The Competing Tunes of Johnny Guitar: Liberalism, Sexuality, Masquerade

by Jennifer Peterson

Johnny Guitar’s allegorical uses of politics and gender are highly contradictory. The film mounts a “liberal” critique of McCarthyism that is undermined by its binary politics, which merely shift blame onto another 1950s bad object: repression in the form of a sexually pathological woman. This apparent misogyny is tempered by other characters’ performance of Joan Riviere’s masquerade, which ultimately validates a playful gender mobility.

Nicholas Ray’s eclectic 1954 western Johnny Guitar has supported dramatically divergent readings by its critics over the years. American journalists at the time of its release were disappointed by Johnny Guitar’s nontraditional use of generic conventions. “It has not only male, but female gunfighters,” a writer for the New Yorker sneered, declaring: “It was probably inevitable that sooner or later somebody would try to change the pattern of Westerns, but I can state authoritatively that this twist is doomed.” Time proclaimed it “a crossbreed of the Western with a psychoanalytic case history,” while Commonweal criticized it for self-parody, “refus[ing] to take the script or . . . actors seriously,” and Variety accused it of having too much “pretentious attempt at analysis.”1 In fact, these critics were correct in apprehending the film’s revisionism, for Ray indeed set out to challenge convention by making his hero female (and by casting Joan Crawford to play this hero[ine]) and by turning the paradigmatic western conflict between individual and community into an anti-McCarthyist allegory. What is less perceptive and more symptomatic about the above criticisms is their disapproval of this generic revisionism.2 These critics, in fact, represent just the attitudes about convention that I will argue Johnny Guitar wants to challenge. Contemporaneous with and in direct contrast to the film’s American critical rejection, French New Wave critics applauded it, celebrating Nicholas Ray as an auteur, a “poet of nightfall.” François Truffaut praised the film as “a Western that is dream-like, magical, unreal to a degree, delirious.”3 This positive appraisal demonstrates a concern with poetics and pathos rather than aesthetic conventionalism and seems inspired by the film’s overinscribed stylistic elements (highly saturated Trucolor film stock, quirky sets, flamboyant acting); in fact, it is precisely the film’s unconventionality that attracts Truffaut. By presenting itself as an exploration of conventionality and unconventionality, Johnny Guitar has produced several decades of criticism.

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along the same lines, criticism that fails to move beyond the terms the film sets up for itself.

*Johnny Guitar* is hard to pin down. To a greater degree than many films it supports multiple and contradictory discourses, and analysis of it has usually focused on one or another discursive level at the exclusion of others. A responsible reading of the film must recognize these oppositions, for this very polyvalency is its key. Its plot is simpler than it appears: female saloonkeeper Vienna is accused of harboring a gang of criminals, and the townspeople—led by the vindictive Emma Small, whose brother was allegedly killed by this gang—try to drive her out of town. Johnny Guitar arrives just as this conflict between Vienna and the townspeople is beginning to brew; he tries to rekindle his past relationship with Vienna, competing with gang member the Dancing Kid for her affections. Vienna’s saloon is torched and many characters are killed over the course of the narrative, but finally Vienna is vindicated: she shoots and kills Emma and pairs off with Johnny as the film ends. Such a conflict between a righteous individual wrongly scapegoated and an angry community is particularly significant to the film’s early 1950s context as an implicit (and explicitly stated) critique of McCarthyite anti-Communist fervor. However, the film’s representations of gender complicate any ostensibly simple political polemic. What concerns me here is the deployment of *Johnny Guitar*’s “liberal” anti-McCarthy agenda and the dependence of this political deployment on a misogynous caricature: the hysterical, undersexed Emma Small (played by the ever-pathological Mercedes McCambridge). In this apparent critique of repressive and conservative postwar American society, Ray actually reveals new anxieties about sexuality and gender. His “liberal” critique of conformity and repression projects culpability onto the woman who is the community leader, thereby gendering persecution mania and anti-Communist fervor female. However, even a recognition of this first ideological U-turn does not fully illuminate the film, for while it presents its “liberal”/misogyny theme, the film also provides a figure of female power in the enigmatic character of Joan Crawford’s Vienna. Finally, the film filters all these issues through a thick veil of campy self-consciousness, which qualifies its stances on politics and gender by making it virtually impossible to take them seriously.

*Johnny Guitar* engages the familiar western icon of the lone hero in a new way: she is a woman; and the part of the villain, though represented in a general way by the frenzied community, is also personified primarially by another woman. This has led critics to see the film as either a protofeminist narrative of affirmation or as an ominously masculinist narrative of female containment because of the film’s not-quite-serious treatment of these female characters. Thus we have the rather starry-eyed 1970s proclamation that “director Nicholas Ray, in very overstated terms, showed how women’s liberation could and did come to the West long before contemporary society took up the hue and cry.” Conversely, we find the equally wholehearted conclusion that “*Johnny Guitar*’s hidden thesis is that the possibility of women gaining power through money makes both the encroaching civilization from the East and even the old western community dangerous.”

