"It Is Leviathan": Family, Feminism, and American Drama.

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"IT IS LEVIATHAN": 
FAMILY, FEMINISM, AND AMERICAN DRAMA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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M.A., Northeast Louisiana University, 1978
May 1996
DEDICATION

To my own family--
of origin, whom I would choose,
and of choice, whom I originated--
I gratefully and lovingly dedicate this effort.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though my indebtedness to family, friends, and colleagues can never be adequately expressed, I nonetheless wish to acknowledge their invaluable support, both moral and practical. Loving gratitude is due my parents, who incredibly resisted their generation’s scripting of daughters; to my aunt, who has ever encouraged grace by example; to my brother, who has exhibited loyalty beyond my worth; to my husband, who believes me more than I am; and to my children, who sustain my belief in the possibilities of family.

I have been moved as well by friendships proved inviolable in the (seemingly) unflagging interest of Betsy, Liz, Carolyn, Ellen, Janice, and Gretchen. Among the many who provided professional encouragement beyond expectations are Denise Pani, the antidote to my computer panics; Theda Birdsong, the most committed of colleagues; and Jerry Holmes, the first to instill a love of modern drama. And to Bill Demastes, the last, I offer a thanks too meager for the inspiration, the humor, and the confidence which have so dramatically altered my own stage.
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ABSTRACT

American drama has ever occupied a stepchild position in scholarship, its denigration rooted in the lure of domestic realism for even the most resistant of our playwrights. Maligned as solipsistic and regressive, this "leviathan" of mainstream American theatre putatively upholds through its content the unity of the mythologized family and through its form the closure of classical realism. Yet the legacy of this leviathan is an epistemological subversion and a transformative impulse. Those very plays which apotheosize American domestic realism ironically undermine its foundation in psychological causality, narrative linearity, transparent language, unmediated consciousness, and unified meaning.

Destabilizing that objective reality perceived through a binary logic of subject/object, post-war playwrights prophesied a shift from a Cartesian/Newtonian epistemology and bequeathed a legacy of reality as uncertain and boundaries as blurred. Reflecting this postmodern shift in family, feminist, and scientific theories, contemporary playwrights have furthered this legacy of a liminal realism. Critics, however, persist in denouncing mainstream American drama; the most vitriolic among these are feminists who are willing to forego broad audiences so great is their fear of both domesticity's circumscription
It is a feminist redemption, then, which proves most persuasive, emerging from family theory's and feminist film criticism's conceptualizations of family and realism respectively as unstable systems. These echo chaos theory's concept of unpredictability in nonlinear dynamical systems, a perspective which reveals alternative futures on America's theatrical and cultural stages.

Fittingly, as the imperative of feminism is transformation, its possibility is signalled by female characters in America's linchpin plays. Culturally scripted as ghosts or monsters, these (M)others haunt their houses and the stage as chaos haunts order and performance, text. Derridian "hymen" or Prigogininian "hypnon," they embody the systemic flux of a Butterfly Effect, pushing the family to evolve from a gendered hierarchy and realism from an Oedipal order. From O'Neill to Mamet, American playwrights have evoked a consciousness beyond binary logic and negative mimesis, a consciousness which begs a re-evaluation of American drama and America itself as liminal realms.
AMERICAN DRAMA AS DOMESTIC REALISM:
THE LURE OF THE LEVIATHAN

"It is leviathan and we in its belly"

"The Ache of Marriage"
Denise Levertov

An "unwanted bastard child" (Smith 112) or "ugly stepdaughter" (Adler 55)—American drama seems unrelentingly relegated to the margins of both American literature and international drama. The frequent use of familial metaphors in assessing this status tacitly exposes the roots of denigration in the family plays which have ever been the mainstay of American mainstream drama; thus, Denise Levertov's "leviathan" of family in whose belly we rest has begotten a leviathan in theatre in whose belly the legacy resides. Since the American dramatic tradition emerged simultaneously with the Ibsenite realistic tradition, the realistic domestic play became both legitimizer and legacy of American theatre, form inextricably conflated with content. Though Ibsen's dominion has been abnegated or modified elsewhere, our playwrights, from James A. Herne through Eugene O'Neill to Sam Shepard, seem inexorably lured by the talisman of the realistic family play. As Tom Scanlan notes in one of the few studies of the American family drama tradition: "What
is remarkable is not only that Americans write domestic drama but that they write little else. . . . [I]f accomplishment is a measure, our heart is in the realistic family play" (5-6).

And despite overwhelming political and epistemological upheavals since Scanlan's 1978 study, the American heart, as we approach the millennium, remains attached to realistic domestic drama. Equally consistent has been the general disparagement of American drama, its domestic content and realistic form dismissed as inevitably regressive philosophically and politically; hence, the paucity of scholarship on the tradition. Our theatre is scorned as an unevolved "doll house," wherein what British critic Benedict Nightingale termed "diaper drama" continues to hold sway over unsophisticated audiences never challenged by universal, intellectual, political, or metaphysical questions. Even American drama critics seem only to exacerbate this verdict and to compound an inferiority decreed by genre from without with one decreed by nationality from within, this latter supposedly attributable to inferior playwrights or infantile audiences.

Yet our ostensibly non-universal, non-political dramatic tradition has proved prophetic since family now occupies center stage, not only in the actual theatre but in the theatre of American culture and politics. And as family has become the focus of political controversy, so dramatic realism has become the focus of critical
controversy; thus a re-evaluation and revaluation of realistic domestic drama strikes at the heart of both cultural and literary issues. Figuring prominently on both fronts, feminism catalyzes the attack on the American family and on the American dramatic tradition. Feminists assault the mythologized Family as a gatekeeper of dominant ideology in its inscription of Oedipal trajectories, gendered identity, individual autonomy, and homogenous unity; feminist drama critics assault classical realism as a similar gatekeeper in its inscription of linear (Oedipal) narrative, psychological causality, transparent language, and unmediated consciousness. Both cultural and literary constructs thus collude in the coding of binary and hierarchical oppositions wherein self is defined against Other, male against female, presence against absence.

It is hardly surprising, then, that feminists most vengefully find the American dramatic tradition guilty on two counts, its content and form each fostering and furthering illusions and reinscribing the status quo. Paradoxically, however, feminism, with its imperative of transformation beyond hierarchical structures offers the most effective political epistemology through which to defend both. In an effort to rescue American drama from the back, if not obituary pages, I shall argue that the most notable canon-bearers of its tradition as well as the contemporary canon-contenders are plays which actually subvert the very ideology of Family and of classical realism which they putatively uphold. Since Long Day's
Journey into Night is widely regarded as apotheosis and paradigm of American domestic realism, it seems an appropriate springboard for my argument. Though some earlier plays evidence a latent subversiveness, the post-war drama most potently bequeathed a legacy which markedly distinguishes the linchpin plays of the tradition. It is a legacy of mythic Family and classical realism destabilized along with their epistemological foundations to reveal a transformative, hence feminist, impulse toward an ethic of becoming rather than being.

Considering the subversive elements of these plays obviously reflects a postmodern approach, and it is a postmodern feminism which I espouse despite the continuing tension between the two perspectives that I shall later consider. In regarding family as an ideological construct and political system, a postmodernist, feminist perspective yields recognition of a profound ideological and political as well as literary significance in America’s tradition of realistic domestic drama. As the primary site of identity formation, the family crystallizes the issue of subjectivity which postmodernists debate; as the primary site of gender acquisition, the family crystallizes the social construction which feminists decry; as the primary site of national violence, the family crystallizes the polarization which threatens all American residents. Insistently and realistically staging this site, American theatre lays claim not only to a prophetic politics but also to a transformative potential, which belies the
rejection of family as inevitably closed, private, and hierarchical and the foreclosure of all dramatic realism as hopelessly hegemonic and linear. The feminist challenge to male/female binary oppositions as paradigmatic valorizes a postmodern dismantling of such binarism to reveal a blurring of boundaries, in life and in theatre, between family and nation, public and private, hegemony and difference, order and chaos, realism and theatricalism, mainstream and alternative, linearity and non-linearity. From these blurred boundaries arises the redemptive force of the American dramatic legacy, for its linchpin plays portray families and gender denaturalized, realism and reality destabilized, and hegemony and order displaced; thus I use the term "liminal realism" to celebrate this legacy of transgressed borders and transformed perspective.

