

9 WHAT IF WISTER WERE A WOMAN? *Melody Graulich*

*Near the end of his essay, Zeese Papanikolas asks a series of "what ifs": What if Molly refused the Virginian and he spent the rest of his life in Jamesian irresolution and sexual unfulfillment? What if Trampas killed him, leaving poor Molly spinstering? In her essay, Melody Graulich continues to ponder the various possible Virginians, wondering, What if Wister were a woman? Focusing like others in this volume on the construction and performance of gender, her essay also questions how the gender, and the gendered assumptions, of the author and the reader help construct the text. She looks closely, if obliquely, at Wister's use of the folk tradition of the tall tale. In her reading the dialectical tension in the text is between the clothed public role, often characterized by bluffing and role-playing, by various poker faces, and the naked hidden self. Throwing some wild cards on the table, without worrying about winning the pot, she imagines a literary history characterized, not by reasoned argument, but by bluffs and bets, by "what ifs."*

For the ex-colonials the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearances and reality. . . . Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be more theatrical.

RALPH ELLISON, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke"

## ENTER THE WOMAN

In a revealing passage about book reading, the Virginian and Molly Wood talk about George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. The Virginian calls it a "fine book," but he thinks that "it will keep up its talkin'. Don't let you alone."

He initially assumes that the novel was written by a man, but when Molly corrects him, his response makes perfect sense to him: "A woman [wrote that]! Well, then, o' course she talks too much."<sup>1</sup>

Passages like this have led many readers to conclude that this novel about the West's most beautiful spacious guy presents us with plenty of discouraging words about women, who, apparently, need to learn to stop nagging and speak more sparingly. In an influential essay, Lee Clark Mitchell claims that it "ends with a reactionary thesis of inequality between the sexes and in the process offers a model of male hegemony."<sup>2</sup>

Yet as Mitchell also shows, *The Virginian* itself keeps up its talking: the novel is about talk. Despite the popular perception of the Virginian as silent and violent, Wister did not write about the West in the action-packed style of earlier – and later – male western writers. The Virginian is downright chatty. In fact, if we borrow his hero's literary assessment, Wister writes like a woman.

Wister's kinship to George Eliot goes beyond style. For like *George Eliot*, *Owen Wister* is a pen name designed to hide the identity of the author from the public. As in a crucial scene Molly Wood plays the "man's part" (213), so did the author of *The Virginian* by calling herself Owen Wister. Letters recently discovered in the Wister archives at the Wyoming Historical Society in Redbluff suggest that the novel was actually written by Mary Channing Wister, Owen Wister's wife and the great-granddaughter of William Ellery Channing. Well educated, the youngest member to be appointed to the Philadelphia Board of Education, cofounder of "the socially conscious Civic Club," described by her husband as a "stirrer up and reformer of all things wrong," Molly Wister was as independent as the heroine she created and named after herself.<sup>3</sup> Like Molly Wood, this "New Woman" fell in love with and married a man struggling with "how it must be about a man" (298) in late-nineteenth-century America. She wrote *The Virginian* in an attempt to understand and redefine masculinity, sexual politics, and gender identities. Like many nineteenth-century women writers, she may have felt what Gilbert and Gubar called *the anxiety of authorship* and protected herself by writing from the male point of view and by obscuring her message with a troubling, ambiguous ending.<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps her use of a male pseudonym and a male narrator helped her claim access to the male point of view. Perhaps she thought that only from the male point of view could she convincingly explore its contradictoriness and the discrepancies between the outer and the inner man, could she enter the man's world of the West.

Yet poker-faced as Molly Wister was, *The Virginian* suddenly makes

sense when read as a woman's text. In the questions that it raises about being a western man or woman, about playing a gendered part, the woman's point of view in the novel never lets us alone. Read as a woman's text, *The Virginian* offers us new insights into the construction of gender in western literature.

