Lament (Lonesome Polecat).”

The strategy that is ultimately successful is proposed by Adam. Inspired by one of Milly’s books (Plutarch’s *Lives*), and contrary to Milly’s warning, it involves grabbing the girls just like they was flapjacks. “Of course,” he explains, “this bein’ Oregon and God-fearin’ territory, you’d have to capture a parson along

with 'em." Adam tells the brothers the story of the Sabine women in "Sobbin' Women," a number that moves the boys from lonesome despondency to action, and at its conclusion, they ride off to town to bring back the girls.

Of course, the brothers' kidnapping would not be nearly as successful if it did not involve the cooperation of the brides. Crucially, the film justifies the girls' abduction by orchestrating the women's submission to their captivity. After a while on the farm, the women sing their only song together, "June Bride." The film has already expressed the girls' interest in having contact with the brothers, and as they lounge in the brothers' bedroom (which is now their own) the women learn of Milly's pregnancy and consider their own futures. Together, as they sing of the wonders of a June wedding ("For they say when you marry in June / you will always be a bride"), they align themselves in the center of the room, stepping forward together in mimicry of the movement of a wedding party. A flower bouquet is passed among them, and each dancer takes a turn in the center of the lines, enacting her own wedding fantasies.

Costume is important here. The girls dance and sing in their underwear, dressed in corsets and pantalets. Unlike the brothers, who wear different colored shirts, the women are not set apart even by color. Their wardrobe makes them nearly identical, further emphasizing the fact that they all share this one dream. Their underwear puts them on display, representing their sexual availability. Its color mimics the white of a traditional bridal gown, and that association contains their sexuality within the marriage vows that they are pretending to make. There,

in their confinement (in their captors' most personal space, even), the women pontificate not on the pain of being ripped from the bosoms of their loved ones, but on the prospect of a June wedding and the legal-cultural-social legitimization of the sexual act that has (not) been forced upon them.

A dissolve turns the girls' make-believe wedding into a lament on the length of winter. In the second half of "June Bride," the women (fully dressed) are photographed against several winter scenes looking terribly lonely. The song moves the film through the winter, emphasizing the girls' misery in the frigidity of their single status: "In November the snow starts to fly / piling up, ankle high / Come December it's up to your knees / still the bride's a bride-to-be." The sequence parallels the boys' "Lament," which was also set against the cold, barren winter. Finally, "all at once, one day, it's spring," and the exterior shot of the snow-covered farm dissolves into an exterior shot of a farm with blooming trees and grazing animals surrounding it. With no narrative break, the men join the women for the next number, "Spring, Spring, Spring."

Despite Milly's vow that the sexes will be kept apart until the girls are returned, "Spring, Spring, Spring" shows the individual couples around the farm singing verses about the spring, spring, spring. This number most overtly legitimizes the women's captivity, erasing any memories of the pain of their kidnapping by replacing them with bright snapshots of blissful coupledness. The song celebrates the joys of spring and the natural expressions of love that they see around them. As one couple sings,

All the henfolk are hatchin' while their menfolk are scratchin'  
 To ensure the survival of each brand new arrival.  
 Each nest is twitterin', they're all baby-sitter-in'.  
 Spring, spring, spring!

The final shot of the song encapsulates its message. After the couples have sung independent of one another, they gather on the slope of a hill to sing together. They share the frame but are not crowded in it; the women enter holding baby goats and baby lambs while the menfolk look over them and beam at their surrogate babies. The film thus makes their unions natural by associating them with the blossoming of spring. Regardless of the actions that delivered them to that moment, they, like the rest of Mother Nature's creatures, are only doing what they have been created to do.

It is not an accident that *Seven Brides* works so hard to establish male authority over women in a *sexual* relationship. In 1957, John Sisk argued in *Commonweal* that the Western hero provides men an escape from female sexual power. He wrote that

the Western Hero expresses for the modern American male his feeling that sex as he knows it, and is overwhelmingly assaulted by it, is a tyranny, and that woman will unman him in proportion as her sexual function overfascinates him... [M]odern civilization has made normal sex life so difficult that one is forced to counter it in fantasy with the idyl of a Man's World.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Sisk recognized a disruption in the presumed sexual balance of the heterosexual couple. Perhaps Sisk's "modern civilization" stretched father back than V-J Day, but it is clear that entomologist Alfred Kinsey initiated a sexual

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<sup>14</sup> Sisk, 368.

revolution of sorts when he released his reports on human male sexuality (1948) and human female sexuality (1953).

Among Kinsey's findings were several statistics that directly affected how Americans viewed sex and common sexual behaviors. Among the surprising statistics: the prevalence of sex outside of marriage (premarital sex and adultery), the prevalence of homosexuality, and the prevalence of autoeroticism. Perhaps his most anxiety-inducing findings were those that dealt with women's sexuality. The reports concluded, for example, that men reached their sexual peak in their late teens, but women did not reach theirs until their late twenties and early thirties.<sup>15</sup> If so, then a generation of men in gray flannel suits were perhaps ill-equipped to sexually satisfy their wives.

*Seven Brides* illustrates real anxiety around sex. On his wedding night, Adam lounges on a sofa in the living room, his brothers sitting and standing around him. The camera first captures a clock on the mantelpiece, and we can hear it clicking. The camera pulls out to reveal groupings of the brothers, each throwing looks at each other and then at Adam. "Nine o'clock already. Hour past your bedtime," Adam tells his brothers. "Yours, too," Frank says, leaning in, and the others snicker. It is clear that Adam is delaying his bedtime because he is nervous about sleeping with his wife.