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In a relatively recent Cinema Journal article, Leo Charney makes a similar argument that the film is an antifeminist narrative; he does not concede any female triumph to Vienna, claiming instead that the film is ultimately and principally concerned with Johnny. The film begins and ends with Johnny, it is titled with his name, and “Vienna’s struggle results not primarily in her victory over Emma or in her business success but in her reunion with Johnny. The film’s containment strives to keep both women and excess in their place.”6 Thus the criticisms have come full circle, from dismissing the film for even having female lead characters to attacking it for its “contained” female characters. These criticisms all move back and forth on a linear axis; either the film is unsuccessful or it is successful, either it is feminist or it is conservative and antifeminist. In contrast, I argue that the film represents competing discourses about gender; on the one hand, Vienna is granted a somewhat qualified female strength, while on the other, Emma is made a completely pathological woman. A linear model is inadequate for an explanation of Johnny Guitar. The film defies the symmetry (both formal and thematic) of the classical Hollywood cinema;7 it embodies all the above politicized elements to some extent simultaneously but ultimately represents something entirely other, enigmatic. It is this inscrutability that provides room for the programming of whatever reading a critic finds useful to his or her purpose.

In particular, I want to address Charney’s criticism, the most recent and rigorous of those outlined above yet still bounded by its insistence on only one discourse. Charney uses Johnny Guitar as a vehicle for discussing Roland Barthes’s notion of “excess,” which is expanded to incorporate the relationship of a film’s narrative to the social context of its production, in this case embodied in the acknowledged anti-McCarthy parable mounted by the film. Charney argues that the film’s structure requires it to “acknowledge excess, [it] must bring it forward in the attempt to contain it.”8 In this configuration, anti-Communist hysteria is evoked by the film to be discredited, contained. Charney goes on to argue that the film’s containment doesn’t stop at the level of the McCarthyist plot but continues on to subsume the Vienna/Emma plot underneath that of Johnny, thereby containing the female characters for the reinstatement of male subjectivity. “The film’s opening clearly establishes Johnny as its center of perception,” and the film’s closure “tips the balance of the film’s gender tensions, structurally subordinating the female plot to the reaffirmed masculinity of Johnny Guitar.”9 I take issue with this argument because it fails to account for the varied and opposing discourses of the film. What about the film’s theme song, sung by a female voice at the film’s close intoning “My Johnny”? What about the film’s self-parody? Charney forces his own argument into a balanced formality of double-containment when the film itself is in no way so neatly structured.

Liberalism. Nicholas Ray made a point of emphasizing the allegory of McCarthyist hysteria he intended in Johnny Guitar. The film was shot in Spain while Ray was in self-imposed exile from the United States after having been “gray-listed” by McCarthy’s anti-Communist forces. Casting was a significant factor in
the creation of this allegory. Sterling Hayden, who played Johnny, had been an informer before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and was looking for a way to expiate the guilt he felt over his infamous act. “Vienna [Joan Crawford] also mirrored reality. Under fire from McCarthy, she refused to inform,” Ray explained. 10 Johnny Guitar’s screenwriter, Philip Yordan, said in an interview: “we played a good trick on Ward Bond, who was, as you know, one of the members of the fascist party in Hollywood. We had him play the role of the head of the posse, an extreme fascist causing a reign of terror. And he thought the character was a hero, a good sympathetic guy. He didn’t understand anything.” 11 Ray and Yordan thus identified with Vienna’s ostracized situation and attempted to coerce the audience into doing so as well in a sort of Hollywood version of a morality play. Following their own binary politics, they styled themselves as “liberal” revisionists of western conventions, typified by films such as My Darling Clementine (John Ford, 1946), for example, in which civilization triumphs over lawlessness and in which individualistic values are integrated into the community. In Ray and Yordan’s reconfiguration, the civilized community is made into a vindictively conservative mass that threatens the freedom of the individual. Johnny Guitar’s persecuted individuals are forced into the role of outlaws by mob violence; thus the community violates its own traditional values (responsibility, family, lawfulness) and becomes a grotesque profaner of American individualism (and by extension the concomitant individualistic values of freedom, self-reliance, and personal integrity). Yordan said in the same interview: “There were other things in Johnny Guitar: a violent attack against puritanism, in the character of the old crazy girl, played by Mercedes McCambridge.” 12 The wording here is significant; it belies a smugly “liberal” and reactionary transfer of blame from one site to another, from blaming the “Communist” for societal ills to blaming the “puritan[ical] . . . old crazy girl.” The film’s gender constructions are the key to breaking it down, for while ostensibly granting women heroic status, the film actually displaces most of its disgust for McCarthyist hysteria onto the female figure of Emma Small.

