
Violent Housekeepers: Rewriting Domesticity in *Riders of the Purple Sage*

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What role does the domestic purview—creating and maintaining a home—play in westerns? Why do westerns include so many male housekeepers? To begin thinking about these questions, let us consider Jane Tompkins' claim in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), that formula westerns arose to challenge the dominance of female-authored domestic fiction:

The Western answers the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture.... If the Western deliberately rejects evangelical Protestantism and pointedly repudiates the cult of domesticity, it is because it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for those ideals. (39)

Tompkins argues that, in particular, Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) "openly dramatizes ... the destruction of female authority." She perceives the struggles between the characters of Lassiter and Jane as emblematic of the novel's conflict between the masculine world of violence and the feminine world of Christianity and domesticity, and maintains that Lassiter's world triumphs when Jane is convinced of the need to kill (40).

Along with Annette Kolodny's *The Land Before Her* (1984) and Patricia Limerick Nelson's *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), *West of Everything* is one of the few studies of western texts and discourse known to a general audience of Americanists. In the field of western literature itself, the book has made Tompkins remarkably notable. She is linked with Lee Mitchell and Richard Slotkin as an important theorist of western culture and popular westerns (Campbell 12; Cawelti 886). Krista Comer, in limning a history of feminist western criticism, begins with Kolodny, continues with Melody Graulich, and ends "finally" with Tompkins (22). Her text's renown derives both from Tompkins' own reputation and the exciting connections she makes between formula westerns and sentimental novels.

The prominence of *West of Everything* makes it important, therefore, to point out that its central thesis is not wrong but somewhat askew. Westerns do subordi-

nate or erase women and they do privilege violence. What they do not do, however, is “exclud[e] everything domestic from [their] worldview” (132). On the contrary, frequently they valorize domesticity: but in their case, domesticity that has been appropriated from women and that is linked with violence. Richard Slotkin uses *Riders of the Purple Sage* to support his thesis that westerns, like so many American texts, “represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and regeneration through violence” (12). Grey’s novel does indeed accord with Slotkin’s argument. The regeneration through violence that it portrays, however, occurs via domesticity. Such a turn allows white men to skirt savagery while on the road to becoming supermen.

Riders of the Purple Sage, as Slotkin’s and Tompkins’ use of the text indicates, has an important place in western literary studies. The text has long been central to both popular and critical understandings of what the western is, and Mitchell maintains that Grey “all but single-handedly confirmed the shape of a powerful new narrative form” (*Westerns* 123). One of the best-selling westerns ever, on first appearance *Riders* sold over a million copies, by 1938 twenty-seven million, and by 1968 forty million (Mitchell, “White Slaves” 235-36; Blaha 949). As testament to its continuing name familiarity, a contemporary anthology reworks the title into *Writers of the Purple Sage*. Its repute and influence, aided by its more than usual complexity, make the text loom large in most scholarly discussions of westerns. Such distinction is self-sustaining, as critics seek to complement or contest previous readings. *Riders* has become a kind of convenient shorthand both to discuss Grey’s *œuvre* and, more important, to discuss early aspects of the genre.

The book describes the attempts of Jane Withersteen, daughter of a wealthy Mormon polygamist, to prevent the outlaw gunman Lassiter from killing the Mormon church leaders he blames for his sister Milly’s kidnapping and death. These same Mormons are out to destroy Jane’s ranch due to her refusal to marry into the church and her friendship with Bern Venters, a Gentile cowboy. In a subplot that grows to dominate the text, Venters shoots the infamous Masked Rider, accomplice to the rustling outlaw Oldring. The wounded man turns out to be a young woman and, incidentally, Milly’s long-lost daughter and Lassiter’s niece Bess. To provide a place for Bess to convalesce, Venters labors to build a home for the two of them in the narrow canyon of Surprise Valley. The canyon, accidentally discovered by Venters, can be gained only through one steep passage guarded by the massive, teetering “Balancing Rock.” When Bess regains her health, she and Venters make a run for Venters’ childhood home of Illinois. At the same time,

Lassiter and Jane, along with the orphan child Fay, flee towards Surprise Valley to save themselves from the bloodthirsty Mormons close on their heels; along the way the two couples meet and exchange steeds. Once arrived, Jane urges Lassiter to “roll the rock!” The act both destroys their pursuers and locks the pair “forever” in isolation within the valley—although (a point usually overlooked by critics) Grey suggests that ten years hence Bess and Bern will return with rope ladders to scale its walls and join the other couple.