Although *Seven Brides* recognizes male anxiety around sexual performance, it also mounts a defense of male virility. This defense is played out most

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<sup>15</sup> Cohan, *Masked Men*, 58-59.

emphatically through the girls' kidnapping. As has been illustrated, the second half of the *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* is deliberately set up to rationalize, contain, and legitimize the environment of rape that the plot requires us to believe in. It is alarmingly successful, and the spectacle and intensity of the musical numbers are what sell the story: the power of the barn dance, the desperation of "Lament," the rousing "innocence" of "Sobbin' Women," the musical acquiescence of "June Bride," and the satisfying joy of "Spring, Spring, Spring." So while the film validates Adam's narrative, the audience is more convinced by the brothers' more problematic one, wherein the brothers' exuberance belies the brutality of their intentions.

For modern audiences, the treatment of the kidnapping in *Seven Brides* is likely the most unsettling aspect of this film. It is striking, although perhaps not entirely unexpected, that contemporary reviews did not reveal any real concern with the kidnapping or the violent implications of rape. A review in *Time* magazine provided the starkest example of this. The author wrote:

**Seven Brides for Seven Brothers** (M-G-M) is a lighthearted musical version of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. It is also the liltingest bit of tunesome lollygagging to hit the screen since the same studio brought forth *An American in Paris* (1951)... In the dead of a bright white winter's night, the hot young sparks fly off to town to steal some girls of tinder age. Six screams later, their sleigh is racing back to the farm with a baggage of "Sobbin' Women" aboard and a tumult of raging fathers behind... and barrel away home to a long winter's courtship.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Cinema," *Time* (12 July 1954): 90.



Although all of the reviews were not as openly dismissive of the women's denied autonomy as this review, no contemporary reviews in my sample expressed any discomfort with the scene.<sup>17</sup>

The reviews speak to how successfully the musical genre hid the cultural issues that were at stake within it.<sup>18</sup> From the reviews, we can see that the power of spectacle constructed this mask. Over and over, reviews described the film's "light" and "bright" look, and they credited its "refreshing buoyancy" and its "rhythmic fun and mayhem."<sup>19</sup> *The Saturday Review* nearly expressed discomfort with the film, describing some of the plot choices as "charmingly off-beat notions," but for the reviewer, they were neutralized by the film's charm.<sup>20</sup>

The reviews suggest that in the minds of the reviewers, there was no question that men should have authority over women. Films, magazines, and other cultural commentators in the 1950s may have questioned whether men were capable of successfully performing masculinity in an authoritative way, but they did not question whether men *should* have that authority. Adam's narrative is about him accepting patriarchal authority in his home and over his wife and daughter, and the brothers' trajectory gives them control over the brides' bodies, decisions, and feelings. In an era that emasculated men by domesticating them (and even their

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<sup>17</sup> For a complete listing of reviews consulted, see the *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* subheading under the primary sources section of the bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> Cultural issues were much more visible to critics in dramatic fare like Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), whose reviews often ran alongside those of *Seven Brides*.

<sup>19</sup> "SR Goes to the Movies," *The Saturday Review* (1 Jan 1955): 63. "The Screen," *The Commonweal*, (13 Aug 1954): 463. "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers," *Variety*, 2 June 1954, p 6.

<sup>20</sup> "SR Goes to the Movies," *The Saturday Review* (7 Aug 1954): 26.

Western heroes), it offered men compensation by giving them power over women, instead.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **“COUNTRY’S A-CHANGIN’”:**

#### ***OKLAHOMA!*, FEMALE PARADOX, AND MALE COMPROMISE**

In spite of being based on the stage production that started the boom in musical Westerns, *Oklahoma!* was the last of the musical Westerns to be filmed in the immediate postwar years. Released in 1955 and 1956, no other musical Westerns entered cinemas for nearly ten years.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being both the first and last musical Western, *Oklahoma!* was one of the most significant musicals in the development of American musical theater. Histories of American theater have described it as the first American musical to fully integrate narrative, song, and dance, but this is something of an overstatement. *Oklahoma!* was not the first musical to ever combine relevant songs with narrative action. But the production’s close integration of music and character and its innovative use of contemporary dance forms were more sophisticated than musicals that had come

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<sup>1</sup> *Oklahoma!* was simultaneously filmed in the new Todd-AO format and the more common Cinemascope. It was released by Magna in 1955 in Todd-AO and re-released in 1956 in Cinemascope by Twentieth Century Fox. After *Oklahoma!*, the next musical Western to be released was MGM’s *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964). Malpas-Paramount’s *Paint Your Wagon*, released in 1969, was the next to be produced and the last musical Western to date. All observations about *Oklahoma!* in this chapter are based on the 1955 Todd-AO release, released on DVD in 1999 from Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.

before it, and its construction influenced nearly every stage musical that followed it.<sup>2</sup>

Because *Oklahoma!* was so different from other musicals on Broadway, its success came as a surprise to the theater world. Famously, when it was previewed, theater producer Mike Todd, referring to the period setting and dearth of leggy chorines, predicted, “No girls, no gags, no chance!”<sup>3</sup> But it was precisely *Oklahoma!*’s conservative, hopeful, old-fashioned nostalgia, its harkening back to the pioneer spirit, that critics and audiences responded to in the middle of World War II and throughout the unsettling postwar period.<sup>4</sup> By 1955, even Mike Todd had changed his mind about the show; it was his production company, Magna, that produced the film in conjunction with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Further illustrating his faith in the show, Todd used the film version to inaugurate his new 70mm widescreen format. *Oklahoma!* was the first film to be produced in the eponymous “Todd-AO,” a new form of presentation with a high, deep, and wide screen nearly twice the size of a traditional screen. Anticipated for twelve years and released in a brand-new format, the 1955 release of *Oklahoma!* was an auspicious event.

*Oklahoma!* integrates the musical and the Western with less overt gender anxiety than *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Calamity Jane*, or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. *Oklahoma!*’s anxiety is made less visible because *Oklahoma!* is not

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<sup>2</sup> Mast, 203.

