Chapter 9

Outlaws, Buddies, and Lovers: The Sexual Politics of Calamity Jane and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

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Initially, Calamity Jane (David Butler, 1953) and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (George Hill, 1969) seem to have little in common, except as variations of the Western genre. One is a lighthearted musical Western that results in the heterosexual marriage of its two protagonists, while the other tells the story of two outlaws on the run and their eventual demise. However, there are connections between them, not only in their musical content (both achieved acclaim for their musical scores) but also in the homosocial and homoerotic undertones that pervade both films. While such relationships are always discernible in Hollywood cinema, there has been a failure to explore them fully until the release of Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee) in 2005. Indeed, at the time of Calamity Jane’s release in 1953, the Hays Production Code (1934) explicitly forbade the representation of “sexual perversion or inference to it” (Bordwell and Thompson 216). Nevertheless, while not directly depicting homosexuality, Calamity Jane contains multiple instances of cross-dressing, and a potential development of lesbian relationship between Katie Brown (Allyn McLerie) and Calamity Jane (Doris Day). Ultimately, though, the film culminates in a heterosexual relationship between Calamity and Wild Bill Hickok (Howard Keel)
and their eventual marriage, one of the most usual outcomes of classic Hollywood narratives, especially where a woman needs to be “tamed.” Various other strategies also serve to recoup the characters’ heterosexuality, while the use of comedy frequently signals the film’s potentially homoerotic encounters.

By 1961, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) had relaxed its enforcement of the Hays Production Code, eventually phasing it out completely by 1968. Even so, homosexuality on screen was still a taboo subject and while Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, released in 1969, was subject to less stringent censorship, the two male “buddy” protagonists effectively “share” a girlfriend (Katherine Ross), thereby similarly negating any implication of homoeroticism. Richard Dyer’s analysis of representation in relation to the buddy film, and his study of gay types, as well as Steve Neale’s account of masculinity as spectacle provide theoretical ways to illuminate the representation of homosocial and homoerotic relationships within the two films and their implications for heterosexual love. The films’ musical content as relevant to heterosexual desire and spectacle, as well as their respective years of production in relation to censorship issues are further germane to such analysis.

**Calamity Jane**

*Calamity Jane* is a musical-Western hybrid that capitalizes not only on the vocal capabilities of Doris Day and Howard Keel but also on their respective archetypal gender and star attributes. Toward the end of the film, Doris Day transforms into an idealized image of femininity, possessing both the platinum-blond hair associated with Hollywood stardom and the innocent smile of the “girl next door,” while Howard Keel’s physical stature and deep voice conform to conventions of the Western’s classic masculinity. Initially, though, Day’s character, Calamity Jane, presents as a masculinized female protagonist who cross-dresses in buckskins and cracks a bull whip, her figure behavior (physical expression) excessive and parodic in relation to concepts of classic masculinity. The film focuses on her apparent tomboy attributes, and follows her transformation to idealized heterosexual femininity (and eventual marriage), this “make-over” (Jeffers McDonald, *Carrying Concealed Weapons* 179) effectively structuring the narrative.

Essentially, Calamity’s mannish costume and excessively masculine figure behavior carry connotations of the “butch female,” which Richard Dyer defines as a form of gay representation. Dyer identifies