Riders of the Purple Sage spotlights male characters who, rather than repudiating the domestic culture historically associated with women, become increasingly active in the domestic sphere and who appropriate control of the domestic from women through demonstrating the necessary efficacy of violence. Instead of resisting the power of women homemakers, the men themselves become homemakers, albeit often homemakers out of doors. Venters becomes a man by virtue of making a home for Bess in a place that already has a long domestic history of cliff dwellers. After transforming Jane’s ranch into a “real home,” Lassiter seals himself, Jane, and Fay into Surprise Valley. There they will resume the idyllic homesteading initiated by Venters. Ten years in the future, when Bess and Venters succeed in returning to Surprise Valley, all five erstwhile loners and outcasts will be joined to form a tiny family headed by Lassiter, a.k.a. “Uncle Jim”: “I reckon I’m Milly’s brother, an’ your uncle! . . . Uncle Jim! Ain’t that fine?” (306).

Michael Kimmel argues in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* that by the end of the nineteenth century, white middle-class men were finding the experience of separate spheres increasingly painful yet feared the emasculation that the home seemed to threaten: “Men were excluded from domestic life, unable to experience the love, nurture, and repose that the home supposedly represented. How could a man return to the home without feeling like a wimp?” (158-159). Bret Harte, writing in the mid-1800s, offered a semi-acceptable way for men to make such a return in his well-known stories of mining camp life. One strand of American discourse set up an opposition between the subdued nature of life in the city and the rigor of life on the frontier: “Let one remain in a quiet city, playing the milksop . . . leading an unambitious namby-pamby life, . . . while the other goes out on the frontier, runs his chance in encounters with wild animals, finds that to make his way he must take his life in his hands, and assert his rights, if necessary with deadly weapons” (Kimmel 88).¹ Harte, however, showed that frontier life could include quiet, “namby-pamby” aspects without compromising virility. Although Harte maintained his distance from his characters through a treatment both sentimental and comic, the miners’ rough lives and manners make them indisputably “masculine” in stories such as “Luck of Roaring Camp,” which por-

trays the domesticating effect of an orphaned infant, or “Tennessee’s Pardner.” As a character in the former remarks, “There’s a street up there in ‘Roaring’ that would lay over any street in Red Dog. They’ve got vines and flowers round their houses, and they wash themselves twice a day. But they’re mighty rough on strangers” (*Luck of Roaring Camp* 20).

Popular understanding of westerns does not include home-centered narratives. On the other hand, scholars seem to find their domestic bent too obvious to merit discussion. Arthur Kimball alludes to the “sugary domesticity” of Grey’s work only in passing (86), as does Mitchell to that of Wister and Grey (“White Slaves” 245). Perhaps because they appear so natural, no attention has been paid to the male housekeepers with whom westerns are replete. What scene could seem more “western” to us than that of the cowboy making his tidy camp, cozily boiling coffee and frying bacon?

Ernest Thompson Seton, founder of the Boy Scouts of America, defensively maintained that frontier men themselves viewed their involvement in domestic affairs ironically: “the home life of those frontier days was nearly ideal; and so sanely adjusted that it may have valuable lessons for those who are wrestling with modern problems of living. . . . Those who cooked and sewed did so in an atmosphere of fun and frolic” (Kimmel 170). More deflating are the mid-nineteenth-century lithographs portraying the home life of same-sex mining couples, reproduced in Blake Allmendinger’s *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature* (68-70), which exaggerate Harte’s portrayal of the comic aspects of male homosocial domesticity (titled “A Sundays Amusements,” “Occupation for Rainy Days,” “A Daily Pleasure,” “A Pleasant Surprise,” and “The Miners Lamentations”). Yet when frontier violence was attended not by homosocial but heterosexual domesticity, it appears to have lost all of its comic register, and thus lent itself to Grey’s earnestness.

In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, the turn from homosociality to heterosexuality is figured by Venters’ discovery that the “boy” he cares for, Oldring’s masked Rider, is really a girl. Such a turn justifies men’s increasing commitment to domestic affairs, and their heterosexual housekeeping is much more highly developed than that of the male “pardners” and their camps so often parodied or romanticized. The confluence of masculine violence and masculine domesticity that *Riders* represents offers men a highly satisfying route to make Kimmel’s return to the house. At the same time, even while their violent acts sanction such a return, the connection between these acts and the maintenance of a proper heterosexual home renders violence itself eminently respectable, a necessary component of Anglo-Saxon civilization.