<sup>3</sup> Mast, 212.

<sup>4</sup> Feber-Kane, 228.

primarily concerned with transforming an unacceptable gender performance into an acceptable one. Its characters are static rather than dynamic, and the most unacceptable performance is destroyed rather than modified. The male lead, Curly, enters in a cowboy hat and on a horse; he lacks the vanity of Frank Butler, the vulnerability of Bill Hickok, and the uncertainty of Adam Pontipee. His antagonist, Jud, is like villains in traditional Westerns – he violates the law and must be dealt with. Just as Curly looks and behaves like a Western hero with which we are familiar, so do the women of *Oklahoma!* subscribe to traditional Western gender ideology – that is, they wear skirts, and their apron strings are tied to the home. But for men and women, gender performance is more complicated than it first appears. Anxiety around female power and male efficacy are disguised by the film’s optimism and divert the viewer’s attention away by the narrative’s focus on a genuine villain, Jud Fry.

*Oklahoma!* is also distinctive among postwar musical Westerns because it presents the most visibly conservative image of the Western. I argue that *Oklahoma!* is the most “traditional” of these films because it contains more of the qualities of traditional Westerns than other musical Westerns. Importantly, *Oklahoma!* has a male hero we can recognize as such (Curly), a clear villain (Jud), and closes with a classic Western showdown between the two men. *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Calamity Jane*, and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* lack villains; their protagonists seek to address moral and social codes that are violated by the protagonists themselves.

In addition to being a Western, *Oklahoma!* is also a musical, and that genre contributes to the film's priorities. The centrality of Curly and Jud's rivalry suggests an interest in male action typical of Westerns, but the musical, with its distribution of songs and screen time, does not limit the film's focus to those characters. Perhaps more than other musical Westerns, *Oklahoma!* is particularly interested in the construction of a community through the contributions of individual characters. *Oklahoma!*'s narrative tracks the romantic entanglements of a number of characters from a frontier community near Claremore, Oklahoma. The show's primary concern is the romance between Laurey Williams (Shirley Jones) and cowboy Curly McLain (Gordon MacRae). Laurey is also pursued by Jud Fry (Rod Steiger), who works on her farm. Laurey eventually chooses Curly; but Jud, spurned and angry, tries to kill the couple after the wedding ceremony. Curly fights Jud, and in the skirmish Jud stabs himself with his own knife. The musical is also occupied with a secondary romantic triangle. At its center is Laurey's friend Ado Annie Carnes (Gloria Grahame), who has been passing time with a peddler, Ali Hakim (Eddie Albert), while her erstwhile boyfriend, Will Parker (Gene Nelson), has been in Kansas City trying to earn enough money to marry her. Presiding over this frontier community is Aunt Eller (Charlotte Greenwood), Laurey's biological aunt and everyone's surrogate mother.

The film, like the stage production, is a self-conscious celebration of this idealized frontier community.<sup>5</sup> It is a perfect example of a type of musical that

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<sup>5</sup> Feder-Kane, 231-232

Rick Altman identifies as “the folk musical,” a musical wherein the characters play out “a mythicized version of the cultural past.”<sup>6</sup> The audience is meant to identify with the film’s vision of community and not necessarily with any specific character. There are few close-ups, there are seldom fewer than two characters in a frame, there are no “star turns” (numbers staged to exploit a particular performer), and very often in the musical numbers, the entire ensemble is present and the entire community crowded comfortably into the frame.<sup>7</sup>

Along with “community,” “optimism” is a fundamental value of *Oklahoma!* (Robert Hatch of *The Nation* called the show “distilled euphoria.”<sup>8</sup>) The exclamation point in the title is no accident – this film celebrates its own cheerfulness. It revels in the beauty of the land from the first moments. The credits are comparatively plain, yellow and red text on an entirely black background. This serves to make the opening diegetic shot more impressive: The camera sits within a field of high corn, looking up into a clear blue sky. It tracks through the field, finally opening into the expanse of grass and sky. A horse and rider, nearly invisible in the distance, are engulfed by the land. On the soundtrack, cymbals clash, heralding the beauty of the landscape and cueing the opening song, “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.” This moment sets the film’s tone; there is a bright, golden haze over *Oklahoma!*.

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<sup>6</sup> Altman, 272.

<sup>7</sup> Feder-Kane discusses casting decisions (including the lack of “star turns”) and their relationship to the stage version’s “atmospheric simplicity” on pages 229-230.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Hatch, “Films,” *The Nation* (29 Oct 1955): 369.

The energy of *Oklahoma!* – its optimism – is checked by its recognition that all is not well in the community. This energy, based in the excesses of the musical, works in a similar way in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, which conceals serious anxieties about gender with its own brand of energy. *Oklahoma!* has a dystopian feel (Jud is *scary*), but it reaches for utopia, defined within the film as the feeling of an indomitable community. The film does not seek to create the illusion that its problems do not exist, but instead argues that the community will feel and be perfect once the negative forces (personified as Jud) can be ousted. After that, the possibilities for happiness within the community (and within the gendered expectations therein) are boundless. *Oklahoma!*'s optimism is notable in its persistence; it rebounds from its dark turns in ways that other films do not. The melodramatic musical *A Star is Born* (1954) has moments of elation that serve only to make the tragedy keener. *Oklahoma!*'s darkness reinforces the power of its optimism.

Within *Oklahoma!*'s traditional frontier community, changes in gender expectations are subtler than other musical Westerns, but the film nevertheless follows the trends of the other films. In this postwar film as in the others, the male heroes are not masculine because they have the power to establish law on the frontier but because they manage to get wives. Thus, subscribing to the ideal of home and family is the primary duty of the male characters. The women of *Oklahoma!* are more present than they would be in a straight Western. But as in straight Westerns, women are domestic figures in this film. They do take control



of the film narratively and visually. But, at the same time, they are also narratively and visually constrained.