The anti-McCarthyist parable certainly works on an implicit level and can be extensively drawn out. While much of the film’s character symbolism may be apparent, I quote one account of it at length partly for its conciseness but also to indicate the limitations of an uncritical reliance on allegory, as if film were some sort of crossword puzzle. The parenthetical comments are in the original text:

The “outlaws” become symbolic Communists (besides living and working communally over their mine shaft, they are also the town’s “whipping boys,” constantly blamed for real and imagined transgressions). Johnny, the ex-gunman is the ex-Communists (now “mere entertainers”) called before HUAC. (At the time, Sterling Hayden was still famous for renouncing his past Party membership under government pressure.) Vienna—consort of the outlaws, and also the town “progressive”—is a “fellow traveler.” Emma Small, driven by hysteria and jealousy, suggests those vindictive witnesses and politicians who used the investigations to destroy the careers of hated rivals. McIvers is big business, going along to protect threatened interests and bending the law to his will. (“I thought it was kind of a nice inside joke to cast Ward Bond
that way.” Ray has said. Bond, of course, was an anti-Communist zealot in the early fifties.) The fair but powerless marshal is the good men in government, caving in under McCarthy’s bluster. And the townspeople are the American middle class—the film’s audience.\textsuperscript{13}

Though drawing out the film’s McCarthyist subtext may be an entertaining exercise, there are problems with leaning too heavily on such a direct analogy, particularly when the filmmakers stated that such analogy was intended. This sort of analysis lays so much stress on a simplistic, one-for-one parallel that it merely reproduces the film’s own self-stated codes, thereby masking any more rigorous criticism of the work—the McCarthyist parable is useful, but it does not tell the whole story. In fact, the anti-McCarthy allegory betrays itself by merely scapegoating another marginalized figure: Emma. \textit{Johnny Guitar}’s negative forces are not defused but relocated. Although I would not argue that the film is simply misogynistic, for Emma’s evil hysteria is balanced by Vienna’s composure, its inability to deal with the force it is trying to denigrate leaves the film with hardly the liberating significance it ostensibly intended.

\textbf{Sexuality.} \textit{Johnny Guitar}’s anti-McCarthyist allegory combines with its gender portrayals to create a telling conflation of the sexual and the political. Emma’s villainousness is uniquely pathological, implicitly stemming from her sexuality (or lack thereof). This transfer of blame along a linear axis—from “Left” back to “Right”—catches up women along the way, using them as politicized pawns. Ray represents the Right as repressed, paranoid, and misguided—by a woman. The Left is comprised of innocent individualists such as Vienna, who is merely trying to do her business and play by the rules but whose alien presence (“You’re nothing but a railroad tramp, you’re not fit to live among decent people,” Emma says to her) is inherently repugnant to the isolationist Right. It is perhaps fruitless to speculate why Ray used women to personify this binary, but the effect is quite illuminating, and certainly the space of a western is a good location in which to fight it out. Despite its pridefully antitraditional crusade, however, the film’s “liberal” assertion of the individual’s right to live free from persecution is actually quite conventional, mirroring the exploration of individualism found in earlier westerns such as \textit{Stagecoach} (John Ford, 1939) and \textit{Shane} (George Stevens, 1953), for example. Ray seems to be attempting a social critique that would provide an argument for tolerance and progressive ideals in an era he viewed as repressive and intolerant. Yet as has been demonstrated by Michel Foucault, reading modern society as repressive, particularly regarding sexuality, is actually a misreading. For Foucault the “repressive hypothesis” of power relations is a false configuration that is “in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it ‘repression.’”\textsuperscript{14} Using Emma as a sexually caricatured figure who must shoulder the blame for all society’s ills merely reproduces the power structure Ray thinks he is critiquing. In a similar manner, D. W. Griffith “liberally” condemned those who tried to censor his \textit{Birth of a Nation} for its racism by representing them as prissy female spinsters.
in *Intolerance*. Once again, repression is gendered female, and a political debate is deflected onto gender. Foucault speculates that “there must be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that might be called the speaker’s benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.” Ray is all too eager to place himself in the role of the deliberate transgressor out to foil repression; his extreme revisionism in *Johnny Guitar*—making fun of the idea of the western itself, as if it were below him—demonstrates this. Certainly in 1954 one could be misogynistic and still think himself a liberal, but viewed today the film’s portrayal of Emma seems quite reactionary. The surprise is perhaps that there exists an alternate discourse to that of female hysteria: Vienna’s undemonized manipulation of female power.