Such a contrast is reflected in a dominant turn-of-the-century conception of masculinity in which, as Gail Bederman argues, “middle-class white men simultaneously construct[ed] powerful manhood in terms of both ‘civilized manliness’ and ‘primitive masculinity’” (23). That the men in Grey’s novel are drawn to the home demonstrates their civilized instincts, whereas the violence that accompanies this transition maintains their masculinity. Moreover, this move to the home actually expands the scope of male power. The home, just like the realm of public affairs, is now a site ruled by men. The “femininity” of the home itself, however, remains intact: the home continues to be a haven of peace and safety and nurture. Even though violence triggers housekeeping, and housekeeping engenders more violence, the spheres remain separate from each other. Significantly, the text’s climactic act of violence, Lassiter’s rolling of the stone, takes effect in the valley below the canyon where the two couples will live, thus preserving the sanctity of the domestic milieu.

In one of the earliest scenes in the novel, Jane gives a womanly shudder over the sound of coyotes and the thought of Venters sleeping among them. She says to him, “at night, sometimes, when I lie awake, listening to the long mourn or breaking bark or wild howl, I think of you asleep somewhere in the sage, and my heart aches. Just think! Men like Lassiter and you have no home, no comfort, no rest, no place to lay your weary heads” (23). In true cowboy fashion, Venters responds, “Jane, you couldn’t listen to sweeter music, nor could I have a better bed” (23). However, seemingly unaware of the contradictions between Venters’ words and his emotions, Grey goes on to reveal that for Venters the outdoors does not make a home, and that he finds his homelessness excruciating. Outside of a larger social and labor network, solitude is intolerable: “As a rider guarding the herd he had never thought of the night’s wildness and loneliness; as an outcast, now when the full silence set in and the deep darkness, and trains of radiant stars shone cold and calm, he lay with an ache in his heart. For a year he had lived as a black fox, driven from his kind. He longed for the sound of a voice, the touch of a hand” (44). Contrast this description of Venters with the description of his horse immediately following: “What [Wrangle] wanted was to be free of mules and burros and steers, to roll in dust-patches, and then to run down the wide, open, windy sage-plains, and at night browse and sleep in the cool wet grass of a spring-hole. Jerd knew the sorrel when he said of him: ‘Wait till he smells the sage!’” (45).² Although Wrangle loves to be alone on the plains far from degraded society, Venters is miserable. Feeling as he does, it is no wonder that early on he tells Lassiter, “I want to get out of Utah. I’ve a mother living in Illinois. I want to go home” (30).

Despite Venters' preoccupation with his mother's home back east, in *Riders of the Purple Sage* and many of his other texts, Grey does not set up his women characters as western outsiders, as the "east" in relation to the "west" of their men. Contrary, perhaps, to readerly expectation, Grey portrays Jane and Bess as deeply tied to the land, whereas both Lassiter and Venters are in the West only incidentally. Eight years of wandering have led Venters to Utah, and he wants out. Lassiter, born in Missouri and still distinctive for his Texan accent, has come to Utah only to take revenge. In contrast, Jane is both personally and historically rooted in the place, her family having lived there for generations. When urged to go elsewhere, she exclaims, "I'll never leave Utah.... I'll never leave these purple slopes I know so well" (272). Grey identifies Jane with the landscape, stating that "She herself was of the sage" (163) and resembled the "wild, austere" land (19). Likewise, Bess, "sweeter'n the sage" (226), "fitted harmoniously into that wonderful setting; she was like Surprise Valley—wild and beautiful" (164). Raised in Oldring's remote canyon, Bess negotiates the land on horseback better than anyone living and her wild rides have made her a local legend.³ She regrets leaving Utah at Venters' behest and looks forward only to their return, exclaiming "Oh! Bern! ... But look! The sun is setting on the sage—the last time for us till we dare come again to the Utah border. Ten years! Oh, Bern, look, so you will never forget!" Whereas Grey compares women to the rampant native sage that lends the book its title, he compares men to the stunted trees that barely survive: "This country was hard on trees—and men" (96).

It is primarily through Venters that Grey demonstrates how hard the country could be, in that its wildness appears to deny the men who inhabit it all homely comforts. When we first meet Venters, he has been living alone on the plains for over a year. Nevertheless, his camp is still scarcely a camp, marked only by his saddle, pack, sleeping dog, and discomfort. Despite the months spent sleeping out, Venters has not taken such rudimentary steps as stockpiling coffee or securing cookware, much less erecting any sort of shelter. The necessity of keeping himself hidden does not account for this lack of basic equipment: as a reflection of his inner misery, Venters seems intent on keeping himself as uncomfortable as possible. The housekeeping that he does do is perfunctory and joyless, described by Grey in the very opposite of his usual purple prose: Venters, on arising, "stretched his cramped body, and then, gathering together bunches of dead sage sticks, he lighted a fire. Strips of dried beef held to the blaze for a moment served him and the dogs. He drank from a canteen. There was nothing else in his outfit; he had grown used to a scant fare. Then he sat over the fire, palms outspread, and waited" (27).

