



Unforgiven: "paradigms of masculinity."  
Gene Hackman, Clint Eastwood, Morgan  
Freeman.



**"MAYBE HE'S TOUGH BUT  
HE SURE AIN'T NO CARPENTER:"  
Masculinity and In/competence  
in *Unforgiven***

Janet Thumim (1993)

The shortcomings of Sheriff Little Bill Daggett/Gene Hackman's carpentry, noted and condoned by his deputies, are measured against his competence in being a man: it is his acknowledged "toughness" which earns him the fear and respect of his fellows. As the narrative unfolds, however, this very toughness is continually put under the spotlight of audience attention—it is observed, recorded, analyzed, questioned. This exploration, this measurement of masculinity is couched in terms both of being tough—equated with fearlessness, brutality, single-mindedness—and of competence since the paradigm for masculinity in the western is the gunfighter who must, by definition, be competent—else he's dead. What is so interesting about this western—Clint Eastwood's "return" to the classic western—is the way in which competence is privileged, being examined not only in the context of gun-fighting and toughness, but also in relation to other and diverse activities—carpentry, farming, story-telling. The idea of competence, as foregrounded in this film, invites a meditation on history—the stuff of the western—calling into question both the morality and the veracity of propositions about America's past as delivered in western myths. That this is not a new project is clear in the near ubiquitous reference, in reviews of the film, to the western before 1964 (which Eastwood, with Sergio Leone, "colluded in undermining"<sup>1</sup>) and particularly to the John Ford/John Wayne films, and often specifically to *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956). The conflict-

ing generic demands of melodrama and realism produced fractures in the episodic narrative of *The Searchers*, most striking in Ethan/John Wayne's *volte-face* when he catches up with Debbie/Natalie Wood near the end of the film and, against all expectations, rescues her despite what he regards as the defilement of her life as Scar's squaw. In *Unforgiven*, however, the two modes are woven together so intricately that each becomes a part of the other: the truthfulness of the melodramatic axis is measured against its consequences in a realist discourse, and the adequacy of a realist account is constantly checked in terms of its moral implications. The marker of the interchange, the place where the two axes intersect, is in the idea of competence, hence this film suggests competence is central to masculinity. *Unforgiven* is not only a classic western, it is also *about* the western and thus, necessarily, it is also *about* masculinity in both its personal and its public, or social, manifestations. The complex moral and epistemological questions it poses reach far beyond the confines of the genre or of the historical moment, 1880, in which it is set—it is not simply (if it were simple) a matter of making a western as powerful and compelling as *The Searchers* or *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), or *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959), but of insisting on our attention to the meanings underlying the myths of the west—for America, for men, for all of us.

An on-screen title informs us that the film is set in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, in 1880. A cowboy, visiting the town brothel euphemistically named Greely's Billiard Hall, is mocked by a whore and is so enraged that he responds by slashing her face. The Sheriff, Little Bill Daggett, dispenses summary justice by ordering the cowboys to compensate the Saloon and Billiard Hall owner, Skinny/Anthony James, for his loss of the whore's earnings. Outraged by what they see as an unjust refusal to consider compensating the woman herself, Delilah/Anna Thomson, the whores put up a bounty for anyone who will avenge her by killing the cowboy. This sets the narrative in train, and a succession of bounty hunters is expected in town. Amongst them is Will Munny/Eastwood and his erstwhile partner Ned Logan/Morgan Freeman, brought out of their farming retirement by the young Schofield Kid/Jaimz Woolvert who wants to prove himself against what he imagines to be the "truth" of the legendary western heroes of whom he has heard (as we have) so many stories. English Bob/Richard Harris is also attracted by the bounty and, accompanied by his "biographer," the writer Mr. Beauchamp/Saul Rubinek, arrives in town first, only to be beaten and humiliated by the Sheriff who is determined not to allow a re-run of the mythic western free-for-all in his town. Eventually Will, Ned and the Kid track down and kill the cowboy and his partner, and Ned is caught and beaten to death in reprisal. This event triggers Will's anger—not the professional bounty hunter now, but the moral outrage of an averaging partner—and in a final and spectacular set-piece he shoots the Sheriff and deputies before returning to his two children, his run-down pig farm and his wife's grave. An end title informs us that he subsequently disappeared and was said to have "prospered in dry goods" in San Francisco.