Even before he meets Molly Wood, the Virginian knows that the woman who signed herself "your very sincere spinster" is "not . . . awful sincere" (38–39) at all, and Molly Wister, of course, hoped for equally astute readers; she expected to be identified as the not-always-sincere author of *The Virginian*. She always maintained that readers could not believe a woman could write so convincingly in the western tradition of the tall tale. She was so discouraged at the obtuse reception that her novel received that she gave up writing and devoted her considerable energies to supplying Delmonico's and the Cliff House with frog's legs from her frog farm in Tulare, California.

And if you believe this story, do I have a frog farm for you. . . .

#### A RIGHT SMART OF DIFFERENCE?

"There's cert'nly a right smart o' difference between men and women" (284), observes the Virginian. Is he right? What if Wister had been a woman? Just how "different" would *The Virginian* read?

Male hegemony rides again? Mitchell isn't the only recent critic to expose the novel's supposedly reactionary gender politics; most writers in this volume agree with him. And when I teach the novel every few years in my graduate seminar on western literature, my students always bridle at the way Molly is reined in by her new "master" at the end.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is hard not to feel saddled with lines like, "At the last white-hot edge of ordeal, it was she who renounced, and he who had his way" (312).

But my reading of *The Virginian* is neither dominated nor mastered by such lines. "He" may have had his way, but so does "she" in the passage that immediately follows, a passage that celebrates male vulnerability and the value of communication. When the Virginian shares his feelings with Molly, she feels a "new bliss . . . to be given so much of him," and in relation to her, he experiences a kind of rebirth: "He never would have guessed so much had been stored away in him, unexpressed till now" (312). Sappy romantic, feminist backslider, I find his self-discovery as telling, as revealing, as Molly's momentary renunciation. I like the Virginian (if I squirm around his racism). He's smart, funny, fast-talking, sensitive,

kind, sexy. It seems to me that the novel doesn't reinscribe male hegemony but do-si-dos with its implications.

I often teach *The Virginian* paired with Mary Hallock Foote's "The Fate of a Voice" (1886), a story about a young woman "with a voice" who initially refuses to marry her engineer lover because his decision to live in the West will prevent her from becoming a professional singer, will silence her. Closely echoing Foote's own life, the story raises all the familiar questions of nineteenth-century women's texts about why a woman should have to choose between career and marriage and about a woman's right to "speak" in public. After temporarily losing her voice, the heroine, Madeline, decides to marry her engineer and live in Idaho, a move that the narrator seems to applaud, although she ironically acknowledges that the "voice was lost." On the surface, the text appears to celebrate her capitulation and his mastery, but as we would expect, it is filled with qualifiers and ironies and submerged rebellion. In my seminar, I watch as my students, well trained in feminist criticism, focus not on the story's overt text but on its "silenced" subtext, not on its ending but on the argument where Madeline challenges her lover's assumptions and forcefully articulates her ambitions and needs, as they suggest that the story reveals Foote's conflicts and her efforts to challenge attitudes about women artists, as they excuse or explain away the ending as "socially constructed."

My students are generous readers, a quality I certainly hope that I encourage. But I sometimes wonder why they don't bring that same generosity to their reading of *The Virginian*, why they can't or won't cut Wister some slack. Foote exacts of Madeline far more renunciation than Wister requires of Molly, yet contemporary feminist readers of Foote's text, female or male, attend less to the story's capitulations to "male hegemony" than to its resistances. I suggest that if Wister were a woman, if *The Virginian* were a woman's text, we would likely read it as tied up in its own knotty questions about masculinity, gender identity, and marriage, presenting the kind of often-conflicted, compromised resolutions that we find in its "sister texts," those by writers like Eliot, Foote, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Kate Chopin. Read in the company of women rather than as the progenitor of the western, *The Virginian* takes on a new look. Let me develop just one example.