Mercedes McCambridge’s performance as Emma enforces this conflation of politics and gender through a mixed use of pop-psychology metaphors. (The 1954 *Time* review called her a “sexological square knot who fondles pistols suggestively and gets unladylike satisfaction from watching a house burn down.”) Emma is clearly the origin of the (significantly all-male) community’s persecution mania, and she is the character the film works to discredit. It is she who whips the men into a frenzy, thus underscoring the men’s own failed masculinity; she spurs them on at every turn to chase after the Dancing Kid and his gang, to banish Vienna from town, and to hang Turkey. Though it may be the community that carries out these deeds, Emma is always to blame for goading the community to follow its worst inclinations. Emma is a half-crazed, pathological caricature. Her facial expressions are excessively dramatized: thick eyebrows persistently raised, nostrils flared, mouth agape, always half-breathless with an airy, high-pitched voice. She is a truly hysterical subject, monomaniacal in her mission to oust Vienna from town. As a female character, Emma is a vehicle well suited to be the carrier of hysteria, a condition historically associated with women. Steven Heath, quoting Freud, has said that “the hysterical will not play the game, misses her identity as a woman: ‘Speaking as a whole,’ writes Freud, ‘hysterical attacks, like hysteria in general, revive a piece of sexual activity in women which existed during their childhood and at that time revealed an essentially masculine character.’” Emma infects the townspeople (all men) with this hysterical quality as though it were a virus, and the only way these men can restore order is by disassociating themselves from her, as they do just before her death. At the end of the film, when Emma and Vienna are about to duel, one of the townspeople says, “Mac, me and the boys have had enough of this killin’.” Mclvers replies, “So have I. It’s their fight, has been all along. Run and tell the others there’ll be no more shootin’.” In this way the infected, hysterical agent (woman) is jettisoned from the all-male community.

Emma is often referred to by the term “puritanical”; screenwriter Yordan labeled her a “puritan,” and many reviewers, including Charney, point to this as a central quality of Emma’s subjectivity, claiming that her “neurotic vengeance vividly embodies a breakdown of Puritan self-restraint.” This term in its common
usage implies that Emma is ultraconservative and prim, anxious to deny all sexuality; using the pejorative “puritan” enacts the repressive hypothesis of power and sexuality. However, I would suggest that Emma is not exactly an asexual character but rather a classic depiction of the pathological lesbian. Indeed, the virus metaphor for Emma’s pathology fits with the characterization of homosexuality in the fifties; as John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman write in their history of American sexuality, homosexuality during the Cold War “took on the form of a contagious disease imperiling the health of anyone who came near it.”20 Thus when the men eject Emma from their society they are ridding themselves not only of a woman but of a homosexual—Communist scapegoating has turned into the scapegoating of yet another generic Other. Though Emma makes isolationist speeches saying that Vienna represents the future of a town “squeezed between barbed wires and fenceposts” to justify her sentiments, the film implies that her motivation for obsessively persecuting Vienna springs from a twisted, thwarted jealousy of Vienna’s sexual relationship with the Dancing Kid, whom she loves but perversely won’t admit to loving. Vienna explains that the Kid “makes her [Emma] feel like a woman, and that frightens her.” Emma is a hodgepodge of sexually aberrant signifiers; her “masculine” qualities—aggressiveness, shortly cropped hair, thick eyebrows, plain, makeupless face—are all stereotypical indicators of lesbianism, along with her pathological attitudes about sexuality, simultaneously decrying sex and yet seeming to need more of it. Her mourning dress also bears an uncanny resemblance to a nun’s habit, another clichéd reference to sexual repressiveness. As one of only two women in the film, Emma is in a sense punished for taking part in the action and not having a male love interest, for not rewarding the viewer with a pleasurable female spectacle for the male gaze. Ray and Yordan meant to indict sexual repressiveness with Emma and thus draw a parallel with societal repressiveness in general, but because this sexual denial is inscribed on the figure of a woman, and because none of the many male characters are punished for their lack of sexuality, the film ultimately replays a patriarchal emphasis on woman as sexual object. Emma’s punishment is thus two-pronged: she is punished for her audacious female leadership, and she is punished for her misdirected “lesbian” sexuality. By infusing Emma’s behavior with a bit of pop-Freudian motivation and by claiming an allegory of anti-McCarthyism, the film tries to claim a liberating agenda for itself, but Emma’s characterization is merely another example of the classical cinema’s masculinist articulation.

Although it is important to acknowledge Johnny Guitar as a lesbian camp classic, it is admittedly somewhat reading against the grain to see Emma as a closet lesbian, since her flaw is primarily a lack of identity mobility. Her two-dimensionality is an easy target for the film to discredit, thus deflecting criticism from the film’s own two-dimensional political spectrum. Emma’s pathology does revolve around an aberrant sexuality, however, and granting that it is acceptable and even necessary to read texts against the grain, her gender problem can thus be analyzed as lesbianism. With this outlook in mind, it is indeed telling that Ray would use a homosexual caricature to deflate the power of McCarthyism, for homosexuals, like
Communists, were another target of the purges of the McCarthy era. D’Emilio and Freedman write that “homosexuals suddenly found themselves labeled a threat to national security and the target of widespread witch-hunts...[in] 1950, the same [year] that Senator Joseph McCarthy initially charged that the Department of State was riddled with Communists...the Senate authorized a formal inquiry into the employment of ‘homosexuals and other moral perverts’ in government...The Cold War against Communism made the problem of homosexuality especially menacing.”21 Ray and Yordan, then, engage in the same homophobic practice as the dreaded McCarthy in their use of Emma as society’s evil incarnate. The film’s “liberal” stance is highly problematic in its simplistic reversal of the power equation; it blindly reproduces the same social prejudice as the “conservative” McCarthyites, albeit under the guise of an alternative ideology. “Male and female homosexuality played to a variety of sexual fears just at a time when an ethic of sexual liberalism had sunk roots into the middle class,” D’Emilio and Freedman write.22 Ray and Yordan are a part of this sexual “liberalism” that is in fact not free from its own form of intolerance. Ray falls decisively short of his self-applauding noble purposes by using contemporary homophobic strategies to discredit Emma. However, Vienna’s character significantly complicates a simple reading of the film as misogynous.