### Carpentry and Competence

I don't deserve this, to die like this  
I was building a house.

Even as the butt of Will Munny/Eastwood's rifle hovers above Little Bill/Hackman's chin in the final scene, Little Bill laments his unfinished house. The gun fighting, violent sheriff, survivor of the legendary tough towns whose names he invokes like a litany punctuating set piece displays of his sadistic violence—"Kansas, Missouri, Cheyenne . . ."—was looking forward to a peaceful old age. He thought he would sit on his porch, the violence and competencies of his life now behind him, smoking a pipe as he watched the sun set over the lake. The film's imbrication of melodrama and realism is invoked in the Sheriff's last words: his mode of death is undeserved—the moral axis because he was engaged in a practical and forward looking enterprise, he was building a house—he was participating in the functional here-and-now of realism.

In this film the men keep talking. But what do they talk about? They talk of desire, fear, power and death, of the past, of remembering and forgetting and knowing. These concerns weave in and out of talk about competence and incompetence, about gun fighting and, above all, about stories of the old west in which these two terms, competence and gun fighting, are synthesized. When the Schofield Kid rides up to Will Munny's pig farm in search of "the worst, meaning the best" gun fighter to be his partner and is witness to a grey-haired and muddy display of half-heartedness and incompetence in pig handling, he is disappointed. He finds, he thinks, "nothing but a broken down old pig farmer." When Will Munny, recognizing his limits as a pig farmer in an eloquent sigh as he leans on the pigs' corral, decides after all to join the Kid in his bounty hunt, he can't even mount his horse. His struggle to gain control of the animal is a recurrent motif—part tragic, part comic—of the narrative. Is he also engaged in a struggle to control his own "animal" self, formerly responsible for the acts of violence, brutality and drunkenness of which his recently deceased, God-fearing, law-abiding wife Claudia had "cured" him? Was it through her agency that he was able to control himself? The interesting question of what it was about him that elicited her support—something her mother, as a title tells us, could never understand—isn't answered. The film is not about its women. The tragedy in the motif of Will's struggle with his horse is the consequence of the man of action's loss of prowess, its comedy is based in the unlikely spectacle of his inability even to reach first base—to get on his horse. As in the classic clown's device, laughs are in response to the clever performance of incompetence: here is a simultaneous recognition and undercutting of skill. The audience's laughter both applauds the clever performance and delights in the cathartic ridicule of "prowess." Will Munny's problems with his horse are excessive and, as if to underline the point, the narrative also delivers this spectacle to excess. When Will and his partner Ned catch up with the Kid they discover that, despite his extravagant claims the Kid's eyesight is so poor he can only hope to hit close range targets—he is practically blind: a blind gun fighter, too, is a comic absurdity. But these are not only comic moments for the audience but also serious and disabling deficien-

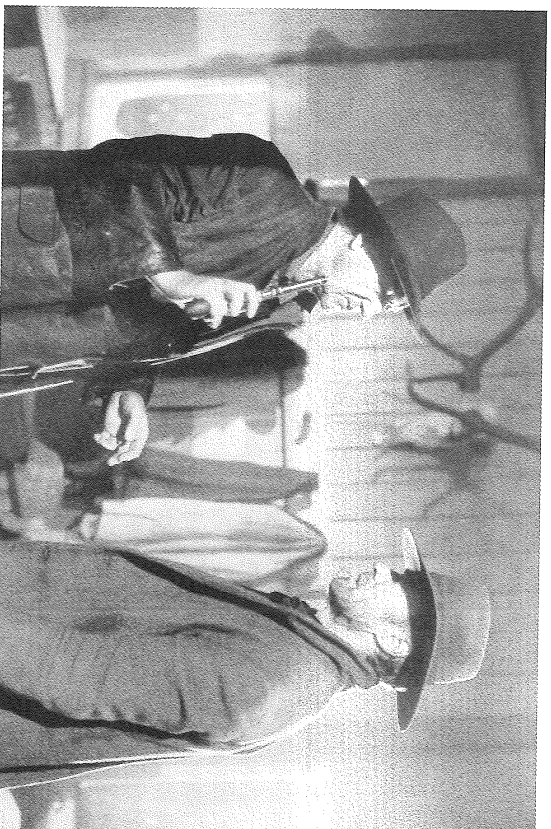


Clint Eastwood as "the worst, meaning the best" gunfighter," William Mummy, and Janinz Woohett as the Schofield Kid.