Once Venters takes on caring for Bess after wounding her, though, homemaking becomes his chief pursuit and chief pleasure—more so, it seems, than Bess herself. Although his long-term goal to return to Illinois remains unchanged, Venters' immediate energies are directed not just towards nursing Bess but towards making a comfortable place to live. All, ostensibly, is for her: "I intend to work—to make a home for you here" (195). His first act of violence initiates his first act of homemaking, as immediately after shooting Bess he builds her a "little shack" of spruce boughs (56), already a remarkably more substantial camp than that which he had devised for himself. The next morning, while hunting a rabbit for Bess, Venters stumbles upon Surprise Valley. There his homemaking begins in earnest. The caves in the cliffs "were clean, dry, roomy. He cut spruce boughs and made a bed in the largest cave and laid [sic] the girl there" (110). Grey pleausrably details Venters' subsequent efforts: "he fitted up the little cave adjoining the girls' room for his own comfort and use. His next work was to build a fireplace of stones and to gather a store of wood. That done, he spilled the contents of his saddlebags upon the grass and took stock. His outfit consisted of a small-handled axe, a hunting knife, a large number of cartridges for rifle or revolver, a tin plate, a cup, and a fork and spoon, a quantity of dried beef and dried fruits, and small canvas bags containing tea, sugar, salt and pepper" (113). The camp brings Venters "peculiar satisfaction": "Upon returning to camp he set about getting his supper at ease, around a fine fire, without hurry or fear of discovery.... He caught himself often, as he kept busy round the camp-fire, stopping to glance at the quiet form in the cave, and at the dogs stretched cozily near him, and then out across the beautiful valley" (116). Venters resolves, long after he has been shown that Surprise Valley meets all their needs and instigated only by Bess' teasing remark that she was tired of game, that "he must go to Cottonwoods; he must bring supplies back to Surprise Valley; he must cultivate the soil and raise corn and stock" (191). Throughout almost the length of the text, Venters remains preoccupied with "improving Surprise Valley as a place to live in" (134). At the novel's opening, Venters had longed to return to his mother's home in the East. The plan delayed, he focuses instead on making his own home in the West.

Bess, in marked contrast to Venters, seems to have no ideas about or interest in home improvement. Grey nevertheless commandeers her for his endorsement of domesticity by showing that she, too, savors the pleasures of home far more than wilder joys. Venters' undertaking repeats Bess' history: Venters is not the first violent housekeeper to have cared for Bess. As Oldring's Masked Rider, Bess did not enjoy "riding like the wind" since she "never had time to stop for anything." Rather, what she preferred was being held in Oldring's cabin as a virtual prisoner:

“As long as I can remember I’ve been locked up there at times, and those times were the only happy ones I ever had. It’s a big cabin high up on a cliff, and I could look out. Then I had dogs and pets I had tamed, and books. There was a spring inside, and food stored, and the men brought me fresh meat. Once I was there one whole winter” (130). The seemingly most “western” of frontier figures—cattle rustlers and cowboys—create and maintain Bess’ domestic world, which governs her rather than being governed by her. On first discovering Surprise Valley, Venters had remarked, “I’ve gone Oldring one better” (101), referring to Surprise Valley’s even greater seclusion than Oldring’s Deception Valley. He also goes Oldring “one better” in his homemaking: Oldring had provided Bess merely a cabin, whereas Venters strives for an entire homestead.

Venters and Oldring are both preceded by a much older group of canyon home-makers, the cliff-dwellers. By locating Venters’ burst of domestic bustle in Surprise Valley, Grey suggests that Venters’ new focus derives as much from his proximity to the cliff-dwellers as from caring for Bess. Indeed, their deserted homes provide the actual “pots and crocks” that Venters steals to stock his new kitchen (129). Despite the novel’s explicit depiction of Indians as an emblem of loneliness and isolation—Grey describes Venters, prior to meeting Bess, as “skulk[ing] about Jane’s home, gripping a gun stealthily as an Indian, a man without place or people or purpose” (26)—the erstwhile community of cliff-dwellers represents the opposite of Venters’ loneliness on the sage. In the text real Indians, or at the least long since vanished Indians, compose a community where people live closely vertically rather than horizontally, keeping their population dense by expanding up instead of out into the valley below and plains beyond.⁴ The cliff dwellers’ carefully stocked and defended homes make Venters realize that life is about relationships, just as do his own forays into homebuilding: “We can’t be any higher in the things for which life is lived at all. . . . relationship [sic], friendship—love” (191). With these words, Venters mouths a central tenet of nineteenth-century domestic ideology.⁵