So vitriolic, however, have been the attacks on American theatre that this subversive, transformative impulse has been effectively obfuscated. Mainstream male critics on the front lines of this charge have found unlikely cavalry support from feminist critics, who even more categorically reject family content and realistic form as allies of dominant ideology. If, then, I can descry feminist possibilities in the American dramatic tradition, its legacy surely can be redeemed. Before outlining, however, my traitorous feminist defense, I should trace the most formidable lines of attack, blazoned by Robert Brustein’s 1959 article entitled "Why American Plays Are Not Literature," which dismissed post-war American drama as
seemingly "the most mindless form of legitimate culture since eighteenth-century sentimental comedy" (171). The reason for its isolation from American literature, according to Brustein, lies not only in the newness of the self-spawned American dramatic tradition, but also in the "show business" imperative of not disturbing an audience, which compromises the playwright and precludes dramatic literature. Brustein, however, identifies internal as well as external obstacles, such as an "indifference to language" from which he exempts only Tennessee Williams:

Most of our other playwrights, including our greatest, Eugene O’Neill, are charter members of a cult of inarticulacy . . . . The failure of dramatic language leads to a situation where a great many of our plays, including two of Mr. Miller’s, conclude on a question—"Why"—when it has traditionally been the dramatist’s job to answer this question. (170)

Thus the problem of language reveals the underlying problem with American drama as "its murky thought" (170), its lack of sense as literature: "in the quiet of the study one stumbles on inconsistencies, disharmonies, and contradictions which are sometimes ignored in the rapid excitement of performance" (170). Apparently not redeemed by his language, Williams epitomizes this "distaste for the logical, the abstruse and the tendentious" (171), sacrificing all to simulate passion and presenting only bargain-basement ideas:

Almost all of our drama, in fact, is equivocal or needlessly ambiguous, for our dramatists find it difficult to square the passionate aspects of their plays with their ideas about American life. One frequently finds, consequently, contradictions between the psychological and the
social or the emotional and mental aspects of a play. (172)

Brustein concludes that only Arthur Miller exhibits the potential to produce an American play which "transcends the family crisis, the sexual conflict, and individual psychosis" (172). His only real hope for a genre "cut off from the mainstream of intellectual and literary discourse" (167) lies in the possibility that novelists will turn to drama.

Neither this salvation nor apparently any other having materialized, in 1977 Brustein remounted his attack in "The Crack in the Chimney: Reflections on Contemporary American Playwriting." Significantly, however, the terms of the offense shifted as the very illogic for which he condemned American drama earlier Brustein now cites as the essential and missing ingredient in American playwriting. Citing Ibsen's *The Master Builder* as exemplar of a metaphysical impulse toward the non-causal, Brustein finds the ostensible progenitor of social realism revolutionary in his rejection of Cartesian and Newtonian logic:

Ibsen, in short, is attempting to repeal the simple, fundamental law of cause and effect which has been an unquestioned statute at least since the Enlightenment—the law that ruled the linear, logical, rationalistic world of literature, and, in particular, the Western literature of guilt. In its place, Ibsen is reconfirming the unknowable, ineffable secrets underlying the will of Nature. (22)

Though Brustein had earlier faulted "murky thought" and deemed it the "dramatist's job" to answer "Why?", he now concludes that explanations "can be determined only through
the artist's intuition and then only darkly. And the task of the modern artist is to help humankind move beyond the sterile cycle of guilt and expiation, which is one of the off-shoots of cause-and-effect thinking" (22).

American drama remains obliviously locked into this "sterile cycle" since "the dominant strain of our stage has been social, domestic, psychological, and realistic—which is to say, causal—and its dominant theme the excavation, exposure, and expiation of guilt" (22). Assuming realism and naturalism to be synonymous, Brustein proclaims that American mainstream drama, though dominated by a presumably Ibsenite tradition, has eschewed Ibsen's exposure of "domestic realism as a cardboard illusion" (22); even its masterpiece, Long Day's Journey into Night, is "remorselessly American in its concentration on the sources of guilt and on the painful confrontation between parents and their children" (23). As O'Neill succumbed in this play, so Brustein's 1959 hope, Arthur Miller, fails to outgrow simple causality. Even contemporary playwrights evince only superficial, stylistic modifications of domestic realism to allow for social generalizations. Thus, most mainstream American drama exudes "the air of a courtroom, complete with arraignments, investigations, condemnations, indictments, and punishments" (24), the audience implicated in the "guilt-mongering of our accusatory playwrights" (29). Brustein's hope now lies in a theatre of metaphor, which will expose domestic plays as "ancient artifacts" (28) and encourage the "capacity to
function with doubts and ambiguities" (29), that very
capacity which apparently did not belong in the "quiet of
the study." The "reimagined theatre" of his latest and
more positive pronouncement on American drama presumably
transcends the limitations not only of New York but also of
domestic drama (Reimagining Theatre 3-15). Nowhere does
Brustein admit to the possibility of a realistic domestic
play which denaturalizes realism and the family from within
and thereby signals a theatre of metaphor already present
in the American tradition.

Brustein’s inconsistencies notwithstanding, it would
be foolish to dismiss facilely such a distinguished critic
or to deny categorically his charges. I have cited him at
such length precisely because his equation of American
realism with deterministic naturalism and domestic drama
with solipsistic causality resounds throughout drama
criticism. Robert Kiernan in 1983 echoed almost verbatim
Brustein’s indictment, maintaining that the post-war
playwrights’ expressionistic and symbolic reactions against
Scribean realism only reveal their commitment to it:

It is the stagnation of the American stage that
such reactions affect the surface but not the
substance of the well-made play. In the
tradition that runs from O’Neill’s Long Day’s
Journey into Night through Albee’s Virginia Woolf
to Shepard’s Buried Child, postwar drama
continues to play out the moral and generational
obsessions of the well-made play, turning the
stage into a kind of domestic courtroom complete
with investigations, arraignments, and
judgements. (110, emphasis mine)
The assumption is, of course, that the verdict in a courtroom equates with closure and Truth and that linear logic prevails.

As any observer of the legal system is aware, what actually prevails is the perspective, often contradictory if not illogical, of judge and jury, and a linear determinism super-imposed and exposed in its tenuousness. Likewise, as any observer of the family system (and theory has established that it is a system) is aware, what actually prevails is the perspectives, again contradictory if not illogical, of its members and a linear determinism super-imposed by generation and gender and exposed in its cultural construction. Brustein and Kiernan's conflation of domestic and realistic with causal and closed precludes recognition that the most notable American playwrights in this vein, including those they target, present "courtrooms" where linearity and binary logic themselves stand trial and surface disruptions reflect substantive destabilizations. As in Ibsen's "cardboard illusions," here family abides as an open system, a process exhibiting, not the "well-made" coherence of Newtonian/Cartesian logic, but the "murky" coherence of a complex system, wherein chaos is not opposite but complement of order.

Ironically, British critics go easier on American drama than do their American counterparts, confirming the specter of a continuing national inferiority complex. Martin Esslin places Long Day's Journey into Night and Death of a Salesman in the realm of Oedipus and Lear, that
"higher region . . . of more profound implications" (25); nonetheless, he reiterates Benedict Nightingales's 1984 indictment of most contemporary American drama for its domesticity and psychological realism:

The theater here does indeed seem more preoccupied than ever with personal relationships but not all that many could be dignified as truly adult ones. For quite a few dramatists, some very talented, the great contemporary question seems to be whether, when, why and how to grow up at all . . . [T]here are just too many diaper dramas. (qtd. in Esslin 24)

Finding further confirmation in Arthur Miller's 1987 *Timebends* lamentations about the contemporary American theatre, Esslin attributes the deficiency to a "profound structural imbalance in the American theatrical imagination" (24). While our Puritan heritage has decreed theatre as merely an entertainment industry so that even "serious" theatre strives for an emotional, identificational response through method acting and soap-opera (family) subjects, our populist heritage has bequeathed its "deep anti-intellectual, anti-ideological bias" (28) to American drama and precluded its becoming that "veritable experimental laboratory of political and sociological issues" (30).

No proponent of theatre or believer in its transformative possibilities can take issue with Esslin's condemnation of America's trivialization of drama as opposed to "literature" nor even with the goal of establishing theatre "among the cultural needs of a sufficiently large audience—the educated elite of the
country to use that explosive term" (32). Esslin’s insistence, however, that contemporary domestic drama cannot stage that political/sociological "experimental laboratory" looms as eminently disputable now that feminists have exposed family as a quintessentially ideological and political system; as with content, so with form as realism, too, is recognized (though not yet widely) as deconstructible.

It remains for another British critic to verify the "laboratory" possibilities of American drama in both its canonical and contemporary manifestations. Addressing Brustein’s original condemnation and lamenting its perpetuation, C. W. E. Bigsby, in "Why American Drama Is Literature," praises its democratic impulse and ordinary voices as well as a structure which compacts social issues. Inadvertently but appropriately applying Esslin’s scientific metaphor, Bigsby assails the failure of even postmodern critics "to perceive the relevance of a self-questioning art which breached boundaries, questioned nature and the status of the observer and proposed the self as paradigm" (9). Though Bigsby does not here pursue this postmodern scientific perspective, I find in it the most persuasive defense against Brustein and his legions; in fact, Brustein’s 1975 article (which, as noted, serves as sufficient refutation of his 1959 argument) proudly employs a postmodern approach to thrash the American dramatic tradition as linear and causal, Newtonian rather than Einsteinian (this opposition in itself misleading). Yet
Brustein himself stops short of the non-classical perspective which he demands of American playwrights in not recognizing that *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, for example, is the masterpiece he begrudgingly acknowledges precisely because its domestic realism destabilizes both family and realism, becoming the American epitome of that tradition despite or, more accurately, because of this destabilization of it.

Embarking on my own postmodernist as well as feminist defense of American domestic realism and, hence, of the American dramatic tradition itself, I face resistance not only from without but also, perhaps more vituperatively, from within the ranks. Compounding an inevitable resistance to domestic subject matter, feminist critics have joined the postmodernist charge against realism as a bastion of the status quo since it sustains the illusion of a linear, objective, homogenous, and masculinist reality. Realism’s greater dominance in American drama than in other genres doubtlessly contributes to the tradition’s continued disparagement. In her 1989 assessment of American drama as that “unwanted bastard child,” Susan Harris Smith bemoans the fact that even revisionist critics of the canon do not seem to question the verdict of such 1950s’ critics as John Gassner and Eric Bentley, who presaged Brustein in proclaiming that “There is no American drama” (cited by Smith 112). Smith argues that condemnations of the post-war manifestation of American drama have been levelled at its entire history: "that [it] is emotional rather than
intellectual, subliterary rather than literary, theatrical rather than dramatic, and derivative rather than indigenous" (116). These negative comparisons I would decode (bracketing only with difficulty the female rather than male implications) as domestic rather than political and realistic rather than artistic, terms only perceived as oppositional.