ties in the skills on which each character depends for his livelihood. All the central male characters are shown to be deficient in a skill that they themselves value and need. Their inadequacies are not just shown in passing, revealed at a tangent to some more pressing concern of the narrative, they are emphatic—leitmotifs, almost: Will's falling off his horse, the Kid's near blindness, the Sheriff's diabolical carpentry.

The event that sparks off the narrative concerns a man's inadequacy: when Delilah, who "didn't know no better"—who was too inexperienced to have learned

never to laugh at a man—giggled at the sight of her cowboy client's "teeny little pecker," his enraged, almost anguished response was to slash her to bits. In its attention to the question of incompetence, the film proposes a distinction between the moral axis, good:bad, and the functional one, competent:incompetent. Social order requires a balance of the moral and the functional, which the Law attempts to negotiate. Woven through the fabric of the film is Will's refrain, sometimes assertive, sometimes questioning, sometimes plaintive that "I ain't like that no more." He has changed: he has *been* changed by dear departed Claudia since, for Claudia, to be a skillful gunfighter is to be a bad man. So Will claims that he is no longer a Bad Man, a gunman. It isn't his competence that is at issue but his motivation, which he understands as pertaining to the realm of the moral. Hence one of the serious questions posed in the film is the relation between these two axes. Competence (gun-fighting, love-making, carpentry) is *necessary* to a convincing demonstration of masculinity, but moral rectitude (right action, responsible concern for the self and others, the knowing use of hindsight and foresight) marks maturity. Does this produce a paradox? How can competent masculinity be marked as mature? Is it, perhaps, a question not so much of knowing how to act, but of knowing when? "I ain't like that no more" doesn't mean Will *can't* operate competently as a gun fighter, but that he *can* distinguish judiciously as to when such skill is appropriate. Will's lesson is eventually learned by the Kid who, initially full of bravado, is so chastened by the actual experience of violent bloodshed that he is ready to accept his inadequacy, to relinquish both his share of the bounty and his gun: "I'd rather be blind and ragged than dead."



Gene Hackman as Little Bill, "rough and ready, one might say, like his carpentry."

But Little Bill's is a more complex and fractured character, living with crude, pragmatic and often flawed judgments—rough and ready, one might say, like his carpentry. It is in this character that the film's dialectic of melodrama and realism is most finely balanced. His inadequate justice, his barely controlled sadism, not to mention his complete oblivion to the shortcomings of his woodworking skills, exist in an utterly convincing tension with his avuncular bonhomie and the engaging pleasure he takes in building his house. Like John Wayne's Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, Little Bill is at once appealing in his verisimilitude and anachronistic in his values. Ethan knows how to track and, eventually, to find Debbie, he knows what to expect from the various renegades from the old west encountered during the long search—but he doesn't know how to fit into the settled, social Texas of post-civil war, post-frontier America. Little Bill knows how to deploy terror in his exercise of control, but he can't acknowledge the justice of the whores' complaint. How does the narrative resolve the conflict it proposes? The future, it would seem, is to belong to the survivors, the repressed Will, "prospering in dry goods in San Francisco" and the near-blind, ragged Kid. Little Bill's "mature" masculinity is inadequate now, it's a fiction. As Sheriff, in his negotiation of the moral and functional imperatives, he has failed. He has been incompetent in his delivery of the law, and he's been out-gunned by a bounny hunter.

### Gun Fighting

But the Duck was faster and hot lead blazed from his smoking six guns.

