“A small and skillful hand” – Female Masculinity and Gender Dynamics in John Rollin Ridge’s *Joaquín Murieta*

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Abstract

Released in the late 19th century as a dime novel, John Rollin Ridge’s Joaquin Murieta is a highly unstable text that simultaneously undermines and upholds societal views of identity categories, including gender. While the text primarily focuses on the simultaneously wildly criminal and honorable chivalrous masculinity of the titular character’s bandit group, women appear throughout the margins of the texts in ways that complicate any fixed notion of gendered meanings. By applying a queer theoretical approach, focusing on notions of female masculinity, the ways in which the women of Joaquin Murieta destabilize cisnormative and patriarchal notions of how women perform gender can, at least, begin to be rendered intelligible.

John Rollin Ridge’s *Joaquín Murieta* creates and reveals various structural issues with gendered practice in culture, particularly where masculinity is concerned. Throughout the text, bandit men commit masculine acts of violent deviancy while feminine women, apparently, weep sentimental over the unnecessary bloodshed and long for a peaceful, domestic life. However, such an analysis overlooks how the women of *Joaquín Murieta* actually upset this binary behavioral stereotype of gendered practice and, in fact, engage in their own forms of masculinity throughout the text. In doing so, they enact a unique form of female masculinity, one which upsets and subverts the way society understands gender. Society structures gender around the idea that specific bodies, identities, presentations, traits, and practices have an essential gendered nature which supposedly rings true throughout time and history. In regards to masculinity, R.W. Connell argues in her work *Masculinities* that so-called “true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body” (46). According to this societal logic, any form of masculinity which is not rooted in what society designates as a male body must be inherently “untrue”; it must be a false, unnatural, and deviant performance of the presentations, traits, and practices that a society deems “masculine”. This is incredibly problematic upon closer inspection considering some of the traits that Western society deems masculine include activity and rationality (68, 164). If the “true” version of these traits become rooted in male-designated bodies, then they are denied to bodies that society designates as
female. Discourses of masculinity, then, inherently deny the inhabitants of female bodies any form of agency or subjecthood. They become passive objects, incapable of rational thought, that male bodies can move and control at will. This is why upsetting societal ideas of masculine practice is absolutely necessary; as long as society assigns masculinity to these traits and roots masculinity in male bodies, any woman who attempts to enact these traits becomes inherently deviant. Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* focuses its entirety on this exact subject, working under the assumption that “female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” and further argues that “masculinity and maleness are profoundly difficult to pry apart” (935). It is precisely this work that my own paper will attempt to build upon. An investigation of how *Joaquín Murieta* depicts female bodies practicing masculinity, both through appearance and actions, in their own uniquely female ways, presenting an opportunity to add another piece of evidence for the existence of female masculinity in discourse – a piece of evidence which helps to build a case for decoupling masculinity from male bodies, and thus decoupling specific traits from masculinity itself.

Existing scholarship on *Joaquín Murieta* and its depictions of women tends to look at how the female characters relate to the men throughout the novel, discussing how they primarily exist within heterosexual couplings and seem to perform typical feminine roles, all the while overlooking how the women simultaneously move in and out of masculinity and, thus, problematize heterosexuality. One such scholar is Maria A. Windell, who argues in “Sanctify Our Suffering World with Tears: Transamerican Sentimentalism in *Joaquín Murieta*” that the women actually play a key role throughout the text, maintaining agency while attempting to bring an end to the transamerican bloodshed through their sentimental appeals. She also states that the women “also force the reader to acknowledge the Mexican men as men, rather than simply as bandits, by recalling their roles as husbands and brothers” (176). This particular portion of her argument reveals how the text, and her argument, engage with the gendered discourses surrounding heterosexuality. According to Windell, the women's position in the text as lovers of Mexican men constructs the men's masculinity in ways that are not limited to solely the deviant criminal masculinity, but also as the heterosexual masculinity of the husband. By performing femininity and existing primarily as sexual and romantic partners of the text’s men, *Joaquín Murieta*’s women create an atmosphere in which those men's heterosexual masculinity do not come into question. However, this engagement with heterosexuality becomes problematized when one considers the way that the women perform masculinity in various spaces throughout the text, as discussed in a moment. Judith Butler discusses this issue in in her article “Performative Acts

1 It's important to note that it is, of course, impossible for female bodies not to enact masculinity as long as subjecthood, agency, and activity are considered masculine. Just by considering this, the entire structure of masculinity and its ties to male bodies begins to fall apart.
and Gender Constitution” where she asserts that one way heterosexuality becomes naturalized is “through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” (905). Gender plays a key role in the creation of heterosexual normativity by defining two genders, their practices, and their appearances as entirely discrete from one another; if there is any overlap between the two categories, it opens the door for a sexuality that exists within this overlap, thus ruining any chance to normalize heterosexuality. What Windell’s argument misses, then, are the places in which the women of Joaquín Murieta upset the “natural appearances” of discrete sexes and, instead, create an overlap of bodies, genders, and gendered practices. While this certainly does not overturn her argument about the role the women’s sentimentalism plays in historicizing the text, it adds a new element of gender dynamics to the way Joaquín Murieta is understood.