In his response to Smith, Bigsby identifies naturalism (which he regrettably equates with realism) as the critical pitfall of American drama, although "for the last forty years it has been seen by critics other than Americans as a major, probably the major world drama" ("A View" 128, emphasis original). Bigsby argues against the over-valuation of European theatre for its Beckettian perspective, insisting, for example, that traditional views of Arthur Miller as a social realist have obscured his preoccupation with the mediation of consciousness by language, with the grammar which constructs the perceived real. Thus, he rightfully concludes that American realism is not always unproblematic, and that "American theatre has produced works every bit as subtle and original as anything coming out of England. Which national literature can lay claim to a postwar drama as various or accomplished? Not England, not France, not Germany, not Italy" ("A View" 131).

In making the case for retrieving American drama from the wings, Bigsby almost apologetically acknowledges that "theatre is unstable and destabilizing" and that drama
"displays its necessary incompletions--necessary because the text has to allow for the impress of performance and the interaction of the audience" ("A View" 132). Rather than pose an obstacle to contemporary criticism, it seems to me that this flagrantly mediated quality should lure postmodern critics to the portals of drama, especially American drama since "realism" foregrounds the problematical nature of the "real." Postmodernism's focal points--the representation of constructed realities, the illusion of linearity, the performative nature of identity, the non-transparency of language, the multiplicity of meaning, the mediation of consciousness, the breaking down of boundaries, the nature of spectatorship--all seem most "dramatically" rendered paradigmatic in the texts of the theatre. Yet as Adler's 1990 assessment of scholarship confirms, post-structuralist or deconstructionist approaches "have been applied hardly at all to the modern American drama" (54).

Since my own deconstructive approach is filtered through a feminist lens, I am heartened by so prominent a critic as Bigsby turning to a founding feminist, Helene Cixous, to capsulize the indictments of unproblematic realism: "'In this system, the "character" represents a set of externals . . . the guarantor of the transmission of sense and of the "true," at once porte-parole, emissary, and idol, indisputably human, at least partially universalizable, and homogenous. The ideology underlying this fetishization of "character" is that of an "I" who is
a whole subject . . . conscious, knowable’” (130-31). It is, however, regrettable that most feminist drama critics have indiscriminately attributed this "male gaze" ideology of objective reality and full presence to all ostensibly realistic drama; not surprisingly, domestic realism garners the fiercest feminist fire as content seems to exacerbate the treachery of the form. Despite Michael Cadden’s demanding on behalf of American drama, "[W]here are the feminist critics?" (133), the appealing symmetry of a marginalized voice addressing a marginalized genre has not held sway. Even Smith, in the "Response" to her respondents, states: "I am not as sanguine as Professor Cadden about the feminist path as the route to recognition" (138), noting that 1985’s *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* includes only one play, Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*, whose title Smith finds fittingly ironic. Encouraging instead a focus on drama and national culture, Smith cites Stanley Kauffman’s conclusion that America’s "'community hunger’" is an "'American theatrical phenomenon’" (139, emphasis original). Yet in her call for a reading of "American drama contextually within American culture as a genre in search of its audience as well as its subject," Smith quotes, not protagonist Willy Loman, but wife Linda: "'attention must be paid’" (140).

Though Linda spoke of human beings, her husband particularly, I am convinced that attention must be paid, not only to the object of that voice, but to the voice itself—or to its silencing. Women have ever embodied that
"dignity [or horror] of silence" (63) that Mac Wellman finds lacking on American theatrical and cultural stages. Not finding logic in binarism or truth in causality, women, as Freud lamented, are subjects of the question, of that pre-Newtonian mystery (or, more accurately, post-Newtonian unpredictability) which Brustein declared absent in American theatre. As Mary Jacobus points out, women are the "monsters" in the text, the repressed who return to destroy illusions of textual and psychic unity (5). Since textual unity is most insistently associated with realism and psychic unity with family, whose sanctified center is Woman, the American tradition of domestic drama provides fertile turf on which the female monster in the text may arise, her performance—of a gendered Cartesian "I"—disrupting the "realism" of Newtonian, linear drama as it destabilizes the "Family" of national myth.

Far from anti-ideological, "diaper drama" most aptly furthers the legacy of an "always already" political tradition. Its beginnings in James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming (1890) lay bare the underlying political nature of American family plays as Margaret confronts gender-dictated sexuality in supporting a husband who has revealed his animal nature. Herne's conflation of psychological realism with domestic settings provided a political, if not feminist, heritage, which Susan Glaspell would evidence in Trifles (1916), where two women anticipate the current "battered woman's syndrome" as a legal defense. Even the most notable of the agit-prop playwrights of the 1930s,
Clifford Odets, grounded his social consciousness in domestic settings as did his contemporary Lillian Hellman, whose strong female protagonists kept alive a recessive feminist strain. When post-war American drama emerged, it did so as domestic and realistic, ideological and political; moreover, the apex of that tradition was to arise not only by refining its form and content but also, and more significantly, by realizing its latent subversive and transformative impulse. The canon-bearing plays of Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee ironically insist on both realism and family as problematic constructs.

A postmodernist feminist approach thus reveals that the family tradition in American drama represents a discourse as vital, as political, as urgent as that of any other theatre; to stage the psycho-political divisions in the American family is to stage the psycho-political divisions in the American identity. Agreement with the playwright’s politics never a prerequisite for recognition of a play’s significance, feminist spectators must renegotiate access to mainstream theatre. Though it is undeniable that the most challenging feminist theatre occurs in alternative venues, it is also undeniable that such theatre reaches only the converted. Only mainstream theatre offers that possibility of transformation to be found in communal disavowal of Oedipal polarization on a personal, familial, and national level. In re-viewing postwar plays from a perspective of family as a political
site, I find encouragement that those that are canonized are those that denaturalize, even if inadvertently, the dominant myth of family perpetrated at the time on sociological as well as theatrical stages. Concomitantly, from a perspective of classical realism as an epistemological site, I am convinced that the linchpin plays of the American tradition denaturalize the linear ideology of realism by attenuating the form to a liminal rather than classical mode.

Without this heritage, there would perhaps not have emerged the postmodern drama which even Brustein lauds as a "reinvented," "reimagined" theatre. Yet the most oft-discussed contemporary playwrights seem inevitably, if resistantly, to turn to family drama. And, again, the degree to which they destabilize the myth of family and of psychological causality seems to determine the force of their plays. Those most provocative take up the challenge to that domestic drama, now epitomized by Neil Simon, which perpetuates both the traditional views of family and the assumptions of classical realism. In the current climate of foundationalist backlash, these playwrights dare to further the feminist, deconstructive legacy of American family drama by filtering their plays through an awareness of family as system, consciousness as mediated, identity as performative, reality as observer-influenced, and order as chaos-permeated. As our nation claims a "moral" right to forge the new world order, contemporary American domestic drama often stages America in paroxysms of identity
construction, clinging violently to a binary logic of self defined against Other, inside against out.

Anticipating resistance from many fronts, I nonetheless hope to establish the ideologically subversive nature of America's tradition of domestic realism as well as its transformative, markedly feminist, possibilities. Chapter One provides theoretical grounding, beginning with an overview of family theory, whose 1970s' "Big Bang" (Cheal 9) overturned assumptions of family as a universal and pre-political essence to reveal it as an ideological construct and politicized system. This mid-'70s' upheaval in sociology parallels upheavals in feminism and in theatre, which illuminate a post-1975 flourishing of that obfuscated transformative strain in the American dramatic legacy. Since family has ever loomed as "the central bete noir" for feminists (Elshtain 1), contemporary family drama on stage seems a "veritable experimental laboratory" for the playing out of the current debate about family drama off stage. As this debate is both within and about feminism, I devote the second section of Chapter One to feminist theory, its mid-1970s' materialist challenge to liberal and cultural dynamics and the consequences thereof for the analysis of family as a process of gender acquisition.

The third section considers the ramifications of this shift in focus for feminist drama criticism, which has emulated feminist film criticism's "male-gaze," anti-narrative bias and categorical rejection of mainstream
formats. Although film criticism has admirably evolved beyond this bind, feminist drama criticism remains mired in the notion of a passive spectator colonized and compromised by a patriarchal, if not pornographic, realistic theatre. As hunkering down in this position forcloeses access to the American dramatic tradition, I urge a re-evaluation of both feminist and theatrical possibilities, suggesting in the fourth section that non-classical science, particularly chaos theory, provides a provocative analogue for a non-classical realism and a non-traditional family system. If transformation is the requisite of feminism, then the order-from-chaos possibilities of Ilya Prigogine’s dissipative structures signal a liberating epistemological shift for feminist drama critics. To abandon Newtonian/Cartesian logic for a Prigoginian/Derridian perspective is to escape the masculinist order of determinism for a new feminist order of flux, which has ever "haunted" American domestic drama.