The novel’s depiction of women struggling to reform their men is also a theme familiar from domestic novels. Discussing her attempt to divest him of his guns, Jane explains to Lassiter, “I wanted you to care for me so that I could influence you” (155). Tompkins perceives Jane’s dramatic failure as symbolizing the triumph of a masculine world. Yet although Jane’s personal efforts do not succeed—and indeed, finally it is at her own behest that Lassiter crushes their Mormon pursuers—simply caring for women profoundly changes the men. Venters tells Bess, “I’m sure helping you will help me, for I was sick in mind. There’s something now for me to do. And if I can win back your strength—then get you away, out of this

wild country—help you somehow to a happier life—just think how good that'll be for me!" (123). He similarly reflects, "How much better I am for what has come to me!" (192-193).

This altruism appears oddly selfish. Venters is primarily concerned with "how good" his work for Bess will be for himself, and expects Bess to get as excited as he in considering the prospect. He thus offers a masculine version of the selfless nineteenth-century angel in the house: his work, rather than self-effacing labor for family, is of value for his own sake. Coincident with this narrative of domestic initiation into adulthood, moreover, the novel portrays Venters as "better" through portraying him as increasingly violent. Before securing himself a home, Venters had willingly given up his guns to Jane; previous to encountering the rustlers and shooting in self-defense, he had never killed a man. Once he begins his homemaking, however, Venters seems to believe it his duty to embrace bloodshed. In the name of Bess' honor, he goes so far as to kill Oldring, whom Bess believes to be her father and whom she tells Venters she loves.⁶ In classic Slotkin fashion, Venters is regenerated through violence, but with him violence plays out as a byproduct of homemaking.

This same confluence of domesticity and violence occurs with Jane and Lassiter. In the case of this couple, it is Lassiter who remains relatively unchanged while Jane learns both the necessity of bloodshed and what constitutes a real home. Urged on by Jane, at the text's climax Lassiter "roll[s] the rock" that simultaneously crushes the Mormons whom Jane had been trying to protect, seals the canyon, and inaugurates Lassiter and Jane's cloistered life in the home established by Venters. Venters believes that Bess metaphorically commands his violence; that in order to care for her properly, he must kill. From Lassiter, Jane literally commands violence. By doing so, she thereby realizes his long-held dream to kill those he holds responsible for his sister's death.

Again, this destructive act takes effect outside the domestic purview: the rock reaches the Mormons "beneath" the valley, thus preserving the domestic arena from the taint of bloodshed. It is shown, however, as following directly upon Lassiter's own involvement in domestic affairs. Prior to this climax, even as Venters and Bess had been embarking on home life together, so had Lassiter and Jane. After two lonely decades of tracking, Lassiter had found himself drawn to Jane's house, lured by the orphan child Jane was raising: "it was owing to Fay's presence that Jane Withersteen came to see more of Lassiter. The rider had for the most part kept to the sage. . . . Fay, however, captured Lassiter the moment he first laid eyes on her" (140). Grey goes on to describe tender family scenes: "In the evening, [Lassiter] played with the child at an infinite variety of games she invented, and

then, oftener than not, he accepted Jane's invitation to supper.... Lassiter began to show he felt at home there" (144). Lassiter appears happy and comfortable in this indoor community of women, composed not only of Fay and Jane but also Fay's dying mother and Jane's "women," her numerous female servants. Of Lassiter, Grey states, "He was always at hand to help, and it was [Jane's] fortune to learn that his boast of being awkward around women had its root in humility and was not true." Indeed, when it comes to "women's work," Lassiter is more apt than women themselves: "His great, brown hands were skilled in a multiplicity of ways which a woman might have envied. He shared Jane's work, and was of especial help to her in nursing Mrs. Larkin" (163).