While questions of skill, competence and adequacy might loom large in men's private assessment of themselves and their peers, the issue of gun fighting is also about competition, dominance and power—overtly about the relations *between* men. No matter the size of the pecker—the gun can be depended on to spurt hot lead on demand. One of the attractions of Little Bill's complex character is his apparent recognition of this, and the consideration of motive and consequence evident in his discussions with—or rather his monologues addressed to—the writer/observer Mr. Beauchamp. Little Bill, Sheriff of Big Whiskey, Wyoming, in 1880, and Gene Hackman, accomplished veteran of Hollywood, seem to be laughing in unison over the extract from Mr. Beauchamp's dime novel, *The Duke of Death*. We're invited to smile, too, at Little Bill's mispronunciation; but from his position of power he dismisses Mr. Beauchamp's correction—command of language (and storytelling, and history, and myth-making) is secondary, for Little Bill, to command of the situation at hand. But as the narrative unfolds Little Bill's rough and ready approach, his crude pragmatics, is found wanting. His summary and fatally mistaken dispensing of justice, avoiding the "fuss" of a trial and compensating Skinny for his "investment" rather than Delilah for her cut-up face, turns out to have been as incompetent as his carpentry. Though his opponent, Will, reminds him that "deserve's got nothing to do with it" before delivering the final shot, still the elegant narrative composition balancing, as it does, classic western oppositions, attributes and motives in a harmony fit to delight any structuralist,<sup>2</sup> invites an explanation for his death.

What kind of man do Eastwood as director and Hackman as actor construct, in their production of Little Bill? His easy-going pleasantness is succeeded by a chillingly passionate violence perceived by observers both on screen and in the films' audiences as bordering on the pathologically sadistic. Philip French, reviewing the film in the *Observer*, wrote:

The middle-aged Daggett disarms Bob and with a sadistic glee destroys him physically and mentally as an example to others.<sup>3</sup>

and, in a similar vein, Sue Heal's *Today* piece described the character as

the terrifying Hackman who will brook no vigilantes in his town and treats all-comers with an unbridled physical force that turns law-keeping into abuse.<sup>4</sup>

In three set-piece scenes, each more savage and distressing, Little Bill's beatings of the would-be bounny hunters English Bob, Will Murry and Ned Logan are the object of meticulous, lavish—some would say excessive—filmic attention. There are other depictions of violence from the initial slashing in the brothel to the shoot-outs at the Bar T and the final showdown at Greely's Saloon, but the camera, in these other scenes, doesn't dwell on victim or aggressor in such lascivious detail but rather delivers an atmospheric interpretation of western motifs. Little Bill is distinguished amongst the film's male characters by his engagement with physical brutality—and it is indeed a physical engagement as he whips, kicks and punches his victims. The only time we see him using a gun it is as a club.

As most reviewers have noted, however, the film also goes out of its way to deglamorise the violence typical of the genre.<sup>5</sup> Not only is Little Bill's physical brutality clearly coded as excessive, but also the gunfights which the film delivers are notable for the attention paid to the fear, suffering, anxiety and, again, the incompetence which it would seem, were their real and inevitable accompaniments. The excessively long drawn out shooting of the first cowboy, Davey, during which Ned cannot shoot and the Kid cannot see, is an example. The dying cowboy calls piteously for water and Will, apparently exasperated by the western's demands for clean and callous dispatchings, breaks all the rules when he calls to the cowboy's comrades to bring him water, promising not to shoot while they do. Not for this film the gunfights sanitized in long-shot which contributed to the cultural status of early western heroes. The competitive strategy of the gunfighter is to inspire fear in his opponent, and fear is evidence of weakness, if not of submission. The film is relentless in its delineation of fear, noting it in heroes, villains and bystanders alike, and, in so doing, problematising those categories. It is no longer clear, by the end of the film, who *were* the heroes, villains or bystanders, nor even, perhaps, what a hero is. From reminiscences about "the west" of history and legend, the narrative proceeds to "replay" a paradigmatic western event, emphasizing all the discomfort, anxiety and pain conventionally omitted in the interests either of glamour or of a lascivious dwelling on spectacular brutality and bloodshed such as in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