Before turning to those post-1975 plays which most overtly challenge fixity, I suggest in Chapter Two a retroactive application of this revised feminist approach to that royal flush dealt from America’s dramatic deck before the political and epistemological revolutions of the 1960s and ’70s: O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey into Night; Williams’s The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire; Miller’s Death of A Salesman; and Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? These plays seem to presage those revolutions in their denaturalization of family and
destabilization of realism and reality. Rather than
upholding assumptions of unmediated consciousness and
psychological causality, these most canonized of plays
subvert the dominant, masculinist ideology apotheosized in
their time. Their legacy, then, is not the fixity of the
status quo but the possibility of transformation. And the
signifiers of this possibility are the very female
characters targeted by feminist critics as evidence of a
hopelessly misogynistic and regressive ethic in American
theatre. This continued feminist insistence on strong
female role models ignores the shift in focus in feminism
itself and occludes the subversive potential of the
excluded term, the present absence. Coded as threat to a
male order, the female ghost-monsters of these plays haunt
their own houses and can only perform their gendered roles.
Thus do they signal the possibility of a higher order by
throwing into chaos the family system. Boundaries blurred,
such an order breaks those binary codes of male/female,
order/chaos, public/private that domestic realism
putatively reaffirms. In claiming a subversive strain in
America's linchpin plays, I posit a legacy that is
transformative, hence feminist. Though I recognize the
heresy therein, I risk banishment from the ranks of
feminist drama critics so profound is my conviction that to
reject mainstream drama constitutes self-willed
marginalization.

Chapter Three traces this legacy even more heretically
in the family plays of Sam Shepard, whose mid-'70s'
defection from the avant-garde to a tradition he had vehemently disparaged testifies to the inexorability of that tradition on the American stage. Shepard's shift, however, reflects a shift (or, in my view, distillation) in the tradition itself from ostensibly classical realism to a form which critics have variously termed New Realism or Super-realism. Incorporating the experimentalism of 1960s' theatre and performance art, Shepard's family plays aggressively destabilize linear narrative, psychological causality, and the familial myth, thereby furthering rather than flouting the core legacy of American domestic drama. Indeed Shepard's current prominence serves to confirm the irony that the exemplars of the American dramatic tradition are those playwrights who undermine from within both the presentation (realism) and the representation (family) of that tradition. Like his predecessors, Shepard endorses neither the order of classical realism nor the order of the traditional family, urging instead a transformation from these calcified and polarized realms. Once again, the harbingers of that transformation are subjugated female characters, pushed to margins which become thresholds of a new order. Most feminist critics, however, remain unconvinced and see Shepard as the macho culmination of a patriarchal hegemony, a charge this chapter hopefully refutes.

In Chapter Four, I consider those contemporary plays which seem most effectively, though not exclusively, to exemplify the irrepressible tradition of American domestic
realism as well as its most potent legacy. My selection will inevitably smack of the arbitrary as there are a multitude of current playwrights writing family plays and many do tap the subversive roots of the tradition. The theatrical experimentalism of the '60s, while yielding few memorable plays, did unleash, as evidenced in Shepard, a more frontal attack on the psychological causality and linear narrative of classical realism; moreover, the political and epistemological upheavals of the period, in auspicious combination with a burgeoning off-Broadway and regional theatre movement, encouraged voices from the margins to challenge more aggressively the ideology of mainstream dramatic content as well as form. Female and black dramatists resuscitated lamentably lifeless traditions, which have provided, in turn, an injection for American theatre. Success, however, inevitably elicits controversy, which my selection of playwrights reflects. Most notably, in the case of women dramatists, I risk the wrath of two feminist camps in identifying Marsha Norman's 'night, mother and Tina Howe's Painting Churches as embodying American drama’s feminist legacy. Those who applaud the penetration of any woman into the male bastion of theatre will decry the omission of such playwrights as Beth Henley and Wendy Wasserstein, who I find ultimately proffer only a regressive feminism. Those who dismiss unequivocally any domestic or realistic play as patriarchal will loathe my positing the possibility of a transformative feminist ethic in two mainstream successes.
Equally resisted will be my conviction that August Wilson, in such plays as *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, seems to epitomize the mining of the subversive strain in American drama far more than the more overtly revolutionary black playwrights who preceded him. And perhaps intransigently resisted will be my claim that, among the still predominant white male playwrights, David Mamet emerges as a befitting final test case since his regional and Broadway success in other, flagrantly male, genres did not shield him from the lure of domestic realism. *The Cryptogram* crystallizes the monolithic endurance of the tradition in American theatre currently apparent in the profligacy of Neil Simon, but it simultaneously underscores the core legacy of that tradition as a transformative subversiveness of form and content lacking in other successful playwrights and linking Mamet, Wilson, Howe, and Norman to the lifeblood of American drama. And again evidence of that link lies in the female or feminized Others, the ghost-monsters that they stage.

The stakes of my defense of American domestic realism as always politicized and often progressive are high. American theatre, with no government funding and exorbitant production costs, struggles against odds which its critics—feminist, postmodern, or otherwise—should not reactively scramble to worsen. In truth, outside academia, theatre critics retain little power to do so since most newspapers and periodicals have cut theatre coverage to a distressing minimum. Tellingly, however, film critic David Denby was
allotted space in the *Atlantic Monthly* to proclaim himself one of numerous New York "theatrephobes" and ask "How can anything be represented on a stage? The place for representation is the cinema" (38). Undeniably, theatre cannot compete with film or television in fostering realistic illusions, but, in its foregrounding of representation and realism as illusion, serious theatre can uniquely address those spectators who are speculators in transformative possibilities. As Bonnie Marranca points out, "[W]hat is more remarkable, even dangerous, about theatre is its ability to demonstrate the potentiality of future worlds in their very possibility of being acted by human beings living now" (8-9).

To foreclose on American theatre is to obviate a singular channel to community in a country now the most polarized and violent among industrialized nations. Since much of this violence occurs in the home, American family drama seems to warrant re-examination from a contemporary critical perspective to establish its profoundly political base and subversive potential. In staging gender construction as a foundation for hierarchical structures, domestic drama offers paradigms for the violent polarization of American society and thus confirms the perhaps cliché but, in an era of rampant domestic violence, still valid, feminist insistence that the personal is political. As the boundary line of this public/private dichotomy is blurred, so, too, are those boundaries between male and female, order and chaos, text and performance,
mainstream and avant-garde, which have been constructed to uphold a binary logic of self defined against Other and presence against absence. In those plays which form the tradition of American drama, it is the absent Other, marginalized and feminized, who from the borders transgresses the borders to signal a liminal realm and liminal realism. As gendered identity is flaunted as performative, the notion of fixity, linearity, and causality emerge as theatrical artifice as well.

Marranca points out that "of all new languages it is the theatrical vocabulary that has most revitalized American scholarship in the last two decades" (11), but theatre writers have ironically contributed little to this language. My own attempt to re-appropriate the vocabulary of theatre for a revaluation of American theatre aims not only to resolve this irony but to champion the theatre's original social and communal function. In a culture aggressively theatrical, the family stage—in and out of the theatre—offers perhaps one hope for transformation and community, a hope which feminists especially cannot afford to abdicate. Sociologist Sara Ruddick lends credence to my call for the paradigmatic possibilities of the literally and figuratively theatricalized family: "Again and again, family power dramas are repeated in psychic, interpersonal, and professional dramas, while they are institutionalized in economic, political, and international life. Radically recasting the power-gender roles in those dramas might just revolutionize social conscience" (89).
Though many echo Frank Rich in finding it naive to look to theatre for social change (Cl), only a lingering belief, albeit naive, in community and in the theatre which, from its origins, has celebrated it can sustain hope in the face of apocalyptic polarization. As emblem of this community, even if it has become only a "community of the question" (Blau 12), mainstream theatre in America can proffer a voice for transformation, a voice which most resounds in the liminal realism of the domestic drama legacy. From the belly of the leviathan, then, emerges a new order of theatre, of family, of community.

NOTES

1 See Brenda Murphy for an insightful identification of American as well as European sources for American dramatic realism and hence a native form. Though her focus is more historical and her concentration on pre-World War II drama, Murphy confirms my determination to retrieve the study of American drama from the "pigeonholes" (ix).

2 Even from within comes reinforcement for the assault on the American stage as playwright Mac Wellman fires again on its unique and ongoing "Euclidean character," wherein single motives are explicated and inner truths excavated. Wellman, however, faults not the realistic/naturalist form itself but the confusion of the convention with reality so that the sham of "one-to-one meaningfulness" (64) is delivered by playwrights "sleepwalking" under the dogma of the oracular method-actor (65).

3 As Bigsby points out, so deep-rooted is the American critic's prejudice against his own drama that the first books on Miller, Albee, and Mamet emerged from outside the American ranks; contemporary playwrights fare the worst as 126 of 180 articles on twentieth-century American drama in Modern Drama from 1958 to 1986 concerned O'Neill, Williams, Miller, and Albee. And though American drama listings in the MLA International Bibliography have escalated since 1981, only O'Neill figures prominently.

4 Concurring with Smith, Joyce Flynn, however, insists that this critical stance toward drama is not inadvertent neglect but "purposeful Freudian forgetting," resulting from scholarly suspicion of any art "created in cooperation
with democratic audiences" (124), a suspicion which may explain "why the new excavations and deconstructions have rarely mined the theatre" (125). Michael Cadden, who once "followed the taste of our Dean, Robert Brustein" (133), also supports Smith's defense of American drama, adding that commercialism and Broadway are not any more damaging than the "workshopping" of regional theatre and that "Broadway has turned out an extraordinary proportion of the American plays worth thinking about" (135). Cadden confirms that the bias is not strictly national but generic as well since academia views drama as "an unwholesomely compromised form of literature" (135), the taint of performance most obvious in recent and naturalistic plays.