“I Only Did the Kinda Things I Oughta – Sorta:” The Women of *Oklahoma!*

The most obvious way that *Oklahoma!* constrains its female characters is by presenting the home as the most appropriate space for them. The female characters’ close association with the home is immediately established. From the first time we see Laurey, she is in and around the house, wearing a dress and an apron and doing domestic work. She enters the frame for the first time singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” as she walks out of the farmhouse and onto the porch. She is considerably more composed than our other domestic heroine, Milly, whom we first see through the window of the boarding house shoving a man who had offended her. As we will see, Laurey is weaker than Milly, too; Milly’s power effects a backlash within the narrative, but Laurey’s decisions do not create the same effect.

But Laurey’s point of view is privileged within the film. Laurey is allowed to control what the audience sees in two musical numbers. This is a privilege not allowed any other character. In “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” Curly describes the rig he has hired to go to the Skidmore party, and we see a close-up of Laurey’s face. She closes her eyes and the film cuts to a surrey riding along a

prairie. The audience is thus brought into Laurey's mind and is encouraged to identify with her dreams. This is a key moment, too, because it signals the appropriateness of this romantic pair. It is the first time that Laurey and Curly come together – not just as the couple in the surrey (although we never see their faces in her daydream), but as the perfect union of Laurey's vision and Curly's voice.

Laurey controls the film's visual and auidial content most famously in the ballet centerpiece, "Laurey Makes Up Her Mind," commonly referred to as the "dream ballet." Laurey uses smelling salts she has bought from the peddler to help her decide whether she should attend the Skidmore party with Jud or Curly. As she sits on the porch in a rocking chair, she closes her eyes and sings "Out of My Dreams." Laurey walks onto a soundstage and changes places with her dancing double, and the ballet begins. The ballet accomplishes several things: it re-emphasizes Laurey and Curly as the ideal couple; it indicates that their union is important to the community; it aligns Jud against the community; and it suggests that Jud (and all he represents) may be impossible to defeat.

The ballet emphatically brands Jud as a threat to the community. He enters at the point of Laurey's imagined wedding, and when he does, the community members who had been dancing excitedly, heralding the day, stop moving and stand frozen. The bright golden haze on the soundstage turns ominous as shadows overtake the frame. In the next scene of the ballet, Jud is shown in an environment he is more comfortable in, among dancers whose melancholy matches the

cheerless red lighting in which they perform. The gaudy women's costumes (short dresses and ostentatious headdresses) let us know that this is a brothel, a setting familiar to Westerns. The scene in the brothel associates Jud with inappropriate sexuality, an important feature of his character. When Laurey chooses between Curly and Jud, she is forced into a classic Western predicament, although it is a dilemma that the male hero more often faces. In her dream, Laurey must choose between a socially sanctioned expression of sexuality (marriage) and unsanctioned, aberrant sexuality (the brothel, sex outside of marriage). As in Westerns, the choice of sanctioned sexuality over unsanctioned sexuality is marked as important to the community.<sup>9</sup> The consequences of Laurey's choice are played out in the dream ballet in clear terms. When Laurey and Curly are about to get married in the ballet, the dancers express joy and celebration. When Jud appears, the dancers stop moving, the orchestra strikes a disharmonious chord, and the lights change and throw shadows onto the scene. Jud's unsanctioned sexuality may be intriguing to Laurey (she is, after all, dreaming about it), but it is frightening and dangerous and destroys community.

In the ballet Jud is dangerous not only because his desires are threatening, but also because he, and the desires he represents, are so powerful. The dream ballet concludes with a fight between Jud and Curly. Jud will not be beaten; he is impervious, even, to the gunshots that Curly fires at him. The gun is discarded

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the choice between whore and virgin is critical to John Wayne's development in *Angel and the Badman* (1946), and a problematic prostitute as at the center of John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

and the men enter hand-to-hand combat as Laurey watches. Other members of the community gather, horrified, but cannot stop Jud from killing Curly and carrying Laurey away. The final moments of the dream imply an off-screen rape; the consequences of the failure of community are dire and brutal. On this unsettling note, the *entr'acte* begins.

It is important to note that when Laurey takes over the narrative, it does not have the same effect of Annie Oakley's ownership of the gaze in *Annie Get Your Gun*. Annie's gaze is disrupting and destabilizing; it is a surprise and a subversion. When Laurey controls the narrative, it is strictly within the realm of fantasy. When she is given space in "reality," her potential for protest is strongly contained. Laurey sings "Many a New Day" after she hears a rumor that Curly prefers "that Cummins gal" to her. Laurey asks, "Why should a woman who is healthy and strong / blubber like a baby if her man goes away?":

Many a new face will please my eye,  
 Many a new love will find me.  
 Never have I once looked back to sigh  
 Over the romance behind me.  
 Many a new day will dawn before I do.

The lyrics suggest that this is a protest song, but the words are so heavily undercut by the visual elements that the number becomes of parody of Laurey's strength and female independence.

"Many a New Day" is set in Laurey and Aunt Eller's home as the young women ready themselves for the Skidmore party and box social. In the song's choreography, female dancers, in balletic style (a hyper-feminine form if there

ever was one), act out female behaviors like brushing their hair, trying on hats, and admiring their clothes. And like the brides of *Seven Brides*, they perform their pantomime in their underwear, making them available to an objectifying gaze. The chorus of female dancers, proud and happy in these tableaux, remove any vestiges of anger from the song. Most potently, near the conclusion of the song, the distinctive laugh of Gertie Cummins is heard from outside. Laurey stops singing in order to run to the window. As she tears up, her independent attitude is revealed to be a fraud; faced with the threat of her man going away, Laurey blubbers like a baby.