In the influential gunfight scene, which supposedly defined western masculinity, the Virginian has recently been much critiqued for refusing to accept Molly's ultimatum that she will not marry him if he fights Trampas. When the bishop reminds him, "Your life has been your own for fif-

teen years. But it is not your own now. You have given it to a woman," he responds, "Yes; I have given it to her. But my life's not the whole of me. I'd give her twice my life. . . . But I can't give her – her nor anybody in heaven or earth – I can't give my – my – we'll never get at it, seh!" (296). Uncharacteristically inarticulate, the Virginian struggles to define his most fundamental self. Is this stubborn male dominance? A mastering male self-assertion?

Let's read the passage in relation to a woman's text published only three years earlier, where the heroine says, "I would give up the unessential. . . . I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself." As the narrator says, "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul."<sup>6</sup>

Although some critics have pointed out Edna Pontillier's egotism, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has generally been celebrated for asserting that a woman has a self outside marriage and human relations, a self to which she owes her first loyalty. Like Edna, the Virginian believes that despite love and marriage, his life is still his own.

Of course, postmodernists might suggest that both the Virginian and Edna – and perhaps their authors as well – presume a fiction: that there is an independent self, apart from socially constructed roles. The Virginian can hold onto this fiction, keep his self-assertion intact, because, in the West, in "this great playground of young men" (41), he is offered a spectrum of masculine roles, from Shorty to Trampas, from the "parson" McBride to Judge Henry, from Steve to the narrator. In true Darwinian fashion, the Virginian gains power both through dominance, killing off the men he might have been, and through adaptation, learning to mimic, chameleonlike, the qualities of those with "quality." Edna, refusing to dress up in either of her two ill-fitting "unnatural" costumes, Mademoiselle or Madame, can maintain the illusion of an independent self only by self-annihilation.

Yet both texts assert that our identities are socially staged, defined by the clothes that we wear to perform: Edna strips hers off to swim off to sea, while the Virginian, although "fonder of good clothes" than his wife, exchanges his silk kerchiefs and cowboy hat for a tailored homespun suit and "usual straw hat" (313) for his trip East. While the Virginian can change his clothes, he can't get back to that naked self he imagines during

his island honeymoon. As fully as Chopin, Wister sees how the clothes, the roles, construct – sometimes constrict, sometimes empower – the man. Late in the novel, Scipio's "Don't change your clothes" even becomes code for "wear your gun" (288). Throughout the novel, the Virginian desires access to a self prior to, more fundamental than, the "male role," but power is seductive, and he can dress the part. Our readings of *The Virginian* depend, then, on whether we see Wister as applauding or exposing those roles.

#### A PART TO PLAY: HOW IT MUST BE ABOUT A MAN

*The Virginian* begins with a stage direction: "Enter the Man." A few chapters later the complementary character is announced: "Enter the Woman." Medicine Bow is a set, its houses wearing "a false front . . . rearing their pitiful masquerade" (8). Wearing his own false fronts, none of them pitiful, the Virginian plays his various parts, as do that "sincere spinster" and the "Prince of Wales," only two of the misleading roles played by Molly Wood and the narrator, roles defined by wordplay and costuming. Even the horse, Buck, chooses the most "theatrical moment" (34) to bolt. In this theatrical opening, Wyoming becomes a stage, the metaphoric kind implied by the novel's most discussed author – and one of the Virginian's favorites – when he declared that all the world's a stage and that we are merely players. Reflecting Wister's fondness for Shakespeare, the theatrical trope continues throughout the novel with plays within plays, complete with audiences; chapters entitled "Between the Acts"; soliloquies and asides; and all sorts of "play-acting" (248). Wister's use of a narrator ensures an audience for the Virginian's varied performances.