WORKS CITED


CHAPTER ONE

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFTS:
FAMILY, FEMINISM, AND CHAOS

"And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds."

"The Idea of Order at Key West"
Wallace Stevens

This chapter provides an overview of shifts in family theory, feminist theory, and scientific theory as grounding for a reconceptualization of feminist drama criticism. Not sociologist, feminist theorist, or scientist, I am emboldened only by the most profound conviction that plumbing these interdisciplinary depths reveals a more evocative epistemology through which to approach American domestic realism. The reconceptualization of family as an open, non-linear system begs reconsideration of the putative insularity and fixity of family drama; moreover, feminist recognition of gender as produced and often performed underscores the significance of this subject matter for the stage. As to dramatic form, the assault on realism, fiercest among feminist critics, can be neutralized by evolutions in film theory which discard notions of closed forms or colonized audiences. Undergirding these shifts away from linearity and stability is a shifting epistemology in science, which resonates with images of a non-stable, non-binary, liminal reality to

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confirm my own perception of a liminal domestic realism in American theatre. Its harbingers are female characters, ghosts who haunt home and stage, dissolving boundaries between absence and presence, chaos and order and thereby unveiling transformative possibilities.

FAMILY THEORY

The epistemological shift in Family Theory defused the binarism at the base of previous concepts of family. To attributes of universality, stability, and nuclearity had been grafted a differentiation of sex roles, resulting in a definition of family according to dichotomies of universal/historical, public/private, society/individual, closed/open, male/female. As feminists point out, these dichotomies are not only naturalized but hierarchized so that the woman’s role as nurturing family center is construed as support for and dependence on the male wage-earner in need of a haven. She thus becomes object to his subject and his haven, her confinement since her function is reproductive. This static concept of family, which pervaded social patterns, was challenged by a concept of the family as an evolving, open system, a process rather than a state. Rejecting linear notions of social causes and effects, theorists emphasized the interrelational aspect of the family, whereby a fluctuation in one part affects the whole; they also pointed out the constructed nature of family, a construct which feminists deem ideological and political. This shift from an epistemology of stability, fixity, and universality opens possibilities
for the transformation of the familial and social system
and correlative possibilities for a drama which stages that
system.

Significantly, the early twentieth-century
entrenchment of that drama in American theatre coincided
with the entrenchment in international anthropology of the
concept of family as universal. By "proving" that
aborigines had marriage, Bronislaw Malinowski "proved" that
family was a universal institution—a bounded or nuclear
social unit, sharing love, fulfilling the universal
requirement of child nurturance, and resisting change. By
the 1950s, arguably the apex of family, structural
functionalism had become standard sociological theory and
incorporated the differentiation of sex roles into
Malinowski's definition (Cheal 9-12). Harvard sociologist
Talcott Parsons, comparing the stability of systems to
homeostasis in physiology and using a binary logic which
now seems "remarkably naive and simplistic" (Broderick 11),
eventually reached the "ill-fated conclusion that the
standard solution [to system survival] . . . was the
nuclear family's gender-by-generation structure and its
four (of course!) basic roles" (Broderick 13): the father's
equated with the instrumental function; the mother's, with
the expressive function; the daughter's, with the
integrative function; and the son's, with the pattern-
maintenance function.

The sexualized division of public and private spheres
and of labor naturalized in this concept of family had
profound consequences in the marketplace, supposedly the antithesis of the private haven of family. Such consequences are, of course, materialist and political, belying the sanctification of Family as a pre-historical, pre-political, universal institution. Most theorists, in fact, regard the nuclear family as a recent development dating from a nineteenth-century bourgeois ethic.\(^1\) The sanctified nuclear Family epitomizes liberal democratic notions of individualism, providing sanctuary from the demands of the workplace for the autonomous liberal subject (read male wage-earner) by a woman who embodies the survival not only of the species but also of values. She, like family, is presumably pre-political, a-historical, and extra-legal (Brown, "Finding" 17). Obviously, scholars were to find much to attack in structural functionalism, but it did at least recognize family as a system, albeit an equilibrium-maintaining one situated hierarchically within another (Broderick 14-15).

This theoretical monolith of the universal, stable, nuclear family exploded in the "Big Bang" (Cheal 9) of the mid-1970s, which resulted from an insistence on empirical analysis of family operations. Most theories, however, still shared the "premise that social causes and effects were connected to one another in a strictly linear fashion that excluded consideration of any of the concepts that were distinctive to the systems approach" (Broderick 6); thus family systems (or process) theory initially remained on the fringes, though it was to prove the most
revolutionary. Based on General System Theory and the science of cybernetics or self-correcting systems, family systems theory revised structural functionalism's version of family as system to describe that system as non-linear and unstable. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory asserted that, as family is an organic unit or system, "a change in one part produces compensatory change in other parts" (Papero 4), aligning family with the same processes which govern other life forms like intergenerational transmission of relational patterns.

Resisting this universalization of all systems as "natural," recent systems theorists follow the Frankfurt School in concluding that the family constitutes a social unit. As Broderick points out, they advocate an analysis of family as a system on which order is imposed, not by Nature, but by interpersonally constructed meanings (23-24); family exemplifies "an open, ongoing, goal-seeking, self-regulating, social system" (37), sharing characteristics such as interconnectedness with all like systems but differing in such features as its greater complexity and "its unique structuring of gender and generation" (37). The individual family system is determined by variations in structure, in its members' psychobiology, and its socio-cultural and historical context; but all family systems are open and ongoing—that is, not static structure but a pattern of processes. Broderick speaks of the family's "construal of reality" (57) and of family systems "in terms of the balance between
shared and individual perceptions of reality" (211); moreover, he urges process theorists to move beyond a "linear model of the socialization process" (243) to systemic principles since assumptions of linear causality preclude adequate representation of an ongoing process.

Obviously this direction in family theory, sown in the '60s, shares roots, if not reciprocal influence, with the Women's Movement. To accept the then prevalent conception of family as a static, natural, and universal system, wherein the mother served as expressive function of reproduction and socialization, was to accept a definition of woman as a private, irrational, docile body—an Other in a male world. Feminists began to insist on family not just as a social unit but as an ideological construct or political entity, reproduction as a social relation (Brown, "Finding" 17, Collier 25), and socialization as genderization. The family's link with Nature obviously emerges from its association with biological reproduction; however, female dependency on men as a result of childbirth constitutes a political rather than biological phenomenon (Barrett and McIntosh 34-38).

Feminist family theory thus insists that family does not constitute a unification of interests but a naturalization of the sexual division of labor (Cheal 9), which has bred invidious consequences. Because the Family has been sanctified as a natural haven of self-determinism with the male as liberal public subject, the woman, supposedly protected in her private realm, actually
experiences extra-legal status. The more the myth of haven persists, the more evidence to the contrary is resisted; thus the rampant domestic violence which so often belies this myth is treated more leniently by the "outside" public realm, as evidenced by the smaller percentage of domestic perpetrators actually prosecuted for homicide (Collier 34-36). Only in the mid-1950s was concern about domestic violence voiced, a belatedness not justified by any statistical increase in its occurrence (Brienes and Gordon 491); the 1970s saw the first major campaign against "wife beating," a term later changed to "wife battering" in an attempt to reflect the systemic and political rather than individual and domestic nature of the crime (Fraser 175). Still, public reluctance to trespass on the private "haven" of Family precluded an equivalence of battering with battery. Despite the American Medical Association’s unprecedented 1992 declaration of wife battering as a national epidemic when the figures reached four million women per year (Smolowe 57), feminist scholars point out that the crisis is insidiously depoliticized with assault on wives subsumed under the rubric of "spouse abuse" or "family violence" and with social services aimed at rehabilitating the victim rather than reordering the system (Fraser 175, Walker 211-212).

Such displacement serves to preclude admission of familial organization rather than individual male or female psychopathy as the seedbed of female oppression. A "locus of struggle" (Brienes and Gordon 529) as well as support,
family structured by gender and age inevitably constitutes a hierarchy of power relationships, which provide a fertile "training ground for violence" (Brienes and Gordon 503). Feminist fears of the repercussions of familially gendered polarization are born out, of course, by recent statistics showing that "An American resident is 'more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten, and killed in the home at the hands of a loved one than any place else, or by anyone else'" (Deats and Lenker 1); such violence and the family structure itself, not natural or inevitable, are produced in a gendered society where male power dominates (Brienes and Gordon 492-93).

FEMINIST THEORY

This emphasis on the production of such phenomena reflects a shift in feminism concurrent and correlative with shifts in family theory. As family theorists had evolved from concepts of a stable, linear, closed system, so feminist theorists evolved from concepts of stable, non-mediated, individual identities defined by sexual difference. In recognizing gender as culturally produced rather than biologically given, feminists examined the process of Oedipal trajectories to inscribe presence or stable identities. The Family sanctified by structural functionalism increasingly was targeted by feminism as an incubator for social polarization; regrettably, despite diverse attitudes among feminists about the family system, feminism is often held responsible for the decline of family and of national values. Actually most feminists
call for transformation rather than abolition of this open, unstable system, for if gendered hierarchies are produced, they may be disassembled. The epistemological shift in feminism, then, cements the evolution in family theory beyond a binary or gendered perspective, a dissolution of oppositions yields that possibility of community so intrinsic to theatre.