Initially "captured" by this female world, Lassiter increasingly comes to influence it. In contrast to Lassiter, it is Jane who lacks traditional female skills. Although she has an apparent advantage over the rootless Lassiter in having inherited her once stable family household, Jane has fewer homing instincts than he. Fay and Lassiter's presence on the ranch makes her realize that "It had never been a real home" and that her rigid insistence on cleanliness was misguided. It takes her longer to realize that at an additional level her home is not homey: although Lassiter quickly discerned that her servants spied on her, Jane is incredulous. In comparison to Venters' and Lassiter's dexterity, Bess is indifferent to homemaking, and Jane simply not good at it. This is not to say that Jane and Bess are negligible figures on Grey's domestic canvas. On the contrary, they are crucial in that they trigger their men into domestic communal life by virtue, it appears, of their very ineffectuality.

The plot of *Riders of the Purple Sage* revolves around people coming together rather than remaining apart. That Grey casts the Mormon patriarchy as the enemy, a vast social network pitted against hapless individuals like Venters and Jane, makes for an easy reading of the text as valorizing individuality over community in what we may consider to be stereotypical western fashion. But the text actually does quite the opposite. Lassiter and Venters resist the Mormon community only to form a tiny new community from five erstwhile isolates: Venters the "black fox" outcast, Lassiter the lone gunman, Jane the rebel Mormon daughter, Bess the mysterious Masked Rider, and Fay the orphan Gentile.

The *Riders* community of single male-female units, even more than to white male homosociality, stands in favorable contrast both to modern Indian society, represented by the lone skulking Indian male invoked at the text's beginning, and, much more explicitly, to domineering Mormon society. Like the Mormons', Lassiter's community is still controlled by men and is still upheld through violence, but unlike theirs it brings men and women together. Offering lip-service to

“woman’s word as law” (10), it is vastly more heterosexual than the Mormon community, which Grey represents as subscribing to the ideology of separate spheres. In the novel, we never actually see a Mormon man and woman together: the men are always out stirring up trouble, whereas the women are in the house spying or counseling forbearance. For his Gentile characters, in contrast, Grey urges gender integration, along the way exposing Jane’s former all-female household as a nest of deception.

The men need women in order to become men, and the women need men in order to become women. Through Venters’ homesteading, Venters grows from a boy to a man and Bess from a boy to a woman. Bess’ words show that her transformation has deeper roots than the loss of her boyish figure and her role as Oldring’s Masked Rider: “I’ve discovered myself—too. I’m young—I’m alive—I’m so full—oh! I’m a woman!” (196).⁷ Making a home with Lassiter, likewise, marks the end of Jane’s feisty girlhood, and Lassiter himself becomes domesticated. In contrast to the ways in which men and women need each other, those of the same sex are not interdependent and, indeed, interact with each other only minimally. Venters and Lassiter are no tightly bonded “pardners.” Instead, Lassiter is a comfortable father figure to Venters and by the text’s end has taken to calling him son. Similarly, with Jane as “Uncle Jim’s” mate and friend of the girl’s mother, Jane and Bess make a very uncharged aunt and niece duo. In Grey’s text, men and women definitively do not inhabit separate spheres, and perhaps it is their comingling more than anything else that signals its divergence from domestic novels. Men take over the traditional domain of women and their autonomy within it, and in doing so erode homosocial bonds and privilege heterosexual ones. Lee Mitchell argues that although their answers vary decade by decade, the central question westerns ask is “What does it mean to be a man?” (*Westerns* 152). *Riders of the Purple Sage* suggests that in early westerns, to be a man means to be violent and a housekeeper—although not both at the same time.

Grey’s text may have offered solace to his male readers, in presenting an acceptable way to return the house that arguably one was not expected to take literally, to the extent of bloodshed: his text suggests that the masculinity of the housekeeping male is preserved so long as he be rugged, robust, and dexterous enough, as attuned to the outdoor world as the indoor. That Grey published many of his early novels in *McCall’s* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* (including *Riders*), and in his first decades of publishing had a largely female readership, thickens the plot (Mitchell, “White Slaves” 236; Bloodworth 14).⁸ Rather than just proffering male readers an alternative mode of masculinity, was Grey also catering to women’s desires by portraying gunfighters as devoted to the home? Emphasizing the con-

nections as well as the differences between male western and female domestic writers is one response to Paul R. Petrie's challenge, that we upset "a chronologically and gender-divided conception of 19th-century American literary history by reading male and female, 'realist' and 'sentimentalist' authors as participants in a unified literary/cultural field or fields." His comments applying as much to so-called formula genres as to more canonical realism, Petrie contends that we need to cross "the 'great divide' in American literary history."⁹ To note the convergence of violence, domesticity, and idealized masculinity in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, in which men take over a conventionally female sphere even as they depend upon women to become real men and to find their niche in the West, is to make one such crossing. *Riders of the Purple Sage*, by suggesting that early westerns rewrite rather than overturn domestic narratives, invites us to search for these rewritings not just in the era's westerns, but also in its newly emerging genres of "realist," "red-blooded," and "hard-boiled" fiction. How much might such turn-of-the-century developments owe to nineteenth-century domestic fictionist forebears?