On this stage, unlike the Shakespearean one, "the Man" and "the Woman" initially seem to have rigidly scripted roles, and any attempt at cross-dressing would probably seem about as successful as Huck Finn's masquerade as a girl. Yet as with so many of Shakespeare's comedies, nothing is quite what it appears in this novel where costuming, role-playing, staging, bluffing, wordplay, and masquerade reign, as they did at Elizabeth's court. Convention scripts the parts, but Wister leads us to think about what convention disguises. Like Judith Butler many years later, he leads us to think about just how much masculinity and femininity are performed according to explicit and implicit expectations, defined by public acts rather than personal inclinations.<sup>7</sup> (Well aware of image,

Wister's friend Roosevelt himself represented masculinity as paradoxical performance—soft words, big sticks.) This question was, as I will argue below, a deeply personal one. At various points the Man and the Woman begin to break down, to cross-dress:

Persistently refusing to be a "lady"; remaining, despite her inability to control her lover's behavior, "independent and unconventional" (86); "craving . . . the unknown" (61); able to "take care of herself, you bet" (74); having "always wanted to be a man" (83); Molly can play the "man's part" (213).

Neither stoic nor silent; relying on words before aggression; ready to read and eager to share "the secrets of his heart" (310); "never [having] guessed so much has been stored away in him, unexpressed till now" (312); sobbing on the shoulder of his friend; the Virginian is willing to question, "What's the gain in being a man?" (310).

Repeatedly and presumably playfully imagining playing a woman: "Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all" (3); touched when his friend "began to give [him] his real heart" (155); the narrator grows into a man through opening himself to what he would feel "had [he] been a woman" (157). (Indeed, he might be the novel's Hamlet, wondering, "To be or not to be.")

Although the novel's ending may reinforce "hegemonic" gender relations, throughout the novel Wister vacillates about "how it must be about a man." To borrow his poker conceit, we might say he hedges his bets.

Wister inherited a predilection and talent for the theater. His grandmother, Fanny Kemble, the strong-willed daughter and niece of a celebrated family of actors who ran theaters in Drury Lane and Covent Garden, debuted as Juliet and was among the most celebrated actresses of her generation. At St. Paul's he wrote a minstrel farce and played Shylock. At Harvard he joined the Dickey Club, performed in its frequent theatricals, and wrote a staged version of *Ivanhoe* (no doubt also reading Scott's *Kenilworth*, which plays such a significant role in *The Virginian*). He also served as manager and performed in plays for the Hasty Pudding Club, whose cross-dressing antics perhaps led to public masquerades such as this one: "Wister and two friends escorted to the Boston Theater a male classmate disguised as a girl, and sat primly with 'her' to see the premier performance of a play about western mining adventures. The escapade apparently fooled practically everyone."<sup>8</sup> He wrote widely performed operettas and aspired to spend his life composing music. (After the publica-

tion of *The Virginian*, he would of course write a successful stage version of the novel.)

Yet Wister felt pressured to give up playacting, to take on a "serious" and appropriate male role. Feeling judged by his father for his "failures" at business and law, Wister wrote a novel, *A Wise Man's Son*, "the story of a young man whose father forced him into business."<sup>9</sup> He sent it to the man he considered a "mentor," W. D. Howells, who recommended that Wister not show such a "rebellious" work to a publisher.<sup>10</sup> Wister accepted Howells's judgment, but he suffered an undefined breakdown. In 1885 he was sent to Dr. Weir Mitchell, who had treated his mother and later treated Charlotte Perkins Gilman.<sup>11</sup>

In Anthony Rotundo's reading of its "cultural meaning," male neurasthenia "often happened at times of vocational crisis" and "amounted to a flight from manhood": "A man who broke down was making a statement, however unconscious, of his negative feelings about middle-class work and the values and pressures surrounding it. In doing so, he made a gesture of serious opposition to manhood in his own time." The male neurasthenic, whose illness was characterized by an "utter lack of energy," "was also finding refuge in roles and behaviors marked 'female': vulnerability, dependence, passivity, invalidism." (All these are characteristics that mark Wister's narrator.) Men who traveled to recuperate pursued "the life of cultivated leisure which was associated with women."<sup>12</sup>