The careful cataloguing of the signs of fear is worth recalling partly because the

implicit acknowledgment of the protagonists' frailty is productive in the interests of a realist re-assessment of the western legends, and partly because they account for the survivors' rejection of the "meaner than hell cold-blooded goddamn killer" role. Will, once the most cold-blooded killer in the west, will prosper in dry goods, and the Kid, avid consumer of western stories and would-be dandy and gun-fighter, vows never to touch his Schofield model Smith and Wesson again. The sweating and shaking deputy, standing in the Sheriff's office, a framed picture of a stag visible on the wall behind him, argues that anyone can be scared. The almost palpable presence of fear is brilliantly suggested in the following scene when, as Mr. Beauchamp reaches into his shoulder bag for the book which will substantiate his claim to being a writer, the tense silence is broken first by the sound of the nervous deputies' clicking rifles, and then by the trickle of liquid forming a pool on the ground by his feet as his bladder gives way. But it isn't only novice deputies and visiting writers who experience fear in the face of western (or should I say masculine?) violence and lawlessness. English Bob, bloody, beaten and imprisoned, knows enough to be frightened by Little Bill's cat and mouse game as he instructs Mr. Beauchamp in the subtler intricacies of gun fighting. Will, in his delirious fever, sees grotesque and terrifying visions from beyond the grave and tells Ned "I'm scared of dying," his admission followed closely by an acknowledgment that this fear is somehow shameful (emasculating?): "don't tell anyone the things I said, don't tell my kids." And then there is the Kid, whose quest for the reality behind the western myth fuels the narrative, and whose own admission of fear is in many ways a more cathartic moment than the final shoot out, or than Will's operatic departure from Big Whiskey. It is the Kid's acknowledgment of his fear which allows his (and the audience's) recognition of the tawdry and brutal reality underlying the western fiction. The narrative's project, to re-educate the Kid, raised as he has been on stories of the west (stories of the masculine) is in a sense completed here in the scene between the man and the youth under the lone pine. What follows—Will's resumption of his discarded persona as the most cold-blooded killer in the West—can be seen as the last repeat of the western melodrama's tragic chorus. Suddenly carpentry, pig farming or even dealing in dry goods, even though they may not enjoy such spectacular sound, lighting and effects, seem preferable alternatives.

The film's articulation of fear is amplified by its recognition of the multiple and intricate connections, in the masculine psyche, between sexuality and violence. It is this, the powerful opening scene suggests, that makes for such a heady concoction when a private inadequacy is played out in a public contest—particularly when the terms are guns and whiskey. The links, for masculinity, between sexuality and power (the latter *always* coded as violence in the western) are acknowledged in several references to the penis. It is the "teeny little pecker" that is the initial cause of all the trouble. Two Gun Corcoran is so called, Little Bill tells Mr. Beauchamp, not because he carried two guns but because "he had a dick that was so big, it was longer than the barrel on that Walker Colt," and Ned refers to the Kid's penis as his "pistol," when they make their precipitous escape from Greeley's billiard hall. But whereas reference to the analogic relation between the penis and the gun is no doubt intended to amuse, to be a lighter moment in the textual construction—albeit (as Delilah discovered) a comedy fraught with danger—there is, I think, a more profound and more troubling relation between male sexu-

ality and the exercise of violent power lurking beneath the surface of the film, half acknowledged, half concealed. Here I return to the film's excessive concentration on the details of Little Bill's grotesque and barely-controlled physical attacks.

After the first of these, when he has finished kicking English Bob around the main street of Big Whiskey he is suddenly "spent," his power and energy wasted. Limp and alone, his opponent vanquished, he returns the gaze of the shocked onlookers as if seeing them for the first time and, irritated by their intrusive presence at his "post-coital" depletion, sends them away:

What are you all looking at?

Go on, get out of here, scoot.

Go on, mind your own business.