Initially, and perhaps necessarily, the dynamic of second-wave feminism was based on a liberal concept of individual progress toward autonomy, specifically through the achievement of female equality within existing social structures. Rejecting such an appropriated ethic, cultural (or radical) feminists, most notably in France, emphasized an essentialist concept of Woman which posed a separatist alternative to a goal-oriented, hierarchical male society through a "feminine" aesthetic of nurturance and spontaneity. Though seemingly antithetical, both these concepts—woman as sociologically male-equal or Woman as biologically Not-Male—share reactive roots in the binary opposition of male/female, wherein each defines itself against the other. Liberal as well as cultural feminism faltered in the 1970s when women of color attacked feminism as a middle-class, totalizing ethic, which subsumed differences of race or class under the mantra of sexual difference.² An emergent materialist approach, urged by British feminists, recognized differences rather than difference, focusing on women as historical subjects; moreover, the identification of a "sex-gender system"
(Rubin 165) pointed out the conflation of sex, a biologically determined difference, with gender, a culturally produced one, spurring analyses of the process of gender acquisition described in Teresa de Lauretis's book as *Technologies of Gender*.

The primary factory for gender production is obviously the family, a constructed system, which, like any representation, both reproduces and produces its culture, specifically gender differentiation, "in and of itself an evil, because it circumscribes difference and denies access to the 'other' in each of us" (Cornell and Thurschwell 157). As the Derridian terminology here indicates, materialist feminism evidences an often-denied influence of postmodernism. The postmodernist impulse to dethrone meta-narratives, destabilize hegemonies, deconstruct ideologies, and denaturalize dichotomies obviously gives voice to those marginalized as "Other" in any oppositional, hence ultimately hierarchical, discourse. Feminism's intrinsically political and transformative imperative, in turn, can defuse charges against postmodernism for its putatively apolitical, nihilistic tendencies. Though the "personal is political" creed may be dismissed as hackneyed, if not naively individualistic, a reinterpretation of "personal" as connoting a subjectivity mediated by sexual as well as class, race, and age differences without foregoing agency renders viable a postmodern feminist ethic. Insisting on gender as paradigmatic of polarization, postmodern feminists regard
the gendering of society as inevitably violent; yet transformation is possible through a Derridian logic of the supplement to displace the logic of the binary.

As the "workshop" for a gendered ideology, family is inherently political and its effect, far-reaching. Fraser attributes the recognition of family as a political problem to Foucault's concept of power through the internalization of "the gaze" by docile bodies (25-26). If, as Hannah Arendt claims, the concept of "society" which emerged in the modern age was modelled on family (as nations) and all human relationships on the household (28-35), then feminists' (and American playwrights') focus on the family represents a vital discourse. Barrett and McIntosh point out that the polarization between hunter and hunted or active and passive which imbues all relationships is based on the system of marriage (38-43). It is not surprising, then, that some feminists call for a total abolishment of family while others urge its transformation. What is surprising is the alignment of some feminists with the current foundationalist backlash against the demystification of family, a movement avowedly anti-feminist (Brienes and Gordon 510). This alliance becomes comprehensible in terms of what Brown has labelled modernist "hesitations" in feminism, which resist postmodernity even as era: "What constitutes this strategy as reactionary rather than merely conservative is its truncated, instrumental link to a foundational narrative; it is rooted not in a coherent tradition but in a
fetishized, decontextualized fragment or icon of such a narrative—'the American flag,' 'the great books,' 'the traditional family'" ("Feminist Hesitations" 68).

Thus many liberal and cultural feminists share with the New Right a belief that they are thwarting the fragmentation and social breakdown epitomized, for example, by family violence; in fact, according to Brienes and Gordon, this violence is a reflection, not of the breakdown, but of the very struggle for maintenance of the social order (511). Despite the fact that 70% of American families today are not traditional (working father and non-working mother with children) and that the static, idealized family never really existed, 63% of Americans still posit this family form as ideal (Wagner 13-14). And despite a quadrupled divorce rate the past twenty-five years (Popenoe 20), 96% of Americans during that period expressed a personal wish for marriage (Orthner 26-29). Though the recent "family values" barrage has not reduced the divorce rate from 50% and the passage of the traditional nuclear family constitutes a major social upheaval, that passage has left in its wake a residue of political manhandling which goes against the grain of family theory in a non-empirical emphasis on Family rather than families.

In fact, this reactionary capitalization of Family dates from the mid-1970s, ironically synchronized with the "Big Bang" of family theory. Diamond identifies an official shift in political focus from children to the
Family as evidenced in 1977's report "All our Children: The American Family under Pressure"; the subsequent Family Protection Act cemented the traditional (Reaganite) view of Family as a haven of values not subject to intrusion from the public realm (Introduction 1-11). Obviously, the "newness" of this Right (actually 1950s' structural functionalism) stemmed from its direct opposition to feminist issues such as the ERA and abortion; however, its lure for feminists, propelling by the mid-1980s what Faludi terms a "din" of feminist recantation and the semantics of "new, pro-family feminism" (319), reveals a perceived threat not only from feminism (though the rise in female employment and divorce precedes the feminist movement [Thorne 1-2]) but also from the irrefutable fact of familial upheaval as reported by demographers in the 1970s (Boles 312). As the family fragmented, the Family solidified, becoming a totalizing myth based, like all myths, on oppositions "designed to save at least the concept of an 'ideal purity'" (Derrida 115).  

Many feminists scoff at mourning for the death of the Family when diminishing paternal authority has been more than replaced by a familialization of society wherein patriarchal power is now generalized (Barrett and McIntosh 125-29); thus familialism becomes a metaphor to grant legitimacy to government economic policy (11-14). These feminists thus call for an analysis not only of the family as an institution of socialization but also of the "hegemonic status of familial perspective and ideology"
Feminists' superseding of the term "patriarchal" with "masculinist" reflects this extension of male power structures. Familial "exchange" in the sexual division of labor now exists in the public realm, which assumes an unpaid, feminized labor force in the home. As Brown states: "However important 'the family' remains, even its absence or disintegration, in constructing the gendered unconscious, it is decreasingly the vehicle or daily superintendent of masculine dominance in postmodern culture" ("Finding" 30). Though masculinist, like male, power is "deconstructible," Brown warns of the bureaucratic creation and disciplining of feminized "clients" of the state which, like postmodern masculinity, finds power in its very disavowal (26-29).

The familialization of the state confirms the monolith of family as myth and metaphor and, since its decline conjures specters of feminist warriors, feminism is blamed for a generalized national breakdown. To attack the Family is to attack America (in the current form of our "school family," "church family," "university family," "corporate family," and "national family"). And for women to lead the attack is not only un-American but unnatural; yet, in my case at least, all those institutions, availing themselves of the obviously powerful rhetoric of Family emulate also its traditional male-dominated structure—male principals, priests, university presidents, CEOs, White House occupants. Yet, abhorring the facile and gendered meta-narrative, I nonetheless perceive within my own family...
the possibility of evolution beyond Brown's "gendered unconscious" to a non-hierarchical consciousness and the promise of community. Though the family may represent, as Elshtain puts it, the "central bete noir" (1) for feminism, there is I repeat, no unanimous or even majority call among feminists for its abolition.

Because contemporary feminists have admirably resisted the siege mentality of identifying a common enemy and forming a united front, interdisciplinary feminist analysis of family represents a diverse discourse; however, as Thorne indicates, that "rethinking" involves five central themes, which I risk repetition to emphasize: the challenge to assumptions that any family form is natural, biological, or universally functional; the analysis of family as a social and historical unit undergirded by sex/gender and generation structures; the recognition of a differentiation of the male and female family experience that the ideology of the private haven elides; the challenge to such assumed dichotomies as private and public, the familial and the social; the long-standing ambivalence in feminism between values of individual equality and familial, anti-capitalist, "female" values of nurturing collectivity (2-3). Feminist focus on family, then, hardly constitutes a pseudopolitics nor "erodes private life by construing it as a power-riddled battleground" (Elshtain 500). It is instead this valorization of private/public, personal/political
dichotomies which sentences many women to just that "power-riddled battleground" and precludes communal grounds.

Visions of those alternative grounds pervade contemporary feminism, which nonetheless continues to be assailed as divisive and seditious. My own goal is not abolishment of family but abolishment of Family and a reconceptualization beyond a fixated, linear, gender-divided nucleus. Feminists, like other theorists and activists, are simply calling for public and legal recognition of already-existing alternative family structures and a communal resistance to any hierarchical structure. It is not feminism but historical, material conditions which have led to the current "crisis" or alteration of the traditional nuclear Family; nor is it feminism alone which has contributed to the recognition of this sanctified Family as a dangerous ideology. What feminists have uniquely contributed is a recognition that woman's subordinate economic position and gender inscription in the "private realm," valorized by biological or functionalist concepts of family as closed, stable, and universal, translates into the "public realm" through the culturally inscribed "woman's place"—hence, the lower paid "female" professions which presume a primary male income and ignore the fact that the majority of American children will spend at least several years in a single-mother household (Whitehead 47).