Rotundo names William and Henry James, among others, as examples of male travelers, but his conclusion is based on European travel. Mitchell prescribed "rest" to both male and female patients, but his notion of what constituted "rest" varied. He sent Wister West. His prescription: enjoy the stimulation of meeting new people, even "humble" ones, and live an active, out-of-doors life; he specifically told Wister to take along riding clothes.<sup>13</sup> In effect he told Wister to go play. Wister went to Wyoming at about the same time as his longtime friend Theodore Roosevelt, who also went West following a breakdown, began to publish his series of "how I became a man in the West" books. Refining Roosevelt's famous phrase, we might term Mitchell's advice *the strenuous rest cure*. Many critics, among them Jane Tompkins and Gail Bederman, have explored how writers and politicians made use of the image of the West and the development of the formula western to counter the perceived increasing effeminacy of turn-of-the-century men, whose ties to the "primitive" had been severed by urbanization and industrialization, and to construct a more "vigorous" masculinity.<sup>14</sup> Rather than a flight from manhood, western travel offered

men like Roosevelt and Wister what David Leverenz has called a "crucible for man-making."<sup>15</sup>

*The Virginian* was forged in this constricting cultural mold. And one of the novel's theatrical motifs, *Henry IV, Part I*, provides what the Virginian himself calls "bed-rock" (217) for this story line. Max Westbrook has pointed out the parallels between Prince Hal and the Virginian: both rowdy boys who "go around town with a mighty triflin' gang" (217), they eventually model themselves on mentors named Henry, reject and abandon their closest friends, kill opponents who threaten – presumably – social order, and, in effect, inherit the kingdom.<sup>16</sup> Obviously in search of cultural scripts for masculinity, the Virginian rejects Eliot's Tommy Tulliver and even more emphatically Austen's Mr. Knightly. Romeo "is no man," (174), but he views the prince as a "jim-dandy." As the Virginian exclaims to Molly, "The boy showed himself a man" (217).<sup>17</sup>

The allusions to *Henry IV, Part I* are overt, on the table; they represent Wister's apparent acceptance of "how it must be about a man" in the 1890s. But in this hand of kings and princes, Wister keeps a card hidden under the table, a wild card that disrupts male power, authority, and inheritance, a card that signals the Virginian's primogeniture, the source of his name.

Wister's naming of the Virginian is a bluff, tantalizing critics. Does his namelessness make him a democratic everyman, climbing the ladder of equal opportunity that Wister espouses? In "The Virginian as Founding Father," Gary Scharnhorst suggests that Wister links his hero to our national architects, reinforcing the narrator's speculations about "nation." Others pick up on the single reference to a given name, Steve's calling him "Jeff," perhaps referring to Thomas Jefferson or even Jefferson Davis and underscoring textual references to gentlemen and leadership.

But in fact the real origins of the Virginian's name are absolutely clear, and they have far less to do with Wister's views on politics than with his theme of cross-dressing. The wild card is the "Virgin Queen," for whom Virginia was named: another performer, bluffer, and gender bender, the theatrical Elizabeth I.

Elizabeth enters the novel in "The Game and the Nation" section, which Wister divides into "acts." The Virginian encounters her in a book that Molly has given him, *Kenilworth*, in which Scott portrays Elizabeth as an actress, as persistently disguising her private feelings behind public roles, as wielding power through her performances.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the three "acts," the Virginian carries the book hidden in his pocket, draw-

ing it out only in conversations with the narrator. Here most clearly Wister correlates power with role-playing, through the connections between theater and poker. The Virginian's own metaphors, drawn from his life experience, inflect his reading of *Kenilworth*. Having just developed an it's-how-you-play-your-hand metaphor to explain to Molly how men prove themselves equals, the Virginian translates Elizabeth's verbal abilities and theatricality into poker playing: he believes that she would have "played a mighty pow'ful game [of poker]" (96). In other words, she's skilled at inhabiting the border between appearance and reality, making the most of what she has, daring and bluffing, manipulating others. She clearly inspires the Virginian's inspired public performance as he cooks frog legs for stalled train passengers and bluffs Trampas and his gang into believing that they can make their fortunes off frog farming in Tulare. (With its California jumping frogs and digressive storytelling, the passage also certainly echoes a writer himself skilled at tall tales but far more skeptical of royalty, Mark Twain.) A woman who because of her sex should never have inherited the throne, Elizabeth embodies the Virginian's ideas of equality: "Equality is a great big bluff" (89). Dealt a bad hand, through skill, pretense, and intimidation she outmaneuvers her inferiors: "Well, deal Elizabeth ace high, an' she could scare Robert Dudley with a full house plumb out o' the bettin'. . . . And . . . if Essex's play got next her too near, I reckon she'd have stacked the cyards" (96). The Virginian resorts to understated poker face in describing his admiration for her: "That Queen Elizabeth must have cert'nly been a competent woman" (94).<sup>19</sup>