This scene reinforces stereotypes of female frivolity and dependence, and it is no accident that the two women absent from the number are the two female characters who do not perform that kind of femininity. Because they are not dependent on one man, Ado Annie and Aunt Eller are both paradoxical characters within the world of the film. Ado Annie straddles the Western's prostitute/schoolmarm dichotomy concerning feminine behavior, a dichotomy that Laurey stays mostly on the right side of. And Aunt Eller, although she is depicted as the most valuable member of the community, is nevertheless castigated for her influence there.

The character of Ado Annie is both domesticated and undomesticated. As such, she parodies the limits of Laurey's frontier domesticity, although the film nevertheless makes attempts to contain her within them. Ado Annie is a farmer's daughter, but she is never visually tied to the home, although Laurie and Aunt

Eller are both often photographed there. Annie is not even successful in domestic duties – her sweet potato pie is known to cause a “three-day bellyache.”

In addition, Ado Annie is sexually aware, yet she is not explicitly marked as deviant. Ado Annie recognizes that society tells her what she must be and do, but she does not necessarily see the value of subscribing to those behaviors. “It ain’t so much a question of not knowing what to do,” she explains to Laurey in “I Cain’t Say No.”

I’m just a girl who cain’t say no –  
 Kissin’s my favorite food.  
 With or without the mistletoe  
 I’m in a holiday mood!  
 Other girls are coy and hard to catch  
 But other girls ain’t havin’ any fun!

As the number concludes, Annie asks, validly, “How can I be what I ain’t?” The film lets the line stand, offering no suggestions.

But *Oklahoma!* is not completely comfortable with Ado Annie’s free sexuality. The film’s anxiety is not revealed in Ado Annie’s performance but is evident when the song reappears in the dream ballet. The tune of “I Cain’t Say No” is prominently featured in the brothel scene of the ballet, particularly when three prostitutes take center stage to dance for Jud. The association between Ado Annie and the unappealing prostitutes condemns the behavior in which the film had previously delighted.

The film undercuts Ado Annie’s independence in other ways, too. At one point, she is, literally, penned in by the film. After Ado Annie and Will Parker are declared engaged, Will and Annie share the duet “All Er Nothin,’” wherein Will

tells Annie that she will have to behave herself once they are married – specifically, she will not be able to have relationships with other men. This song reverses gender expectations – it is the man, Will, who says that he is “a one-woman man, home lovin’ type” and that he wants to know what Ado Annie’s “intentions” are. The lyric is interrupted by two female dancers with whom Will stops to flirt, and Ado Annie gets angry. “With you it’s all er nothin’,” she sings. “All fer you and nothing fer me!” But Ado Annie understands that Will needs his freedom. She sings:

So I ain’t gonna fuss, ain’t gonna frown,  
 Have your fun, go out on the town.  
 Stay out late and don’t come home ’till three.  
 And go right off to sleep if you’re sleepy –  
 No use waitin’ up fer me.

This is the final verse of the song and a strong exit line – but rather than leaving the scene, Ado Annie runs into a bullpen. Will swings the gate around and traps Annie, and as he steps toward her, they both slink down into the ground. And thus Will recoups the power over her within their relationship.

Aunt Eller, the third and final major female character, is the centerpiece of this community. The character is a nod to the frontier woman, that figure who kept the homestead together despite the hardships of frontier life. “You gotta be hardy,” Aunt Eller tells Laurey. “You *gotta* be.” In *Oklahoma!*, Aunt Eller’s presence is necessary. She works as hard as anyone to keep the community intact and ensure that it will continue, and she is more effective than any other character. Aunt Eller’s efficacy is in evidence in the second act, which begins at the Skidmore

party. The first number after the intermission is “The Farmer and the Cowman,” a song that calls for unity on the frontier. As the community members square dance in a frame schoolhouse, they sing: “Territory folks should stick together / Territory folks should all be pals / Cowboys dance with the farmer’s daughters / Farmers dance with the ranchers gals!” But when the song descends into disunity as the cowboys and ranchers throw punches at one another, Aunt Eller commandeers a gun and discharges it into the air. “There ain’t nobody gonna slug out anything! This here’s a party! Sing it, Andrew!” – she says, pointing the gun at Ado Annie’s father, who begins to sing. Everyone else joins in, and Aunt Eller has re-established peace on the frontier.

But despite the power that Aunt Eller has – or rather, because of it – she is unmatched. To be unmatched is the harshest punishment a musical can mete out, and Aunt Eller is unattached throughout the film. One of the film’s final images is of Aunt Eller in front of her home as Laurey and Curly ride off on their honeymoon (in a surrey with fringe on top). The couple in the surrey are in the foreground, and Aunt Eller stands in the background, furiously waving the white handkerchief in her hand. Laurey and Curly move farther into the distance, and other horses and surreys follow in the foreground, as Aunt Eller continues to wave, partially out of focus, in the background. Life, it seems, is passing her by.

Aunt Eller’s punishment is more tragic when we realize that Aunt Eller, despite her age, is still a desiring woman. She flirts openly with Curly and at one point tells him, “If I wasn’t a old woman, and if you wasn’t so young and smart



alecky, why I'd marry you." It seems like Aunt Eller plays matchmaker for Laurey and Curly not only for her niece's benefit, or for the benefit of the community, but also as an expression of those desires for which the film offers her no outlet.

In the film's view, perhaps the frontier needs a woman like Aunt Eller now, but as Curly says, the "country's a-changin'" – and it is not the pioneer strength of Aunt Eller that will be needed to usher in these new times but the contributions of quieter, less imposing, less powerful women like Laurey. That is, perhaps, just as the Second World War required unprecedented participation from the women left behind, the new postwar frontier neither required nor desired that kind of strength.