**Masquerade.** While Emma’s problem is her rigidly pathological identity, Vienna’s strength is in her gender mobility. Vienna goes unpunished in the plot as a strong, sexual woman; she is a leader in her own way: quiet, solitary, self-possessed, gaining allies through respect rather than intimidation. Contrary to Leo Charney, I argue that Vienna is the undeniable heroine and focus of the film. The narrative is motivated and propelled by her conflict with Emma, and Vienna maintains the power to choose her own course of action throughout. Vienna and Johnny both are allowed the power to repeatedly mask and change their identities; Vienna changes from pants to dresses, Johnny switches from guitar wearing to gun wielding. Johnny has changed his name, Vienna has changed her profession. Vienna’s identity in particular resists pigeonholing; it fluctuates throughout the film and allows her a greater power than Emma, stuck in a hysterical bell jar. To further complicate the film’s identities, there is also a theme of false identification surrounding other characters. The Dancing Kid and his gang are accused of a holdup they didn’t commit, Vienna is repeatedly accused by the townspeople of masterminding crimes she had nothing to do with, and Turkey, trying to escape hanging, lies that Vienna was a part of the bank robbery he committed. Identity is thus continually in question in *Johnny Guitar*; in effect, the film deconstructs identity and assigns a power to gender fluidity that is unavailable to characters stuck in narrower categories. Vienna’s inscrutability forms a buffer space around her, protecting her individuality from the prying eyes of the conformist crowd. She is able to masquerade as either male or female, as the costume suits her fancy.

Joan Rivière’s notion of the masquerade is therefore useful in analyzing Vienna’s empowered position in the film. “Womanliness” in Rivière’s configuration
is put on as a mask to disguise a female’s “masculine” possession of phallic power. “Womanliness therefore [can] be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she [is] found to possess it.”\(^{23}\) Vienna is in possession of such phallic power: she is financially independent, runs her own saloon, and is the boss of several male employees. She is also in control of her sexual relationships, able to choose for herself which man she wants (the Dancing Kid or Johnny), rather than being chosen by them. She performs the female masquerade, particularly at crucial moments in the plot, to save herself when this visible power becomes construed as a threat by the male community. Most notably, when she puts on a white dress to meet Emma and her angry mob of townspeople Vienna plays at female innocence and decorum. This white dress is not merely white, it glows with luminous spotlessness. Made of layers of sheer, fragile-looking material, its voluminous skirt billows out from her trim waist, exuding placid feminine righteousness. She has chosen to use this dress as a sign of her innocence, along with her solitude and moody piano playing; the excessiveness of this dress clearly indicates Vienna’s self-conscious choice (via the film’s costume designer, Sheila O’Brien) to wear it as a costume, unleashing the significant cultural import of the white dress as a sign of purity. Later, when running from the mob with Johnny, the dress no longer serves its purpose and in fact catches on fire, hindering her progress and emphasizing that the charade of the white dress is no longer needed. At this point Vienna changes into pants. Her pants wearing and her dress wearing are both a drag performance of sorts, but the costumes also have some “truth” value for Vienna since she does embody both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities—she is at home in either outfit. Vienna is willing to “play the game” of female masquerade, unlike Emma, who possesses some power, albeit pathologically inspired, but who is not so careful (or able) to disguise it. “Hysteria is what? failed masquerade,” Steven Heath proposes, describing a situation akin to Emma’s.\(^{24}\) And as Mary Anne Doane puts it in a description applicable to Vienna, “masquerade is anti-hysterical”\(^{25}\) because it creates a space between the self and one’s perception by others, thereby masking desires that others would find aberrant and threatening in a woman. In a sense, then, the masquerade is a necessary defense mechanism for women, a means of maneuvering some power out of a prescribed position of disempowerment.