"Cert'nly" Elizabeth was much more than competent, but *competencé* is an interesting yardstick for Wister to employ, and he uses it consistently. He concludes the section with this assessment from the narrator: "For the Virginian had been equal to the occasion; that is the only kind of equality which I recognize" (126). Initially incompetent, the narrator proves himself, not by the number of antelopes killed, but by gaining the Virginian's affection and confidence. Molly's competence as literary know-it-all and ethical arbiter – qualities monopolized by "true women" – comes into question, but I would argue that her marriage is what she looked for, "not a stooping" (58), and that we have no real reason – just because she was unable to control her spouse's actions – to question her competence as a "rebel, independent as ever" (210). After all, quite unlike Molly's mother and great-aunt, Mrs. Henry – sarcastic, unconventional, physically active, and even willing to make suggestive sexual innuendos about her attrac-

tion to the Virginian – provides her model of a competent and suitably rebellious western woman. Competence crosses genders.

At the end of “The Game and the Nation,” “Last Act,” when the narrator asks the Virginian, “Don’t you think you could have played poker with Queen Elizabeth?” he answers, “No; I expect she’d have beat me” (126). In a tall-tale stretch, perhaps I can read that line in this way: if you can’t beat them, join them. In any case, the Virginian’s identity as Queen Elizabeth’s symbolic bastard son oh so competently interferes with readings of *The Virginian’s* dominant misogynist ideology, as does the narrator’s wishful thinking about being a woman and the evolving emotional intimacy that he and the Virginian share. Like Wister’s lost first novel, *The Virginian* is a rebellious work, straining to tear the seams of the proscribed masculine dress.

#### WHAT’S THE GAIN IN BEING A MAN?

What’s the gain? Well, one thing, if you’re white, you can vote. But what if you’re a woman? Wyoming’s territorial government, of course, had been the first to grant equal suffrage to women in 1869, followed by an equal suffrage clause in 1890 when it applied for statehood.<sup>20</sup> In “When You Call Me That . . .,” Mitchell suggests “that *The Virginian* offered a muted resolution to the crisis over woman’s suffrage developing at the turn of the century” by representing “an independent schoolteacher who at last accepts her social and intellectual dependency in a man’s world. . . . If in 1902 the prospect of life in an ‘Equality State’ seemed unsettling to readers, their uncertainty would have been eased by the drama of the Virginian’s courtship of Molly.”<sup>21</sup>

I can use the same historical fact to support my argument, to argue, poker faced, that an author would naturally set a novel raising challenging questions about late-nineteenth-century gender roles in the “Equality State.”<sup>22</sup> (In fact, Wister no doubt set *The Virginian* in Wyoming because it’s what he knew, the place where he had spent most of his time in the West.) One conclusion to draw from this essay is that all literary criticism is a bluff, a tall tale featuring the teller.

But I too want to have it both ways and conclude more seriously as we look toward what role *The Virginian* might play in the next hundred years of literary history. By attempting to disrupt the dominant critical view of the novel as reifying socially constructed gender roles, I suggest that we

should not cast this novel, or others, in too narrow a role in our literary dramas. In my own work I want to attend less to moments in a text where gender is “reinscribed” than to moments where it is questioned, where slippage occurs, where expectations are reversed, where we are surprised. And perhaps a text like *The Virginian*, with its mixed messages, double crosses, and bluffs, can tempt us away, sometimes, from closely argued, well-supported analyses into more speculative, performative, dialogic essays that raise more questions than they answer.