A brief reading of another influential masculinist text may not so much answer this question as it may suggest the links between domestic novels, westerns, and other popular genres, as well as point to the pervasiveness of turn-of-the-century images of the violent, housekeeping male hero. As a best-selling adventure text highlighting both the violence and housekeeping of its male protagonists, *Riders of the Purple Sage* is complemented by Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, which was also first published in 1912. *Tarzan's* readership and long-term cultural impact rivals that of *Riders*, as Bederman's brief history shows: "*Tarzan of the Apes* was one of the best-selling novels of the early-twentieth century. After appearing in *All Story* magazine in 1912, it ran serially in at least eight major metropolitan newspapers. In book form, it was published in 1914 and sold 750,000 copies by 1934. It spawned twenty-seven sequels and forty-five movie versions" (Bederman 219). Bederman argues that the figure of Tarzan, as both Lord Greystoke and King of the Apes, is a salient illustration of her thesis, that turn-of-the-century hegemonic ideals of masculinity stemmed from the notion of white civilized supremacy twinned with primitive savagery. Possibly inspired by accounts of Theodore Roosevelt's African safari, Tarzan's links to popular westerns are manifest in its portrayal of the efforts of an Anglo-Saxon hero to vanquish his degraded foes as well as contend with a wild environment.

Tarzan, of course, is set in the African jungle. Yet throughout almost the length of the text, Burroughs contrasts the jungle to the one-room cabin in which the white characters, Tarzan excepted, spend much of their time ensconced in refuge from the lions and apes outside. The cabin was built by Tarzan's father Clayton

after he and his wife were cast ashore by mutineering seamen. Clayton, “the type of Englishman that one likes best to associate with the noblest monuments of historic achievement upon a thousand victorious battlefields—a strong, virile man” (2), constructed the house with care over the length of a month; likewise, Burroughs himself spends over a page detailing its building in his brief chronicle of the pair’s life in the jungle. Once Clayton finishes the house, at first his sole occupation is the killing of animals for self-defense and meat. Eventually, however, a new interest comes to supplement his shooting:

Long since had he given up any hope of rescue, except through accident. With unremitting zeal he had worked to beautify the interior of the cabin. Skins of lion and panther covered the floor. Cupboards and bookcases lined the walls. Odd vases made by his own hand from the clay of the region held beautiful tropical flowers. Curtains of grass and bamboo covered the windows, and, most arduous task of all, with his meager assortment of tools he had fashioned lumber to neatly seal the walls and ceiling and lay a smooth floor within the cabin. That he had been able to turn his hands at all to such unaccustomed labor was a source of mild wonder to him. But he loved the work because it was for her and the tiny life that had come to cheer them. (24)

This description of Clayton’s interest in “beautifying” his cabin, as opposed merely to constructing it, occurs immediately following the description of his wife’s loss of her sanity. Now that is impossible for his wife to perform a domestic role (not that she ever was shown performing it, or, indeed, shown doing much of anything at all), the text can now portray Clayton as taking it on. Clayton’s domestic pursuits, although not acceptable in his home country of England and startling even to himself, are sanctioned by his heroic and violent labors outside the home. Even his penchant for displaying flowers appears manly in the context of his gathering of native clay for the vases.

Years later, his son Tarzan of the Apes, who exhibits an even more perfect masculinity, is drawn instinctually to the house his father built. Tarzan spends hours perusing the books and other artifacts remaining in it. His desire to spend time there is so great as to make kingship onerous: “he longed for the little cabin and the sun-kissed sea—for the cool interior of the well-built house, and for the never-ending wonders of the many books. . . . he felt that the much preferred the peace and solitude of his cabin to the irksome duties of leadership amongst a horde of wild beasts” (91). Yet although Tarzan gives up his role as leader in exchange for leisure time to spend in the house, the text does not show him doing anything to or for the house. Unlike his father, Tarzan only works in, rather than on, the cabin, as he teaches himself to read and puzzles over the mystery of humankind. He neither prepares food—throughout the text Burroughs emphasizes Tarzan’s pri-

mal appetite for raw meat straight off the carcass, even when cooked becomes available—nor appears to sleep in the cabin. Out in the jungle, he similarly does no housekeeping. The text includes no mention of Tarzan constructing a shelter or even a sleeping pallet for himself; he has less of a camp than had even Bern Venters, out on the sage.