Judith Butler points out that the masquerade (in Lacan’s analysis, but still applicable here) can be construed as either “performative production of a sexual ontology” or as a “denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy.”\(^{26}\) I would argue that in the case of Vienna, we have the former example of “performative” femininity. Vienna is clearly performing, and she is in control of her desires—particularly for men. Butler’s continuing description of the first understanding of masquerade as “performative” is particularly applicable to Vienna. “The former [understanding] would engage a critical reflection on gender ontology as parodic (de)construction and, perhaps, pursue the mobile possibilities of the slippery distinction between ‘appearing’ and ‘being,’ a radicalization of the ‘co-
medic’ dimension of sexual ontology only partially pursued by Lacan.” In Vienna’s case, repression and denial are not at the core of her masquerade. Her costumes—pants, boots, and a gun when she is “masculine,” dresses, particularly the white one, when she is “feminine”—are so extremely at odds with each other that they do indeed engage a parodic deconstruction of gender. She has another notable costume: the red negligee-like gown she wears when she and Johnny re-affirm their romantic relationship. This is Vienna’s sexy outfit (red, clingy, just as obvious as the white dress), though she remains a fully sexual woman while not wearing the dress as well. Though she is most helpless when in a dress (unable to stop the bank robbery, unable to prevent Turkey’s lynching) and she is most powerful when in pants (the initial confrontation in her saloon, the shootout with Emma), there is a crossover between outfits; for example: she cooks breakfast for Johnny while wearing pants. Each of these costumes enhances qualities Vienna already embodies; they serve as icons in themselves, oversaturated with significance to highlight whatever quality is most opportune at the moment. Vienna is not made to deny her desires; rather, she plays with power relations, always retaining control of her outwardly perceived identity.

Vienna’s masquerade is not only of “womanliness” but of “manliness” as well—though Riviere’s and other discussions of the masquerade do not speak of women masquerading as men since this changes the equation from one of disguising desire out of fear into an appropriation of power for similarly manipulative purposes of disguise. Vienna’s masculine attire at times seems to mask a certain sadness that lies beneath her veneer of phallic power; this sadness shows forth in her reunion with Johnny, when she admits to a deep loneliness, and in her wistful maternal tenderness for Turkey, both while wearing pants and dresses. She is femininely vulnerable, yet at the same time Vienna seems to possess a certain fighting spirit and self-control that looks awkward in a dress, indicating that perhaps she is truly at home in neither costume. In Heath’s words, “The pertinent question remains: what is behind the mask of womanliness?” Butler implies that it is masculinity, but this seems inadequate. Vienna demonstrates the pose that is gender identity, but is there an essential identity beneath this mask? Returning to Riviere, we find an answer: “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.” I suggest that Vienna embodies a certain enigma that is incorrectly represented by either gender mask. It can be argued that Vienna acts out a radical critique of the binary gender construction itself, demonstrating that a full character is inadequately pigeonholed by rigid identities. These identities are the only framework available, however; thus the method of subverting them is to demonstrate their constructedness.

Vienna is validated by Johnny Guitar as a figure of female power in the traditionally male-dominated West; in fact, she is almost superhuman. She has it all, both breasts and a gun, and remains intact even after her saloon has burned down; she is a rugged, tough individual with a solid presence that the film respects—or
does it? Such vehement validation of a female character in fact verges on grotesque parody, particularly since this character is played by Joan Crawford. The film’s camp can be read as either containing or liberating, depending on one’s attitude toward gender play and strategic misreadings. It is possible to read Vienna’s powerful position as undermined by the film’s camp. Pamela Robertson, however, makes a compelling argument that the film’s camp elements work in precisely the opposite direction not to bring about containment but to work in favor of a feminist reading. While it is true that Vienna could be seen as merely inappropriate rather than critically transgressive (the camp-as-containment argument), in Robertson’s critique, camp is the primary force through which “certain marks of excess undermine the film’s narrative strategies of containment.”

Vienna may resemble a campy castrating woman (who, like Emma, could even be pigeonholed as a lesbian because of her possession of phallic power and certain visual clues such as her short hair and her pants wearing), yet it is this very camp excess that undermines the film’s misogynous elements. Camp thus enters into the picture as yet another contradictory force, potentially discrediting Vienna’s position as the film’s heroine yet also allowing space for Vienna’s fluid gender-bending performance of the masquerade. Despite the film’s camp (or, rather, because of it), the film can be seen as mounting a critique of stability and containment on the level of gender, as it tries to do with politics. Johnny Guitar lacks stable gender roles, except in the character of Emma, who is made freakish by the very rigidity of her sexual identity. Vienna’s ostensibly threatening gender play is shown to be a red herring as Emma is discovered to be the real threat; Emma’s real threat of social conformity-gone-hysterical is defused upon her death, leaving Vienna to emerge triumphant, still wearing pants and in possession of her Johnny. Johnny Guitar, then, does allow Vienna to retain heroic status: in a straight reading despite its campy treatment of a conflict between two women, in a camp reading because its camp allows for such transgressive gendering in the first place. The film encodes at least three different attitudes about female gender: Emma is misogynistically portrayed as hysterical, Vienna is celebrated for her female power, and Vienna’s masquerade, the flip-side of the film’s camp, provides the means to this power through the deconstruction of gender identity. I agree with Robertson’s claim that Johnny Guitar is a “fundamentally incoherent text,” for in my argument, this incoherence is what allows for the programming of so many diverse readings.