“Oh, Why Did Such A Feller Have to Die?:” Masculinity and Community  
Responsibility

There are two particularly important men in *Oklahoma!*, Curly and Jud. Their relationship looks more like the classic hero-villain relationship than any other pair in musical Westerns. They are two men – one a threat to civilization, the other responsible for removing that threat. In previous films, the “antagonists” (Calamity Jane, Annie Oakley, Adam Pontipee) are folded into the community once they manage appropriate gender performances. But *Oklahoma!* does not

organize Jud into civilization – he is instead violently ejected from the community.

Curly is the Western hero and he looks the part, entering astride his horse in full cowboy get-up, down to a neck kerchief. But there are subtle changes to this version of the Western hero. Most importantly, Curly is willing to compromise. This is not a quality dear to most Western heroes. Those men know they are right, and they are willing to die to prove it. (The immobility of their convictions often leads to the familiar shootout.) But here, in *Oklahoma!*, the man unwilling to compromise is the villain. Jud will not give up Laurey, and it kills him.

Curly's ability to compromise is crucial to the establishment of civilization, just as the hero's refusal to compromise in other Westerns performed the same task. The main theme of *Oklahoma!* is perhaps best expressed in Curly's speech after he proposes to Laurey:

Well, gotta learn to be a farmer, I can see that. Quit thinkin' about throwin' that rope and start in to get my hands blistered a new way. Things is changin', Laurey, right and left... They gonna make a state outta this – they're gonna put it in the Union! Country's a-changin'; I gotta change with it.

Curly's speech suggests that *Oklahoma!* is not self-consciously about taming the West. We get the feeling, instead, that for these characters, settling the West is not a decision they make but some force that they are caught up in. It is an inevitability, but it is a pleasant inevitability. There is no anxiety about the coming of civilization; civilization is defined as "community" here, and community is the ideal of this film. Importantly, marriage and family are the

building blocks of this community. Marriage is necessary to farming (farming requires a home) and vice versa. Not only must the farmer and cowman be friends, but the cowman must *become* the farmer.

The most important feature of Curly's performance of masculinity is that it is unassailable. In previous reconfigurations of masculinity in musical Westerns, changes to the Western hero have made him vulnerable. Frank Butler's vanity is disturbing, Bill Hickok gives into a woman and is humiliated, and Adam operates under a faulty definition of civilization. But there are no moments in *Oklahoma!* when we doubt the appropriateness of Curly's performance of masculinity. *Oklahoma!* reveals a level of comfort with shifts in ideal masculinity that is not as evident when the film deals with the possibility of feminine power.

The film is comfortable with the changes in the Western hero, perhaps, because there is a clear villain upon which to hoist inappropriate masculine performance. What we expect from a villain in a Western is an undisciplined individualism, a man who trespasses against law and order. Jud does use violence in unacceptable ways, but that is not his only threat. Jud is a symbol of everything that could destroy the community of *Oklahoma!*. Other characters comically refer to divisions that may keep the community apart (Annie's free sexuality may harm her future with Will), but Jud, who is genuinely threatening, displays them all. He is what the film recognizes in order to destroy.

Jud speaks to the class divisions that are ignored by a song like "The Farmer and the Cowman." Jud's dangerous hate comes from his bitterness at feeling

treated unfairly because he does not own his own land. He calls up this anger twice, once with Curly, when Jud remembers that his previous employers were “always treatin’ me like I was dirt.” Later, Jud claims that Laurey does not want him because he is a “hired hand.” He accuses, “I ain’t good enough for you, am I? I’m a hired hand. I got dirt on my hands, pig slops. I ain’t fit to touch you! You’re *better*, you’re so much *better*, Miss Laurey!” That is, Jud represents the class differences that could create a schism within this community. Jud also represents the repressed sexuality that the film fears. He decorates his walls with pictures of nude women, and in a truly unsettling scene, Jud spies on Laurey as she undresses. In “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind,” the danger of this sexuality is explicitly felt, when we see and feel the danger of this aspect of Jud’s villainy.

In a strict departure from the tradition of Westerns, Jud is not killed by his signaled antagonist (Curly). In the end, Jud self-destructs, and Curly’s trial implicates the entire community in Jud’s death. The trial is held in Aunt Eller’s kitchen, the symbolic center of home and family. The trial is controlled by the matriarch herself, who hands the judge a kitchen spoon in place of a gavel and instructs him to begin the trial. Amidst the protests of the federal marshal (although he eventually quiets down), the judge begins the proceedings. The crowd in the room interjects and comments in favor of exonerating Curly. Indeed the crowd, not the judge, declares Curly “not guilty” after he pleads his case.

*Oklahoma!* is a celebration of community, and certain performances of gender are marked as appropriate within that community. The film offers a stern warning

against those who will not be or cannot be integrated into the community. Within that vision, *Oklahoma!* redefines and validates a Western masculinity that involves compromise and an acceptance of the inevitability of change. For its women, the film provides a place to dream, but it undercuts potentially threatening aspects of feminine power in the film's reality.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **HOLLYWOOD'S A-CHANGIN', TOO : CONCLUSION:**

#### **MUSICAL WESTERNS IN A CULTURE OF DECLINE**

Watching *Oklahoma!* and looking for reasons why it was the last of the musical Westerns in this period is a difficult task. Had it been badly reviewed, or had it failed at the box office, the answer would be easier to find. But *Oklahoma!* was not the last musical Western because it was unsuccessful. To the contrary, it was one of the most popular films in the year after it was released and was almost universally well-liked by critics. To understand why musical Westerns were discontinued, it is more useful to look outside of the films and consider changes in the movie industry and more general trends in Hollywood productions. The most tangible reasons for the stoppage are industry-related; however, certain gender and genre trends of the 1950s also help to explain why Hollywood lost interest in musical Westerns in the middle of the decade.