Postmodern feminists strive to displace the binary logic whereby gender is paradigmatic of oppositions
reifying dominance over a feminized Other. Defenses of The
Family rest, of course, in the power of negative mimesis to
uphold personal and national identities; its decline, as
Jane Flax points out, may signal the rise of an
"emancipatory transformation in social relations" (22)
beyond asymmetrical power structures:

Domination and submission can be replaced by
reciprocity as the governing principle of all
social relations. Can two genders--bent and
distorted, weighted with conscious and
unconscious history--transform and redeem the
past, in the name of a future nobody can clearly
see? On this question rests not only the future
of feminism and the family but perhaps human life
itself. (36)

Thus a theoretical shift from the concept of family as a
closed system of linear, gendered, and generational
trajectories to one of family as an open system of non-
linear, non-fixated, non-predictable processes parallels an
epistemological shift in feminism, revealing it as an ever
more promising perspective for the construction of an
alternative future.

**FEMINIST DRAMA CRITICISM**

The evolutions in family and feminist theory, which
have reconceptualized family dramas off stage, should point
to a need to reconceptualize those on stage as well.
Indeed, domestic drama’s suitability as a "veritable
laboratory" is confirmed in the theorization of family as a
theatrical construction with role assignments, performed
identities, interactive meaning: Berger and Kellner
conclude that "Marriage in our society is a dramatic act
in which two strangers come together and redefine
themselves'" (qtd. in Broderick 187, emphasis original) while Ochs and Taylor point out that "political order within families is manifested and constructed through family narrative activity" (301). Plays which stage this "dramatic act" or "political order" are not, then, inevitably insular, isolated, non-political, private, psychological, or, at best, psycho/social.

Since it is Brustein's damning equation of "social, domestic, psychological, and realistic" with "causal" ("Crack" 144-45) that denies metaphorical, metaphysical possibilities to the "ancient artifacts" of American domestic drama, the reconceptualization of family as a non-linear, perspectival process should refute at least the content-causal equation. Indeed, family represents not only the most pervasive of metaphors but also the most immediate of transformative political and metaphysical possibilities. Rather than domestic courtrooms where linearity and causality rule, American post-war domestic plays emerge as oracles of the 1970s' theoretical and theatrical rejection of stable, linear models. And rather than "diaper drama" obsessing on whether to grow up, contemporary American theatre emerges as the prophecy's realization and furthers the transformative legacy of American drama by answering Flax's demand for the "(potential) polity" to "grow up" (35) by abandoning self-validating fantasies of the Great Mother, Nature, or Home and evolving into degendered reciprocity.
Just as epistemological shifts have revealed such possibilities in the theatricalized family, so can they absolve American drama's favored theatrical form of charges of reactive re-inscriptions of dominant ideology. Even more damningly than "domestic" has "realistic" been equated with causal since contemporary critics, especially feminists, have escalated the assault on realism as dangerous, the most so when coupled with domesticity. What is actually dangerous is this intransigent stance because it serves ironically to re-entrench a binarism lethal to feminism. In affirming dichotomies of realism/theatricalism, text/performance, mainstream/avant garde, inside/outside, and male/female, feminist drama critics validate hegemonic fixity and effect a self-willed marginalization. After deeper examination of the roots of this apparently unperceived bind, I shall consider evolutions in feminist film theory inexplicably ignored by but eminently promising for drama critics.

Assaults on Realism

Realism has long preoccupied feminist critics; as Jill Dolan notes, "The feminist debate over aesthetics is in some ways a response to realism as the dominating form of modern American theatre" (Spectator 84). This debate has reflected the stages of feminism itself, though Austin laments the recalcitrance of drama criticism to incorporate the most recent theory. Liberal feminist criticism, incorporating liberal humanism's belief in "universal" values for free individuals and focusing on the passive,
silenced images of women in canonized (i.e. male-authored) texts, appeared in drama criticism only in the 1980s with "a rush of work" (17) on Shakespeare. Despite Austin's bemoaning the lack of a first-stage grounding, much feminist drama criticism still reflects this liberal ethic, defining a feminist play as only one which depicts positive female images to communicate universal values.9

Cultural feminist criticism went beyond this criticism of canonical plays to reject them completely in favor of a counter-canon to celebrate a female culture. To the 1960s' avant-garde attack on realism as ideologically and covertly conservative, these feminists added the dimension of gender and defined feminist drama by a separatist feminine aesthetic centering the mother-daughter relationship.10 Both approaches reflect sociological assumptions that theatre mirrors reality, whether reproducing liberal feminism's "realistic" images of women or cultural feminism's nurturing image of "Woman." Recognizing that any representation, including theatre, produces as well as reproduces culture, materialist criticism deconstructs both the liberal Woman-as-male-manque and the cultural Woman-as-not-male to focus on the linguistic and theatrical modes of representing women. Since materialist feminists constitute the most pervasive and persuasive voices of contemporary feminist criticism and since they have most aggressively opened fire on American mainstream theatre, its redemption lies in this approach.
The death knell for realism was arguably tolled in 1988, the year of publication of both Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* and Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Case deprecates the cultural representation of a fictional "Woman," born of the suppression of real women by their relegation to the private, actually invisible, realm and subsequent mythologization in the public one, a practice of gender fiction decreed in Aristotle's *Poetics* and continued today as women fulfill the role of commodity in an exchange system: "Classical plays and theatrical conventions can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production" (7). Case concludes with a materialist focus on historical and classist as well as gender oppression and on production as "the central human action played out in the market place and, for women, in the domestic sphere" (83). Her "New Poetics" calls for a deconstruction of the traditional systems of representation complicit in this ideological production.

Poststructuralist critiques had identified narrative as pandering to the desire for stable identity or presence through the illusion of linear unity and closure and the camouflaging of ideology; Barthes described narrative as universal and Oedipal in its search for origins of self (47)—the guilt mongering which Brustein scorned in American drama. Feminism added the specification of Oedipal desire as male with women posited as
"object/objective/obstacle" (Case, *Feminism* 116). Adapting this premise of male desire to theatrical production, where playwrights, directors, and producers are overwhelmingly male, Case also applies it to spectator reception; here she signals a prevalent focus in drama criticism and its grounding in film theory, which arose in the 1970s from Althusser and Barthes’ insistence that "ideology—whether it be the ideology of Christianity or the ideology of realism—must be understood, first and foremost, as a representational system which addresses subjects (Mayne 16, emphasis original).

Althusser urged a "scientific" discourse on ideology from outside ideology without an "always already" subject, inadvertently conflating the individual with subject positions and endorsing a structuralist ethic of a coherent meaningful textuality. Barthes, on the other hand, conceptualized a multiplicity of subject positions but no subjectless discourse and reflects a poststructuralist ethic of provisional textuality in allowing the possibility of a "limited plurality" even in the realist text and of multiple, even contradictory meanings (Mayne 15). Originally following Althusser, film theorists formulated a subject/spectator trapped and mechanically determined by a cinematic institution where psychoanalytic and ideological workings became one monolith of Oedipal desire/narrative/identification. Drawing on Freudian biological and Lacanian linguistic notions of the self as determined by castration anxiety and unfulfilled desire, French theorists
equated the experience of cinema to a regressive fantasy of pre-Oedipal wholeness, a return to the Lacanian mirror stage. Since Freudian civilization and Lacanian symbolic order are linked to the phallus (hence Derrida's identification of a "phallogocentric" system), the woman is constituted as both signifier of and release from the male's fear of lack or castration.

Thus, Laura Mulvey, in 1975's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," formulated the Foucaultian concept of the "male gaze," which was to set the course of feminist film and later drama criticism. As "bearer of the look" (11) opposed to woman as "bearer of the bleeding wound" (7), the male occupies a spectator position founded on either voyeurism (devaluation) or fetishism (overvaluation) of women to counter castration anxiety. To assure himself of full-presence or the phallus, the spectator aligns his gaze with the male protagonist, aided by the "male" camera in classical Hollywood cinema. As the protagonist follows the Oedipal trajectory to define himself against a castrated (M)other, an eroticized object of desire, so the spectator (male or female) defines presence against female absence. Mulvey thus concluded that the scopic, identificatory pleasure of narrative (Oedipal) cinema reconfirmed violent patriarchal binarism and precluded feminist access since linear narrative reflects the fact that "Sadism demands a story" (14).