Johnny, too, is endowed with the ability to change his identity. He embodies the myth of the ex-gunfighter, a western convention, but with a twist: he has changed his name from Johnny Logan to the ridiculous and flamboyant Johnny Guitar, an example of the film’s intentional self-parody. His guitar is a feminizing prop (though he still carries his guns in his saddle bag), and when he first emerges to confront Emma and the angry townspeople in Vienna’s saloon he carries a tiny blue-flowered china teacup in his hand. For a male lead in a western, he is notably inactive throughout the film, mostly standing on the sidelines looking on while Vienna interacts with others. This inaction, along with his guitar, renders Johnny “feminine,” particularly when compared with other male western leads such as
the paradigmatic John Wayne. Johnny’s feminization, along with Vienna’s masculinization, is part of the film’s revisionist stance toward the genre, though here again the film retains a conventional western trope with Johnny’s strident individualism. He rides into town on a horse like a typical western hero, big, strong, and silent, yet he rides with a guitar slung over his shoulder instead of packing a gun.

Vienna berates Johnny for being “gun-crazy,” a code word for violent loss of self-control (like Emma’s) that also implies a too-great fascination with phallic power, or perhaps with the gun/phallus itself. This can be read as Vienna’s desire that her man not be too violent and that he need not be overly masculine. But without stretching the text too much, the term “gun-crazy” could be read as a sign of latent homosexual desire. Christopher Castiglia traces such male homosexual desire in Ray’s subsequent film Rebel Without a Cause (1955). In this film there is an apparent tension surrounding male sexuality located in the adolescent crisis of Jim (James Dean). Jim’s evolving sexual identity is influenced by his two friends, who compete for his attention: the nymphlike Plato (Sal Mineo) and the attractive teenage Judy (Natalie Wood). Homoerotics are thus dramatized in triangular romantic competitions, ultimately resolved through the traditional heterosexual coupling.\(^\text{32}\) Although the homosocial/sexual elements of Rebel are clearly indicated in that film and are not as implied in Johnny Guitar, a strategic misreading of Johnny Guitar as filled with homosexual tensions is helpful in understanding its gender constructions, even if the idea must be highly qualified.

Gender fluctuation is central to Vienna’s character, as we have seen, and Emma’s converse position of gender fixity figures strongly as part of her discrediting as a maniacal dyke figure. Johnny’s own inaction might be understood as misplaced phallic potency: he’s put his gun away and must get it back again by the end. Johnny’s physical appearance is as important as Vienna’s: he is large and oafish-looking, very fair-skinned, always looking like a little boy with messy hair. Johnny’s guitar playing is a comedic parody; he rarely picks up his instrument, and when he does it is only briefly to play a weepy sad song and then some absurdly dramatic “Spanish” chords. These examples indicate Johnny’s participation in a male masquerade. Gaylyn Studlar states that “the tantalizing pleasures of the masquerade depend on the mobility of desire and the pleasurable exchange of identity. Males as well as females participate in masquerade that delays consummation through the changing spectacle of mobile desire.”\(^\text{33}\) Johnny’s participation in the game of identity mobility parallels Vienna’s and is equally centered on gender bending. These constructions allow the film to explore gender slippage while still upholding the traditional heteronormative understanding of sexual relationships, an understanding also at play in Rebel. However, Johnny is not completely feminized, nor is Vienna characterized as unhealthy for her androgyny; they are clearly sexually involved, and there is no ambivalence on Johnny’s part about his attraction to Vienna. He demonstrates his possession of Vienna with his bantering with the Kid and with his body movements, as when he fastens Vienna’s belt for her in front of the Kid. Reading the film as a latent homosexual text is therefore only
partially accurate, though in its explorations of gender it is perhaps a foretaste of things to come in Rebel.