When he whips Ned, stripped to the waist and gripping the cell bars, the camera lingers perhaps just a little too long on the extreme close up of Ned's face, Little Bill's face just behind, whispering threats. Is it Ned's shallow breathing, his glistening skin, or is it Little Bill's intensity, his whispering, that lends this scene such a sexual charge? Little Bill's violence is not expressed through the stand off, the shoot out, the exercise of skill and cunning in hunting, tracking, aiming and so on, but in the sweaty intimacy of (almost) hand to hand combat—except there's no combat here, just beating, which is what makes the scenes so hard to watch. Once again I'm reminded of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, and the grim retribution he exacted from his opponent, Scar. What is less clear is how far the film is condoning or even legitimating the dubious pleasures of spectacularly sexualized violence, how far the propitiatory jokes about guns and penises are offered as a mask, a cover for a more disturbing model of male sexuality, one which requires a powerless partner (should I say victim, opponent?).

### Story-Telling

Hell, I even thought I was dead but I found out it was just that I was in Nebraska.

Whereas the classic western characteristically glamorizes violence and romanticizes the arduous frontier life, this film works to deconstruct, even to undermine those myths. The emphasis on competence as the measure of moral adequacy in the melodramatic mode and of functional adequacy in the realist mode requires the film's protagonists to evaluate each other's past and present actions—to deliver the measurement. Thus the very processes of storytelling, of men's talk, are at the center of the film, embodied in the characters of the writer/observer Mr. Beauchamp, author of *The Duke of Death* and in the would-be gun fighter—we might say the consumer of western fictions—the self-styled Schofield Kid. Both these characters propose "histories" which are corrected by the central pair of protagonists, Little Bill Dagget and William Munny. Through this device of doubled pairs of storyteller and listener the film draws attention to the gap between the event and its recounting, and hence to

the formation of the story—and of history. Various sources purveying western myths are emphasized in our glimpses of the newspapers, the *Cheyenne Gazette*, the book, *The Duke of Death*, in the traces of the Kid's Uncle Pete and his reminiscences, in Little Bill's eyewitness corrections to English Bob's falsified accounts and, finally, in Mr. Beauchamp's faltering attempt to begin a history of the massacre he (and we) have just witnessed.

Mr. B.: You killed five men. You're single-handed.

Will: Yeah.

Mr. B.: That's, ah, that's a Spencer rifle, right?

Will: That's right.

Mr. B.: Who, er, who did you kill first?

When confronted by superior numbers an experienced gunfighter will always fire on the best shot first.

Will: Is that so?

Mr. B.: Yeah. Little Bill told me that.

Then you probably killed him first, didn't you.

Will: I was lucky in the order.

But I've always been lucky when it comes to killing folks.

Mr. B.: Is that so?

Who was next?

It was Clyde, right?

It must have been Clyde. Well it could have been Deputy Andy.

Will: All I can tell you is who's going to be last.

In this way the audience itself is implicated in the recording, preservation and recycling of stories and their transformation into myths—both the myths of the western and the myths of the masculine. It is impossible to ignore the film's demands that its audiences consider the politics of storytelling as well as its consequences for culture and history—for social formation. At the same time it is a story and it is *about* stories.

Storytelling assumes this crucial importance once hindsight allows the recognition, frequently reiterated by both Will Munny and Little Bill in their re-tellings, that the protagonists of the legendary events were too drunk to shoot straight half the time, let alone to remember who shot who, and why. Thus the film works to reveal, as we have seen, not only the complex and unsettling links between male sexuality and violence, and their centrality to the western genre, but also the uncertain and provisional understandings of reality embodied in both contemporary and historical accounts of western history. As Philip French put it in the *Observer* review "it is a meditation on history and the American experience, and an allegorical commentary on the state of the union."<sup>6</sup> So men's fictions are laid bare. Could this be the offense implied in the film's resonant title?

There is a clear distinction, in *Unforgiven*, between "men" and "boys," between those (men) who remember the real west because they were there, they have earned their status as "men" by virtue of their survival which has required their competence as gunfighters, and those (boys) who know of the west, but do not know it. The older

