

CHAPTER FOUR

“LIKE AN ANGEL IN A JUNGLE”:
GOD’S ANGRY WOMAN
IN RON HOWARD’S *THE MISSING*

ROBERT E. MEYER

Near the beginning of *Stagecoach*, John Ford’s 1939 classic Western, a gun-slinging card player named Hatfield (John Carradine) looks wistfully through a barroom window at an attractive young matron whom he recognizes as a fellow genteel southerner. “Like an angel in a jungle,” he sighs. With these words and his subsequent offer of “protection” on the ensuing stagecoach journey, he makes manifest at least part of the central—usually one-dimensional—role of women portrayed in Westerns. As the harbingers of civilization, they are both highly valued and vulnerable, and they must be protected during the perilous time before the savage ways of the West are swept aside.

In Western films of the thirties through the fifties, womanhood (like manhood) was painted in broad strokes, serving, perhaps unconsciously, to reinforce traditional gender roles in which men are active, often even violent figures, while women are passive potential victims of violence who, if they avoid death—or the often-alluded-to fate worse than death—provide the stability necessary for an orderly society. This limited (and limiting) portrayal of women may well have contributed to the Western’s demise in later years. *Stagecoach*, while providing John Ford considerable freedom with respect to cinematic artistry, was shackled to the dramatic cliché of depicting woman as either the Madonna, in the form of Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt), the object of Hatfield’s gaze, or the whore, in the form of Dallas (Claire Trevor), the love interest of the heroic Ringo Kid (John Wayne). Such simplistic dichotomies have prompted Molly Haskell to note that, in Ford’s Westerns, “a kind of reverence...which transfixes and isolates women” predominates.¹ In many Westerns, perhaps best exemplified by *Shane* (1953), women are depicted as wives and mothers

who cower in fear when violence breaks out, whose safety is a prerequisite for a civilized community. In this connection, John Belton writes that, in films of the West, “women represent the forces of civilization; they embody the values of family, community, education, domestication, and cultivation that inform the male hero’s transformation of the wilderness into a garden.”² Similarly, Robert Warshaw observes in the Western film a link between women and children, both of whom “represent the possibility of a settled life.”³ Even in *High Noon* (1952), in some ways a precursor of the anti-Western, the filmmakers seem unwilling to stray too far in their portrayal of an active woman, choosing to play for irony when Amy Kane (Grace Kelly) saves her husband by firing a gun while wearing a blindingly white wedding gown, and this only after spending the entire film preaching against violence.

By the late sixties and early seventies, American filmmakers were making serious attempts to rework the Western, usually by reversing the traditional roles of hero and villain, as in *Little Big Man* (1970), in which the cavalry is bad and the Cheyenne are good, and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), in which viewers are encouraged to admire the (a)moral fortitude of a gang of murderous bank robbers. Feminist viewers of each of these films find much to object to in the portrayal of women, who appear as repressed nymphomaniacs or frustrated masculine females in the former and as duplicitous sex objects whose blood is spilled without regret in the latter. A Western such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) is unusual in that a strong female character maintains her independence to the end of the film, but this exception is in keeping with a general inclination to revise the genre.

Dances with Wolves (1990) managed to reassert the place of the Western film by rehabilitating it in the eyes of a feminist audience more inclined to resist limiting stereotypes. The women in this film are depicted as strong and independent (one is even named “Stands with a Fist!”) and have a position of honor in Lakota society, whether their membership therein was granted by birth or adoption. In a sense, then, *Dances with Wolves* may be seen as a revision of *Little Big Man*, building on the idealization of Native Americans in that film and adding a similar elevation of women. *Unforgiven* (1992), which, like *Dances with Wolves*, won several Oscars, including one for best picture (which, of course, says less about its quality as an artistic achievement than it does about the film’s acceptance by a mainstream audience), does not go as far in its advancement of women. The stereotype of the prostitute with a heart of gold is alluded to here—even resurrected—although this time the women of the brothel show their sympathy for one of their own number (rather