I began this essay with a tall tale, trying to place *The Virginian* in a wholly new context to surprise us out of our usual ways of thinking about the novel and its role in our literary traditions, to find it some new bedfellows. Thinking about “the Equality State” and who gets to vote, I’d like to close with another “what if” speculation. In exploring the clothes-make-the-human and cross-dressing tropes, I left out one key scene, the night at the dance when Lin and the Virginian switch the clothes and blankets of the community’s babies, fooling everyone. The children are temporarily indistinguishable, but once the clothes are removed there is one significant difference: “And the other one that’s been put in Christopher’s new quilts is not even a bub – bub – boy!” (77), cries Lizzie Westfall. Finally, when it comes to women and men, “natural” differences do exist.

This scene, I suggest, bears the fingerprints of Mark Twain, an author whom Wister admired; indeed, those fingerprints are all over *The Virginian*. It echoes a scene with far more serious consequences from Twain’s 1896 *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, a satiric exposé of socially constructed identity.<sup>23</sup> When Roxy, a white-skinned mulatto, switches the clothes of her enslaved son, Chambers, with those of her master’s privileged heir, Thomas a Becket Driscoll, she also switches their “social positions,” revealing the absurdity, in Twain’s – and my – view, of defining identity by race: it is nurture, not nature, that shapes who they become.

What if Wister came to understand how social expectations skew personal inclinations, not only through personal experience but also through reading Twain? I could point out that the Virginian, a Southerner, is frequently called “the black man,” that he obliquely refers to disenfranchisement when he sings – in “blackvoice” – the racist minstrel song that perhaps provided the name for the Jim Crow laws, that Judge Henry’s support of lynching does not extend to “Southern Negroes” (272). Could I spin an argument out of the question, What if the Virginian were passing? I couldn’t, and wouldn’t, and why not? What makes such

an argument perverse and ethically unacceptable? One easy answer: Wister's writings demonstrate his racism; in this one example, he reduces Twain's heavy irony to a joke. But many, recently most, have argued that they also demonstrate his misogyny. As Max Westbrook suggests, "To reject the Virginian because he is a male chauvinist with an ideologically-dictated blend of superiority, humility, idealism, and cynicism would seem to be easy; but the memory can be taught to reject any evidence which does not conform to our prejudice. A few million readers simply like this paradigmatic folk hero and refuse to register information which might diminish or corrupt his image."<sup>24</sup>

Mea culpa?

I can tell my feminist tall tale because I'm a woman. In essays like this, I "perform" as a woman. Not as an African American. Not as an American Indian, whose subjugation to "masters" like the Virginian cannot be playfully "unregistered."

No one talks about reader response criticism any more; has it been so thoroughly integrated into our thinking that we assume its pervasive influence? I don't think so. By and large, we still write as "objective" authorities, as if texts have meanings that we can persuade everyone to agree upon. Have I persuaded you? If so, I have a frog farm for you.

#### NOTES

1. Wister, *The Virginian* (NAL, 1979), 86-87. Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text.
2. Mitchell, "'When You Call Me That . . .,'" 74.
3. Payne, *Owen Wister*, 172, 171.
4. Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*.
5. Consider, however, this line: "But manhood had only trained, not broken, [the Virginian's] youth. It was all there, only obedient to the rein and curb" (94).
6. Chopin, *The Awakening*, 48, 114.
7. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
8. Payne, *Owen Wister*, 31.
9. Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 136.
10. Payne, *Owen Wister*, 74.

11. While the rediscovery of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and its rapid canonization led to an epidemic of feminist scholarship about women's health and the medical establishment, about the rest cure and its role in the lives of famous turn-of-the-century figures like Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Jane Addams, about the misogynistic cultural implications in diagnoses of "hysteria" and "neurasthenia," until recently little attention has been paid to male neurasthenics and the cultural implications of their dis-ease with their gendered roles, although Anthony Rotundo argues that neurasthenia may have been "equally common among males and females" (*American Manhood*, 189).

12. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 190, 191, 193, 186, 191, 191.

13. See Payne, *Owen Wister*, 76.

14. Tompkins, *West of Everything*; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

15. Leverenz, "The Last Real Man in America," 273.

16. See Westbrook, "Bavaro, Prince Hall, and the Virginian," 104. Of course Westbrook discovers many more parallels than these.

17. In another passage, the Virginian asserts that "Romeo is no man" (174). With his confidence as literary critic, he would no doubt have rejected Henry James's assessment of *The Virginian*: that he would have liked the novel better had Wister cast his hero and heroine in a Romeo and Juliet drama as, in this case, class-crossed lovers, ending in the Virginian's death (see Payne, *Owen Wister*, 201).

18. In this paragraph I am indebted to the insights of my student Maya Sinha.

19. Scipio LeMoyne enters the text along with Elizabeth, and his role is far more ambiguous. His verbally outrageous performance as the long-dead Colonel Cy's Jones at the Omaha "eating palace . . . which opened upon the world as a stage upon an audience" (92) provides the Virginian with the material for his masquerade. Equally intelligent, psychologically penetrating, and verbally dextrous, both mimics, Scipio and the Virginian "were birds many of whose feathers were the same, and the Virginian often talked to Scipio without reserve" (166). As "a library of life" (130), Scipio provides the Virginian with a wholly different kind of knowledge than does his book reading with Molly. Perhaps because Scipio represents a significant challenge to his ideology - are we to assume that if he somehow found access to Shakespeare, sexy clothes, and Judge Henry, he could become another Virginian? - Wister evades concluding Scipio's script, one of the novel's greatest failings.

20. See Mitchell, "'When You Call Me That . . .,'" 73.

21. Mitchell, "'When You Call Me That . . .,'" 73-74.

22. Mitchell does suggest generally, although not in this particular case, that "the very ability to have things both ways led to [the novel's] success" ("When You Call Me That . . .," 74).

23. For Wister's reading of Twain, see Payne, *Owen Wister*, 19. Twain's influence is most overt in Wister's comic elements, the tall tale, complete with digressions, and the frog farm in Tulare County, but his many references to Shakespeare and "royalty" seem to be a "serious" response to the farcical exploits of the king and the duke in *Huckleberry Finn*.

24. Westbrook, "Bavarov, Prince Hall, and the Virginian," 104.

## 10 WISTER'S RETREAT FROM HYBRIDITY

*Neil Campbell*

*While Melody Graulich focuses on the staged performances of gender in The Virginian, Neil Campbell looks at the ways in which Wister stages "tentative ideas" about western hybridity and then "contains" them within preexisting ideology. Using the work of cultural geographers and James Clifford's theoretically suggestive pun of "dots and routes," he explores patterns of migration and multiculturalism in The Virginian, but in Campbell's reading, informed by recent postcolonial and poststructuralist theory, Wister, with his "fear of difference," "retreats" from the implications of his portrayal of the "diasporic West." He creates "dialogues between movement and stasis, nature and civilization, migration and settlement, hybridity and essentialism," but ultimately, the novel, like its heroine, capitulates to the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon. Providing the model for the "existential restlessness of the western genre," The Virginian nevertheless remains entrapped in the tension between stasis and movement.*

*Campbell's exploration of the importance of the theme of mobility and its centrality to the ideology of the novel was inaugurated in this volume by Louis Owens. Owens also raises the concept of "transculturation," a process in evidence throughout the volume. The essays by Victoria Lamont, Zeese Papanikolas, and Campbell might themselves be seen as characterized by critical migrations. Together, they demonstrate a cross-cultural, transnational, diasporic perspective, one that will open new critical spaces for the study of western writing.*

You are mixing things – I never heard you mix things before.

OWEN WISTER, *The Virginian*