characters—Little Bill, William Munny, English Bob, legends in their own time—must educate, discipline and protect the younger ones—the group of deputies, the "hard-working" cowboys, the Kid and, through the figure of the writer, the readers of the future—the audience for the stories. It is here that the implied synonymy between "the west" and "the men" is instrumental in defining masculinity. Herein too lies the film's fascination for the female audience, because in deconstructing the myths of the west the film is also obliged to deconstruct the myths of the masculine. Just as the "reensy little pecker" summarizes, retrospectively, the inadequacy: sexuality: violence matrix at the center of patriarchy's construction of the masculine, so the resonances of the initial event, the cowboy cutting Delilah's face, constitute a paradigm for western storytelling. The pivotal scene in the melodrama/realism dialectic ordering the narrative is the meeting between Will and Delilah, when he first sees her for himself. He is recovering from a fever contracted after his ride to Big Whiskey in torrential rain and his brutal beating at the hands of Little Bill in Greeley's Saloon. For three days he's been hovering, delirious, near death. His old, stubbled, bruised face half buried in unwholesome blankets is seen in medium shot, in the shadows of a dilapidated shed. Delilah, her scars healed but still visible, is tending him. She seems a little hesitant, awkward, frightened perhaps, an ordinary woman in her dull coloured dress and enveloping cloak, from the homestead or wagon train of any western. But to him she is, as he says, a "beautiful woman with scars"—his summary, in itself redolent of melodrama's central paradigm, invites the audience to take a second look at the scene. Now the characters' latent meanings to each other, and to us, come to the fore. She is beautiful because she has suffered; he is frightening because he is unknown. The symbolic possibilities of melodrama transform the characters, the landscape, they shift the focus of our attention. But as our attention is shifted, realist and melodramatic codes are simultaneously in play, and realism's damaged man/scarred woman are balanced by melodrama's threatening male/suffering female, the equation offered as exemplary of patriarchy's masculinity and its feminine Other.

The film opens with a low lit medium close-up of a cowboy "riding," in the whores' own parlance, a semi-clothed woman. The rhythmic creaking of the bed-springs is interrupted by the sounds of cries and commotion from the adjacent room which the couple (and the camera) run to investigate. All is chaos: the medium and close-up shots of the dimly lit and crowded interior make it impossible to distinguish people and actions: a claustrophobic urgency pervades the scene. Silence and order are achieved by a threatening gun to the head of the enraged cowboy whose "pecker" had so amused the sadly ignorant Delilah. Thus, in the very construction of this scene the film suggests the impossibility of answering the question "what happened?" in any but the most partial manner. The contingency of truth is subsequently demonstrated through the various (and varying) accounts both of the incident and of Delilah's face, which punctuate the film. Alice/Frances Fisher, in her fury at Little Bill's misogynist prioritizing of Skinny's property rights over Delilah's own rights, refuses Davey's conciliatory offering: "She's got no face and you bring her a goddamn mangy pony?" The Kid, in his efforts to enlist Will as his partner, claims that Delilah's eyes, ears and "tears" were slashed, as well as her face and, as in a game of Chinese whispers, this version is repeated, with elaboration, to Ned. Delilah's narrative function here recalls



Anna Thomson as "a beautiful woman with scars."

that of Debbie in *The Searchers*, whose seizure by Scar and his band motivated the long search chronicled in that film. Both Will and Ned, seasoned gunfighters though they are, are shocked by the story they hear:

Ned: All right, so what did these fellas do?

Cheat at cards?

Will: Steal some strays? Spit on a rich fellow? What?

Ned: No, they cut up a woman.

Will: What?

Will: Yeah.

Cut up her face, cut her eyes out, cut her fingers off.

Cut her tits.

Everything but her cunny I suppose.

Ned: Well, I'll be damned. Well—I guess they got it coming.

The retribution required by moral order leads, just as it did in *The Searchers*, to the quest, the contest—but though it is *activated* by the woman it really concerns the *exchange* between men, self-appointed as executors of the Law. When, somewhat later, we get to see Dilliah's scarred face for ourselves we are invited to compare our view with others' descriptions. Alice says she's got "no face"; Skinny says she's so ugly no-one would pay for sex with her; Will when he finally meets her takes her, in his delirium, for an angel. Later, as the film shifts effortlessly from realism to melodrama, he calls her a beautiful woman with scars—the version with which the audience is invited to concur. Both Dilliah herself in the flesh, as it were, and references to her in the accounts of other characters appear repeatedly throughout the film, insisting by their presence on the relativity of truth in that continuous relay and replay of record and interpretation which constitutes the social world. This paradigmatic tale, Dilliah's "story," allows fragments of other stories—"I was in the Blueottle Saloon in Wichita the night English Bob shot Corky Corcoran. . . ." or "You remember the night I shot that drover in the mouth and his teeth came out through his head. . . ." or "You were *there*, at . . . ?"—to reverberate around the cavernous space the film creates with its sweeping landscapes, its cyclic time marked by the passing of seasons, its echoing fictions counterpointed with rolls of thunder.