Despite her gender—or more accurately because her gender is not static but floating, both "feminine" and "masculine"—Vienna is allowed to stand as a self-sufficient individualistic western hero. Vienna is certainly not a depiction of the female as lack, nor is she entirely a castrating woman. She has phallic presence and is unable to be possessed unless she allows it. At the same time, however, this presence is a spectacle. Her male saloon employees make a point of commenting on this unusual gender behavior. Sam says, in a nearly direct address to the camera and the viewer: "Never seen a woman who was more a man. She thinks like one, acts like one, and sometimes makes me feel like I’m not." Tom speaks similarly of Vienna: “I never believed I’d end my years workin’ for a woman . . . and likin’ it!” The female image, it seems, can never escape its function as spectacle; here it is Vienna’s very power that makes her visually fascinating. Despite the many point-of-view shots the film grants her, Vienna’s female heroism could be interpreted as mere spectacle, a function of the film’s campiness and overt revisionism. Indeed, the duel staged at the end of the film between women instead of men lacks the dramatic veracity of a typical western—this stand-off mimics a catfight more than it does a shootout. The duel takes place at the Kid’s hideout, which itself resembles a 1950s ranch home more than it does an outlaw’s lair, perched atop a mountainous rock and silhouetted against the blue sky. The women fight it out on the porch of this domestic, homelike space. While Emma creeps up the hill to Vienna on the porch, Mclvers and the townspeople watch, along with Johnny and the Kid, as the nondiegetic dramatic string music builds. When Emma reaches the porch there is a pause; the music stops momentarily and Vienna and Emma each get a quick medium camera shot. The women face each other on the porch, above the men watching them from below as if they were on a stage. Then there are three brief shots of the men watching, first Mclvers, next Johnny, then the Kid, each accompanied by a rising horn note on the soundtrack as a counterpoint to their shot. Emma shoots Vienna in the arm, and Vienna falls down limply backward onto the planks of the porch. Emma, crazy with rage, begins shooting at everybody, landing a bullet in the Kid’s forehead. Vienna finally shoots her from where she lies wounded on the floor, and Emma falls dramatically off the porch, her black, witchlike skirt swishing around her, rolling down the hill face down into a stream. This spectacle of two women fighting can be compared with the male-oriented lesbian sex scenes of much straight pornography, particularly in the extent to which it is staged for the men watching from within the diegesis. The scene’s violence is the consummation of the conflict between Emma and Vienna, which has hinged on sexuality all along. Pamela Robertson states that though Emma’s activities are supposedly motivated by a repressed desire for the Dancing Kid, “she directs all her manic energy and enmity toward Crawford’s Vienna. Perhaps it is not a dancing kid but a dancing lady whom Emma desires.” This shootout is a classic moment of the female spectacle and can certainly be interpreted as
undermining any straight-faced female heroism. However, I maintain that Vienna does emerge triumphantly affirmed by the narrative, and her performance of spectacle (as demonstrated by the masquerade) has all along been her means to maintain power. Though the shootout is a different kind of performance, it does not necessarily undermine the affirmation of Vienna’s discourse.

Vienna may be a heroic female figure, but the question remains whether the film actually articulates any female subjectivity. As Emma’s characterization demonstrates, *Johnny Guitar* does not have an overtly feminist agenda, and the staging of the female shootout only underscores this point. However, because Vienna is the hero of the film, the spectator identifies with her as the protagonist, despite the film’s title. Peggy Lee’s song at the film’s close reasserts Vienna’s presence over Johnny’s: “There was never a man like my Johnny, like the one they call Johnny Guitar.” These words, sung by a female voice, assert Vienna’s point of view, as if the entire film has just been narrated by her. Johnny is positioned as the object of the song; he is Vienna’s possession, “*my* Johnny,” hers to marvel at. The song, like the rest of the film, is also ironic: pop music vocals enter the film’s western environment as if by mistake from a teen flick or melodrama. *Johnny Guitar* is intentionally misnamed—the male lead is not the active focus of the film and even disappears altogether for a time after Vienna pays him off. This title is yet another facet of the film’s revisionism, a revisionism so thorough and yet so contradictory that the film nearly falls apart at times—yet it is all the more intriguing for that incoherence.

Though I maintain that *Johnny Guitar* has the ability to support any critic’s most expedient reading, this of course should not deter us from yet drawing conclusions. I argue that gender mobility, then, is the key to understanding *Johnny Guitar*. The film engages in a critique of identity through its use of the masquerade to powerfully illuminate the workings of the gendered power imbalance. To reiterate Riviere once again, there is no distinction between “genuine womanliness and the masquerade . . . whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”35 It is *Johnny Guitar*’s strength and innovation that it recognizes the constructedness of gender in similar de-essentializing terms and rewards the characters that utilize this knowledge to their own benefit. *Johnny Guitar* points straight to the constructed spectacle of masquerade as a mechanism of power and fantasy. The masquerade is at once a role-playing game that masks and heightens desire and a means to maintaining phallic power otherwise unavailable to marginalized figures such as women and “outlaws.”

**Notes**

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1. *New Yorker*, June 5, 1954, 65; *Time*, June 14, 1954, 109; *Commonweal*, June 18, 1954, 270; *Variety*, May 5, 1954, 6; this is just a small sample of the remarkably unisonous (and today, often-quoted) first reviews of the film.
2. Though genre is still a complex and vexing issue, most film scholars can at least agree that it works on just such revisionist terms, operating in cycles of repetition and similarity but always with a difference in order to remain compelling and apparently new. What remains intriguing about genre is the degree of difference within each individual film, and how this degree of difference within repetition reflects a political subconscious. See Christine Gledhill’s chapters on “Genre” and “The Western” in The Cinema Book, ed. Pam Cook (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 58–72, for a useful overview and bibliography of genre criticism. Also see Film Genre Reader, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), especially Rick Altman’s “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” which provides one model for complicating certain simplistic oppositions genre revisionism might tempt us to make.


12. Ibid., 50.


15. For one account of this, see Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. chaps. 5 and 6.


22. Ibid., 294.


27. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 192.