Among the contributing factors was the overall decrease in the number of films produced in Hollywood. The film industry entered a period of crisis in the postwar years, and a number of radical changes in the industry led to a decline in production. In 1948, an anti-trust lawsuit against the major studios reached the

United States Supreme Court (U.S. v. Paramount Pictures).<sup>1</sup> At the time, the five major studios controlled all aspects of filmmaking: production, distribution, and exhibition. The Court found that the studios' ownership of movie theaters was in violation of anti-monopoly legislation, and the studios were directed to divest from their theater chains. The decree went into effect on New Years Day of 1950, and from that point, studios were no longer assured that their films would be exhibited, and they had to compete against one another for theater bookings. This made filmmaking more expensive and added an element of risk that producers had not previously needed to consider.<sup>2</sup> This moment of divestment marks the beginning of the end of the studio system that had been at work since the 1910s.

During the same period, film studios also had to deal with the exodus of their patrons. As previously mentioned, motion picture attendance waned through the 1950s, as the emergence of television dealt Hollywood a blow from which it has yet to recover. In this complicated moment, studios had to cut down on the number of productions per year, but they also needed to spend more money on processes to induce people out of their homes and into movie theaters. Visual formats like Cinemascope and Todd-AO were developed to create an experience that television could not duplicate. Studios also tried new sound processes and other visual tricks (like the short-lived phenomenon of 3-D). Each studio created and publicized their own developments, and theaters in the 1950s were inundated

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. v. Paramount Pictures, Inc," FindLaw.com, <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/334/131.html> (accessed 28 March 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lev, *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959, History of the American Cinema* ed. Charles Harpole, vol. 7 (New York: Thomson-Gale, 1993), 10.

with new looks and sounds in film. The studios' attempts were satirized by Cole Porter in a number from the 1957 film *Silk Stockings*:

The customers don't like to see  
 The groom embrace the bride  
 Unless her lips are scarlet  
 And her mouth is five feet wide!  
 In glorious Technicolor,  
 Breathtaking Cinemascope or  
 Cinerama, VistaVision,  
 or Superscope or Todd-AO  
 and stereophonic sound!"<sup>3</sup>

To the great misfortune of the studios, the new tricks did not work, and attendance numbers continued to drop throughout the decade.

Under these new financial pressures, studios halted production of musicals, the costliest films to produce. The breakdown of the studio system made musicals riskier and more expensive. The sheer number of artisans involved in a musical greatly surpasses those needed for non-musical films. And when studios began to break up and break apart, they were less able to collect talent to create and stage original musicals. Paradoxically, in the same years that shrinking profits threatened studios' ability to afford musicals, they nevertheless relied on the popularity of the genre to turn a profit. This explains why adaptations of Broadway musicals went into production as the production of original musicals stopped. As Mast says, by the late 1950s "Hollywood could not afford to make

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<sup>3</sup> *Silk Stockings*, dir. Rouben Mamoulian, 117 min., MGM/CBS Home Video, 1981, videocassette.



musicals that weren't Broadway."<sup>4</sup> For producers, success on the Great White Way mediated the financial risk of producing a musical.

The changes in the studio system and the subsequent drop in the production of musicals were likely contributors to the drop-off in musical Westerns. But those changes do not entirely explain the halt, for as studios looked to Broadway for musicals with less cost and risk attached, they passed up a number of musical Westerns. Among them were *Destry Rides Again* (April 1959 – June 1960) and Lucille Ball's starring vehicle, *Wildcat*, from the 1960-61 season. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's 1951-52 hit *Paint Your Wagon* was eventually filmed, but the show closed a full seventeen years before it made it into movie theaters.

It is likely that more general changes in Hollywood cinema contributed to the studios' reluctance to produce musical Westerns at least as strongly as financial considerations. The decline in musicals and the decline in musical Westerns may be attributable to two factors: to the casualty of strong women's roles in the 1950s as films became more interested in male stars, and to the seemingly necessary suppression of potentially disruptive gender performances in the conservative 1950s. Molly Haskell has argued that there was a decline in the quality and quantity of roles for women, and that the heroines of 1950s films were not as strong at their 1930s and 1940s counterparts. She writes that in the 1950s:

there were not only fewer films about emancipated women than in the thirties or forties, but there were fewer films about women... The big, important pictures as well as the little, cultist ones were practically all

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<sup>4</sup> Mast, 289.

male-oriented: tall (weatherbeaten) tales of the last (boxer/Western hero/gangster/gunfighter/you-name-it).<sup>5</sup>

Evidence supporting Haskell's claim is visible within trends in the musical.

MGM's biggest female musical star of the 1930s was Eleanor Powell, whose aggressive tapping was so overpowering that she was almost never partnered in her dances. The female star of MGM's biggest musicals of the 1950s was Cyd Charisse, who depended on Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, and whose ballet-based style was not at all threatening to male stars.

Similarly, Brandon French argues that films of the 1950s contained both radical and conformist attitudes towards women, but that the most radical elements of films had to be disguised by the end of the decade. In the late 1950s, French writes, "certain films harbor evidence of a *radical* transition, in men as well as women, but the revolutionary content is heavily camouflaged" (emphasis his).<sup>6</sup> The rejection of home and family as ideals, for example, is "hidden beneath the habit of nuns" in *A Nun's Story* (1959) and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957).<sup>7</sup> Musicals, with their open celebration of female power, do not sit well in this trend. A woman in a musical Western would sit even more uncomfortably because the strong presence of a woman in a male genre is intrinsically unsettling, potentially radical, and not at all camouflaged.