Whether Little Bill is in Death, Nebraska, or Big Whiskey is, in the Wagnerian climax, immaterial. Despite some reviewers' recognition of a "feminist streak" patriarchal order is, on the evidence of this film, secure enough to risk, if not a little giggle at its pecker, at least some navel-gazing. The fact that to today's audiences—or at any rate to this audience member—the whores' outrage, if not its consequences, is utterly convincing and justifiable is a credit to Eastwood's recognition of a feminist agenda. It's certainly a development from the narrative pretext of *The Searchers* which was to prevent an unthinkable miscegenation. But the misapprehension of those men sympathetic to a feminist agenda who thought that Eastwood could produce a "feminist western" is amply demonstrated in the film's ultimate inability to sustain a female character central to both the moral and the functional axes of the film. With the possible exceptions of William Wellman's *Westward the Women*, (1951) and the flawed but alluring *Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993), the western and feminism seem to be contradictory terms. Women, though certainly not absent from the film, are freely acknowledged in their classic role, marking the boundaries of the masculine. Dilliah's mishap motivates the contest, and she and her "sisters," the whores at Greeley's saloon and billiard hall, mark the progress of their revenge, standing silently together in the windblown garden or on the raised wooden sidewalk, watching, waiting, subject to the outcome. Claudia's gravestone frames the narrative and the whores' revenge gets it moving. In between it's men's talk.

## NOTES

My thanks to Gill Branson, Pat Kirkham and Lee Thomas for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. *Sunday Times*, 13 September 1992, pp. 22-23.
2. For example, Will Wright, *Stixguns and Society*, University of California Press, 1975.
3. *The Observer*, 20 September 1992, p. 53.
4. *Today*, 18 September 1992, p. 33.
5. See, for example, review articles on the film in *Cineaste*, December 1992; *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Volume 21, Number 1, 1993; *Films in Review*, December 1993; *Sight and Sound*, October 1992.
6. *The Observer*, 20 September 1992, p. 53.
7. For example, Amy Taubin in *Village Voice*, 18 August 1992, p. 52; Jonathan Romney in *New Statesman and Society*, 18 September 1992, pp. 31-32; Alexander Walker in *Evening Standard*, 17 April 1992.

## OUR HEROES HAVE SOMETIMES BEEN COWGIRLS: An Interview with Maggie Greenwald

Tania Modleski (1995)

When a woman film-maker stakes a claim to genres like the Western does she betray feminism by adopting male stories and male myths? When a woman makes a Western about a cross-dressing female hero, should we read it as an allegory of the female director in Hollywood? Does female success in the world of popular entertainment mean that a woman's gotta do what a man's gotta do?

In the early years of feminist film theory, writers such as Claire Johnston urged feminist film-makers not to abandon the formulas of the entertainment film which have given so much pleasure to women, but rather to work at transforming them. Many feminist critics began to study women's genres like Hollywood maternal melodramas and television soap operas in order to examine how women's fantasies have been shaped and how feminists might begin to reshape them. Although the fantasies of many women have surely been influenced by male genres too, we didn't really think much back then about how women might appropriate these genres. At the time, such an appropriation might have struck many of us as an affirmation of the very values and storytelling traditions we wanted to subvert.

In those days female "transvestisrn"—a term we used figuratively to designate an identification with the opposite sex—was often held to be a sorry condition; in fact it became a major metaphor for the tragic plight of the female spectator, who because she was forced to project herself onto a male hero was thought to be unable to "achieve a stable sexual identity;" as Laura Mulvey put it in her analysis of *Duel in the*