Personal appearance takes on especially crucial roles when discussing gender because our understanding of gendered bodies draws strongly from visual signifiers, and any attempts to upset the ability to discern someone’s gender category through appearance unsettle the connections between sex, gender, and gender presentation. Butler argues that it is through societal beliefs about gender that a person’s “body is invariably transformed into his or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance” (903, emphasis added). The gendering of appearance can happen through any number of visible actions and decisions, but clothing choice is an easily discernible example. The bandit-loving women in Joaquín Murieta, when first introduced, are “dress in male attire and well armed” (29). Through their already established position as deviant women, the mistresses and lovers of hardened male criminals, these women take on male attire of their own while riding in public, likely for ease of riding and to hide their gender from onlookers. Furthermore, the women also arm themselves, revealing a willingness to either commit violence or at least a desire to project that willingness. In a seeming contradiction, the women’s heterosexual connections to particular men actually creates a space in which a masculine presentation becomes an unquestioned aspect of their identity. However, these women not only dress in masculine attire, but also pass as men. The work describes how, while in a town, the cross-dressing women “appeared as charming a trio of handsome cavaliers as ever delighted the visions of romantic damsels” (32). These criminal women, while donning their masculine garb, become social men. They pass the visual tests of heterosexual women and come out read as delightfully attractive men. In doing so, the cross-dressing call not only the heterosexuality of both these “romantic damsels” into question, but also the heterosexuality of their male partners. By breaking apart the ties between gender, sex, and sexuality, the women’s successful cross-dressing dislodges the idea that heterosexuality finds foundation in anything other than an individual’s
inherently fluid gender presentation, not the supposedly rigid assigned biological sex. Joaquin and his band are attracted to women who can easily become men, and other women are just as attracted to those men who are actually women. As such, this moment of passing becomes a moment of incredible tension in which heterosexuality’s supposed biological nature comes under fire. Perhaps amusingly, Joaquín Murieta presents these scenes of female cross-dressing uncritically; they appear and disappear in the flash of a sentence. They are not the subject of a long discussion about any party’s “true nature,” but they are instead entirely transitory and temporally limited. In presenting gender and sexual attraction in such a way, the text reveals precisely what Butler argues when she claims that society genders a body based off appearances and performances. The women of Joaquín Murieta become men by dressing in masculine attire, and thus they rattle the foundations of biological essentialism and how society couples gender, gendered practice, and sexual orientation to particular bodies.

Masculinity, however, is not solely rooted in appearances and attraction, but also in actions, and the character of Margarita provides a perfect example of how a text can depict violence, typically a masculine-coded action, being perpetrated by a female-designated body through female-designated actions. In her work, R.W. Connell historicizes masculinity, particular focusing on “the connection of masculinity and violence” that permeates Western culture, from the frontier battles between “Cowboys and Indians” to state-enacted military warfare (185-186). Masculinity, given positions of subjecthood and tasked with exerting dominance, takes on violence a hallmark trait, oppositional to the idea of a gentle, caring femininity. Margarita, a two-time widow who murdered one of her husbands, represents a dangerous threat both to attempts to unite masculinity with violence and attempts to box women into being passive participants in heterosexual couples. After her husband assaults and abuses her, an act during which the text describes how she “submitted to the infliction with great apparent humility,” Margarita kills her partner by putting “just one drop of hot lead into his ear, tipped from a ladle by a small and skillful hand” (81). In this single act, Margarita reclaims violence for female bodies, garbing it in femininity and uncoupling it entirely from masculine practice. Her murder begins with apparent submission and victimhood, both hallmark feminine traits, and ends with a dark mirroring of the domestic cook’s actions, only this time the wife’s hand serves death to her husband. In this moment, femininity reclaims violence and turns it back onto oppressive masculinity. The very particular wording in this passage completely detaches violence from male-designated bodies, and even from masculinity itself, thus revealing how even one of the most gendered actions, violence and murder, can be reclaimed by the bodies that gendered systems deny agency to.