Probably the strongest contributors to the cessation of musical Westerns were the many changes in the traditional Western in the late 1940s and 1950s. The

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<sup>5</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 270-71.

<sup>6</sup> Brandon French, *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978), xxii.

<sup>7</sup> French, xxii.

landscape of the film Western altered drastically in the years after World War II, in industry and gender terms. The most potent changes were the decline of “B” Western and the appearance of the “psychological” or “adult” Western.

The 1940s were the heyday of the “B” Western, but the 1950s were not so kind to them. Again, television is a culprit here. George N. Fenin and William K. Everson write that Westerns were immediately and immensely popular in the new medium, and the market for Westerns on television diminished the demand for new theatrical Westerns.<sup>8</sup> The minor studios found it difficult to turn a profit from that previously dependable genre and stopped producing them. Even the well-liked singing cowboys left the movie business after the war – Gene Autry hung up his spurs in 1953, and Roy Rogers defected to television in 1951.

While “B” Westerns petered out, “A” Westerns remained popular. But they looked noticeably different from Westerns that had been released before World War II. They were darker, more complex, and more contemplative. The changes in “A” Westerns became more visible as the “B” Western exited films for television. In this new film landscape, the Western was not reserved for juveniles and “yokels” (the common perceptions of low-budget Westerns), and the genre was taken more seriously by the major studios, by critics, and by historians. Within film studies, 1950s Westerns and their directors have proved most interesting to scholars. “Auteur” John Ford, for example, made only two sound

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<sup>8</sup> George K. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western from Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973) 301.

Westerns before World War II. His “cavalry trilogy” and other canonical works were released in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

The 1950s is a critical period for scholars particularly because the direction of Westerns shifted toward a new seriousness in these years. Among other changes, Fenin and Everson identify the presences of “neuroses” and “racial conscience” as new characteristics of postwar Westerns. These trends likely contributed to the demise of the postwar musical Western, as the Westerns became a self-consciously serious genre.

Postwar Western heroes in the 1950s grew more insecure as the decade progressed, but they did so within a kind of sanctuary. Wendy Chapman Peek has argued that because the genre validates being male above all else, Westerns are “a ‘safe space’ in which to raise questions about masculinity, to perform different kinds of masculinities, and to explore the pleasures and perils of male bonding.”<sup>10</sup> Nineteen-fifties Westerns used the “safe space” of the Western to play out serious meditations on male psychology. In the so-called “psychological Western,” exploring the psychology – or in some cases, the psychosis – of the male hero is just as important to the film as male action and violence. The most famous Westerns of the 1950s fall into this category, including John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948), Anthony Mann’s Westerns starring James Stewart, and Howard Hawks’

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<sup>9</sup> Ford’s pre-war, post-sound Westerns were the colonial frontier story *Drums Along the Mohawk* and the inescapable *Stagecoach*, both released in 1939. Ford’s “cavalry trilogy” consisted of *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950). They are often mentioned as a unit of films, but they tell unrelated stories about US cavalry units.

<sup>10</sup>Wendy Chapman Peek, “The Romance of Competence: Rethinking Masculinity in the Western,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30 (Winter 2003): 206. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

*Red River* (1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959). Of course, these Westerns and the rest were interested exclusively in *male* psychology, further limiting (if possible) the place of female characters in the genre.

After the war, Hollywood became interested in films that dealt with social problems in the United States after the war. These “problem films” dealt with a number of topical subjects, including prejudice against Jews (*Gentleman’s Agreement*, 1947), prejudice against African-Americans (*Pinky*, 1949 and *The Defiant Ones*, 1958), and juvenile delinquency (*Blackboard Jungle*, 1955). Westerns joined this trend by re-considering the place of Native Americans within the genre. Fenin and Everson argue that *Broken Arrow* (1950) “presented the Indians for the first time in years as sympathetic human beings with a genuine grievance.”<sup>11</sup> Films like *Hondo* (1953), and *The Searchers* (1956) were also part of this shift in the characterization of Native Americans. These films cannot be called radical by any means – they did not, for example, reflect upon the genocide of Native Americans or seriously interrogate the validity of white Americans’ claims to the land. But the films did recognize the humanity of Native Americans, even if only to shift the stereotype of native peoples (and particularly native men) from “wild savages” to “noble savages.”

In this changed generic landscape, a musical looks out of place as a Western. Musicals are certainly as complicated and interesting as Westerns, but they are perceived as inconsequential. Musicals work to hide anxieties, to smooth them

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<sup>11</sup> Fenin and Everson, 281.

away with song and dance. But in postwar Westerns, the whole point was to make anxieties visible. As the Western grew into a protected space for men and the interrogation of male action, the genre could not stand the interloping of the musical, with its frivolousness and its prominent female actors.

In the 1950s, the film industry developed into an unwelcoming environment for musical Westerns. In terms of concrete economic changes, the break-up of the studio system made musicals a riskier investment. More abstractly, Hollywood grew more conservative in its attitudes toward women's roles, and films grew more closed to rebellious performances by women. The Western genre also closed itself off to being transformed into a musical, for its new self-awareness did not gel with the presumed triviality of the musical.

Between 1946 and 1955, though, the Western and the musical were not at odds with one another. Musical Western films may have been produced with an eye towards reviving the flagging film studios, but they also engaged with and attempted to solve gender questions of the decade. Each film constructs and subscribes to the dominant domestic ideology of the immediate postwar era; but taken together, their internal ambivalences, conflicts, and uncertainties reflect the ambivalences, conflicts, and uncertainties of Americans in the late 1940s and 1950s. Made evident by the strictness of the Western and disguised by the energy of the musical, musical Westerns offer a complicated, fascinating, and undeniably entertaining picture of genre and gender in postwar America.

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