As with that of Bern and Lassiter, Tarzan's housekeeping is initiated only by his finding of a female mate. After he battles with a gorilla for the possession of Jane, Tarzan takes her deep into the jungle and there prepares a shelter, a bed, and even "with his knife opened and prepared . . . various [ripe and luscious] fruits for her meal" (164-165). He later repeats this pattern in caring for the wounded Frenchman D'Arnot. Tarzan's primitive household labors, along with his father's more sophisticated ones, appear in the text in implicit contrast to the exclusive pursuits of black African tribesmen, whose hunting is unsupplemented: "He noticed that the women alone worked. Nowhere was there any evidence of a man tilling the fields or performing any of the homely duties of the village" (74). Tarzan's introduction to white society, and especially to a white woman, triggers his rapid ascent up the ladder of civilization.

Yet even prior to this catalyst, Tarzan engages in a single act of household "work." This act reads like a grim parody of his father's household labors, which are both vastly more elaborate and more innocent. Directly after killing the son of a village chieftain, Tarzan enters the village and, much as he is drawn to his own father's cabin, is drawn to a village dwelling:

His eyes rested upon the open doorway of a nearby hut. He would take a look within, thought Tarzan. . . . There was no sound, and he glided in to the semi-darkness of the interior.

Weapons hung against the walls—long spears [sic] strangely shaped knives, a couple of narrow shields. In the center of the room was a cooking pot, and at the far end a litter of dry grasses covered by woven mats which evidently served the owners as beds and bedding. Several human skulls lay upon the floor. Tarzan of the Apes felt of each article, hefted the spears, smelled of them. . . . As he took each article from the walls, he placed it in a pile in the center of the room. On top of all he placed the cooking pot, inverted, and on top of this he laid one of the grinning skulls, upon which he fastened the headdress of the dead Kulonga. Then he stood back, surveyed his work, and grinned. Tarzan of the Apes enjoyed a joke. (76)

Tarzan's joking "work" terrorizes the African villagers even more than does his murder of their prince (77). That Tarzan gravitates to the hut reveals his civilized inheritances. His housekeeping, however, takes the form of an act of aggression rather than true domesticity, and operates independently of women and love.

Despite the fact that their housekeeping and violence feed upon each other, the men in Grey's *Riders* maintain the two in separate spheres. That Tarzan does not here manage to do so shows that his transition from ape to man is not yet complete: he is not only a violent housekeeper, but one whose housekeeping is itself violent. ✿

Notes

¹ Kimmel quotes General Horace Porter, "The Philosophy of Courage," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 36 (May-Oct 1888): 253.

² Tompkins persuasively argues that western critics need to pay more attention to cattle and horses: "Though horses in Westerns are de rigueur, the characters who ride them don't pay them much attention, and as far as the critics are concerned they might as well not exist.... Because of this strange invisibility they are the place where everything in the genre is hidden" (90).

³ And, of course, the canyon terrain to which Grey devotes so much narrative energy itself could be read as an eroticized feminine landscape.

⁴ For a discussion of the uses to which Grey and his contemporaries put such communities, see Walter Benn Michaels' "The Vanishing American," which takes its title from one of Grey's novels.

⁵ By way of contrast, consider Willa Cather's contemporaneous *Song of the Lark* (1915). Her heroine Thea experiences the same awe as Venters in encountering traces of a history reaching far past that of Euro-America. In Thea's case, however, living in the cliff dwellers' caves leads not to renewed appreciation of community and relationships, but to greater command of her own art and genius.

⁶ In one of the most disconcerting moments of the text, Venters becomes enraged with Jane for inadvertently informing Bess of this murder and thereby putting a strain on their relationship.

⁷ Regarding Bess' literal transformation: "she no longer resembled a boy. No eye could have failed to mark the rounded contours of a woman" (175).

⁸ Bloodworth seeks to account for the seeming incongruity of westerns published in ladies' magazines by suggesting that in contrast to our beliefs the readers were "actually post-Victorian in sentiment" (14). It may be more fruitful to speculate that it is our perception of the books along with the readers that bears reevaluation.

⁹ Paul R. Petrie, Call For Papers: "Across the Great Divide: Bridging the Gender Gap in Nineteenth-Century U. S. Literary History," Northeast MLA, Pittsburgh, April 16-17, 1999. September 4, 1998.

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