All of these claims are not to say that Joaquín Murieta provides a rosy perspective
on the fluid, constructed nature of gendered practices in which a change of clothing and an alteration of actions creates an entirely new identity for the individual. After all, the text essentializes gendered actions throughout the entire narrative, such as when it describes Joaquin’s mistress, Rosita, as possessing “a woman’s true nature,” which abhors violence and longs for a happy domestic life (28-29). This meditation on Rosita’s feminine desires literally shares the page with the previous description of the same mistress happily cross-dressing and easily passing as a man. Mere sentences after the first cross-dressing incident, the novel then describes how, when arriving in a Mexican town, “the women appeared in their proper attire and were admired for their exceedingly modest and quiet deportment” (30). While it’s difficult to pull apart the value judgment of this passage – is the attire’s “properness” rooted in biology or the social perception of what women should wear? – it’s far easier to tell that these women only engage in masculinity during specific times and spaces. They return to the appropriate gendered practice and the gendered garments that match their sex as soon as the need for crossdressing disappears. It is within the apparent contrast between these moments which essentialize the women’s female gender identity and their ease at performing masculinity that the subversive potential of the text and its presentation of gender dynamics lies. While, on the surface, this gendering of traits, values, and bodies seems to feed back into the existing gender schema, it actually creates tension within it. Rosita, described always as a woman who, at her core, carries the true nature of womanhood, is able to enact masculinity and even pass as a man without her identity and womanhood falling apart. If Joaquín Murieta instead described her as inherently masculine or as possessing a “man’s true nature”, then masculinity again becomes rooted in maleness and manhood. Her successful cross-dressing would reveal an essential maleness that her female-body imprisoned and, thus, the subversive power of female masculinity would change into a protonarrative of transgender identity. Instead, this essentializing of womanhood actually turns the masculinity of Joaquin’s mistress into, what Judith Butler calls, “a female masculinity [that] is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity” (954). The masculinity of Rosita and the other women is its own unique masculinity that does not extinguish their femininity nor their female identities. Their female masculinity is contextual, appearing and disappearing at will and without comment or critique. Never does Joaquín Murieta claim that their masculine practice makes them less womanly or less female. The narrative does not punish these women for their masculinity, and instead simply opens a space for it to exist without comment nor condemnation, vilification nor verification. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the description of Margarita after her murder of Guerra. The text does not punish this reclamation of the masculine act of violence by a woman, one committed against a man at that, but instead celebrates it. The story describes how, afterward, Margarita marries another man and “her step
was as buoyant as ever, the play of her limbs as graceful, the heave of her impulsive bosom as entrancing, and her voice as full of music as if she had never lost Gonzalez or murdered Guerra” (82). Murdering her husband does not strip Margarita of her femininity. She does not become manly, nor does her femininity disappear. Instead, her female-designated body and her identity as a woman both remain entirely intact, despite their contact with violence and masculinity. While the text certainly essentializes these women’s femaleness, which is inherently problematic when applied to female bodies, it simultaneously incorporates actions and presentations which society deems masculine into the practice of those female bodies and, thus, works to decouple the association between maleness and masculinity.

Joaquín Murieta’s presentation of gender dynamics and the light it shines on the constructed nature of gender provide an example of how texts can present gender in ways that are simultaneously problematic and liberating. The marginal depictions of women and how they enact problematizes certain long-standing views of masculinity, whether deliberately or not. It’s important to note that, due to the scope of this paper, little historical and cultural context appears throughout the argument, instead taking a mostly theoretical view on gender constitution through literary depictions. Further analysis of the text’s gender dynamics might focus on the intersections of ethnicity and gender through various other avenues, such as investigating how John Rollin Ridge’s ethnic identity as a male Cherokee Indian may have shaped his perception of gender or by drawing from historical sources to determine how society constructed Mexican women in discourses during the time. Another analysis may tackle the specific genre of the text, considering how discourses of criminality and the work’s position as a criminal biography may affect the way gender appears throughout the text. Any one of these lines of criticism would likely expand, problematize, and support various aspects of the largely theoretical arguments made within my own paper, much as I believe my analysis expands on those of previous scholars by shining light on sections they may have overlooked. Any article which attempts to couple masculinity to the novel’s men and femininity to the novel’s women clearly overlooks the gender dynamics that persist throughout the text, a work which undermines the conflation of masculinity with men’s body throughout its gendered depictions.
Works Cited