Like Mulvey's rejection of classical Hollywood cinema, drama critics' call for a rejection of theatrical realism...
is based on a conviction that the representational apparatus is most threatening when covert. Since fourth-wall realism creates the illusion of a transparent text and thus masks the ideology inherent in all representation, this form constitutes the most conservative perpetrator of the dominant cultural codes. Following the unmasking of realism by Artaud and Brecht, materialist feminists follow the latter’s foregrounding of the apparatus, adding to the class dimension one of gender. Dolan condemns classical realism for positioning the reader as a subject who is interpellated and provided a parameter of meaning or "truth" through a narrative wherein textual description is resolved in closure, the reinstatement of a culturally determined order (Feminist Spectator 84). Of all representation’s "transcendent, universalizing traps," which convert the material base of women into a class of gender and a transcendent myth of "Woman" to perpetuate male ideology, it is realism, particularly the American variety, which is the most dangerous:

American realism’s "craving for a referent"—that is, its mimetic representations of "the real"—situates the spectator as a subject of coherent identity who can be appealed to through the text’s construction to authorize its illusion. If feminism points out that representation does not construct women as subjects, and also views coherent identity as a myth, a feminist mimesis is extremely difficult to theorize. (Feminist Spectator 96)

Specifying the issue of identity as central to feminist drama criticism, Dolan acknowledges that the postmodernist disavowal of fixed identity threatens the
feminist political agenda and icons like consciousness raising; yet she insists that a concept of experience as an ideologically constructed material reality, not a basis of Truth, leads to an eminently political examination of the power structures of representation, most especially "male-identified realism" ("Defense" 60) and the construction of subjectivity within them. Also positing the subject as a linguistic or narrative position rather than the natural Cartesian "self," Case calls for the construction of the woman as subject of the gaze, a possibility non-existent in realistic theatre. Though I concur with Dolan that a postmodernist perspective affords the most highly politicized epistemology for the feminist critic, I resist the defeatist abdication of a male-gaze criticism. I thus depart from most of my counterparts, who disallow any transformative possibilities in realistic theatre, especially that most abhorrent manifestation, domestic drama, where the Freudian model of subordinate female sexuality invests the formal convention:

Realism in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as sexual "Other." The portrayal of female characters within the family unit—with their confinement to domestic setting, their dependence on the husband, their often defeatist, deterministic view of the opportunities for change—makes realism a "prisonhouse of art" for women, both in their representation on stage and in the female actor's preparation and production of such roles. (Case, Feminism 124)

I am encouraged that Jeanie Forte, citing film critics, does reconsider the conclusion that realism is
useless for feminists. Unlike Lynda Hart, who re-affirms the constitutive dramatic aesthetic (Aristotle's) as unwaveringly "pernicious" (Introduction 3), Forte does not regard as uncomplicated the premise that a realist play cannot effect a political response. She also questions the assumption that a text which frustrates narrative expectations automatically provides a political alternative to disrupt the dominant ideology-classical realism juncture; since "context is the final arbiter of meaning" (124), a play which aims for political subversion through anti-realism may prove self-defeating since its form precludes the likelihood of production.

Unfortunately, Forte ultimately underscores the predominance of a lesbian ethic in alternative theatre as the means to thwart the monolith of the male gaze. In rejecting the political efficacy of deconstruction as a closed system which attacks but leaves intact the dominant ideology, Case and Forte together call for a desiring female subject to disrupt the discourse externally, especially one in a homosexual relation which confronts gendered behavior and the dramatic focus on male-female polarities ("Formalism" 62-65). Dolan, moreover, specifies De Lauretis's feminist spectator as lesbian since "personally, artistically, and spectatorially, hers is closest to the view from elsewhere, and offers the most radical position from which to subvert representation" (Feminist Spectator 119).
Also following de Lauretis in "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," Case overcomes the feminist obstacle in postmodernism by supplanting Althusserian/Foucaultian notions of a subject immobilized in ideology with a feminist subject, who inserts gender and agency from both inside and outside ideology; but this subject must have escaped the "social institution of heterosexuality" as have the "dynamic duo" of butch and femme. Lesbianism is privileged as a subject position since "the female body, the male gaze, and the structures of realism are only sex toys for the butch-femme couple" (297). Case, then, resounds the call to arms against the American mainstream theatre tradition: "The violence released in the continual zooming-in on the family unit, and the heterosexist ideology linked with its stage partner, realism, is directed against women and their hint of seduction. . . . Cast the realism aside--its consequences for women are deadly" (297). Regrettably, such a call only undergirds the binary perspective of the male gaze with a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy.

Evolutions in Feminist Film Theory

The feminist but heterosexual critic (surely not an oxymoron) thus finds herself suspended between a modernist (liberal and cultural) foundationalism, which naively leaves reality and realism unchallenged, and a postmodernist (materialist) marginalization, which offers alternative vision primarily through a lesbian lens and non-realistic theatre. To encourage a postmodern
perspective which neither compounds masculinist exclusion from mainstream theatre with self-imposed exile nor rationalizes realism only for its production potential, I turn to an evolution in feminist film theory consistently and bewilderingly elided in feminist drama theory. No longer seeking that escape from the male gaze which ironically serves to validate its immutability, the very film critics cited above have revised the concept itself. Prompted by a previously unconfessed fondness for Hollywood melodrama and by questions about the female spectator, Mulvey first modified the female position to an oscillation between a transvestite, nostalgic fantasy identification with the active male gaze and a masochistic identification with the passive object of that gaze ("Afterthoughts" 12-15).¹²

Still grounded in paradigmatic male/female polarization, this concept confirms that universal castration complex and colonized, gendered spectator who still figures in feminist drama theory and whose fixed position necessitates a rejection of realistic drama as regressive. But Mulvey and others are now rejecting this notion itself as regressive, challenging the conflation of an Althusserian/ Foucaultian sociological subject trapped in the mechanisms of ideology with a Freudian/Lacanian psychological subject trapped in the workings of the symbolic order. This denial of agency to the subject as well as the non-historical notion of the subject itself has spawned a myriad of revisions or rejections of founding
theory; though total rejection seems as reactionary as the theory itself, revision appears essential for feminism since acceptance of a colonized subject constitutes acceptance of an inescapable, gendered object position. And these revisions extend beyond a lesbian subject outside of realism.

Mulvey categorically abdicates the gendered gaze, anti-narrative stance, conceding in 1989's Visual and Other Pleasures that her own argument precluded change and remained "ultimately within its own dualistic terms. The polarization only allows an 'either/or.' As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependent on each other for meaning, their only possible movement is into inversion" (162). Historicizing her male gaze premise in the context of a once-requisite "polemical spirit," Mulvey dismisses its "'conceptual topology'" of inside/outside as politically arresting and its avant-garde "negative" or "counter" aesthetic, including her own alternative films, as initially valuable but ultimately vulnerable to calcification in a system of binary oppositions, wherein dominant ideology is always addressed. Although this passage through counter-myth is a prerequisite of the move from mythologized oppression founded on a paradigmatic mind/body polarization, these "rituals of inversion" can actually serve as a "social safety-valve for the forces of disorder" (169).
Mulvey points out that the middle stage of tripartite narrative celebrates "transgressive desire and organises it into a stylized cultural form: narrative" (170). Though the end integrates this disorder into order, Mulvey perceives a celebration of the possibility of change in the conflict stage, which corresponds to the traditional liminal stage of rites of passage. The contradictions of Oedipal narrative are resolved only by splitting the temporal process into a spatial and mythic opposition between mother (past) and father (future), a "'taming and binding'" (174?) generated by myth to mask collective contact with the unconscious.\(^{13}\)

The contradictions inherent in the "acquisition of sexual identity, family structures, and historical conditions" surface in collective desires which constitute the "shared, social dimension of the unconscious" (175), the symptoms of which erupt in popular culture. But whether carnival or movies (or theatre), these are narrative or temporal forms and thus not necessarily preclusive of transformation as they appear when conceived by spatial, binary logic:

If narrative, with the help of avant-garde principles, can be conceived around ending that is not closure, and the state of liminality as politically significant, it can question the symbolic, and enable myth and symbols to be constantly revalued. A feminist perspective should insist on the possibility of change without closure, drawing by analogy on the female Oedipus complex, the crucible out of which sexual identity does not emerge as pure gold. (175, emphasis mine)
Mulvev refers here to the asymmetry of the male and female Oedipal experience, an imbalance of power, as Althusser perceived, which forces the girl to move into inversion and masquerade and to experience infinitely displaced integration and closure. This intrinsic instability undermines defining dichotomies of male/female, active/passive, mind/body, and inside/outside.

The abdication of binarism has profound implications for feminist drama criticism, which continues a strategy of inversion in privileging "woman-conscious" (Curb 302) alternative theatre and the lesbian perspective. Mulvev's closing from Victor Turner that "'Pleasure becomes a serious matter in the context of innovative change'" (175) warns against this once requisite, now reactionary attack on all realistic theatre, which obviously most pleases American audiences. The insistence on the possibilities of change, on the use of the female Oedipal experience as analogue rather than alternative, on the value of avant-garde as principle not counter-practice, and on the dismantling of fixed identity renders questionable a male gaze approach. Mulvev's historicization of psychoanalytic criticism reveals the female spectator as neither inside and colonized nor outside and critical but an active meaning-constructor of even the most "male-identified," realistic texts.

Also oft-cited but under-incorporated by feminist drama critics, Teresa de Lauretis confirms this threat to unitary subject/spectator positions by positing a double or
divided desire for both mother and father. If cinema’s task (like that of Freudian psychology) is to represent the male quest to confirm the truth of his desire, the contradiction of a double desire must be resolved, as in myth, by the containment or destruction of women. But De Lauretis adamantly rejects the "stoic, brutal prescription of self-discipline, the destruction of visual (narrative) pleasure that seemed inevitable" (Alice 155). Instead, the contradictions which destabilize desire and make it impossible even for Oedipus to fix a gaze open a perspective beyond inversion:

I am not advocating the replacement or the appropriation or, even less, the emasculation of Oedipus. What I have been arguing for, instead, is an interruption of the triple track by which narrative, meaning, and pleasure are constructed from his point of view. The most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is not anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the opposite. It is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject within it, the contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus. (Alice 157)

Like Mulvey, De Lauretis departs from Althusser in insisting on the feminist subject as both simultaneously inside and outside ideology, particularly but not exclusively the ideology of gender or heterosexism, and conscious of such doubled vision:

It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins (or "between the lines," or "against the grain") of hegemonic discourses and
in the interstices of institutions, in counter-practices and new forms of community. (26)

Since these spaces are not oppositional or linear but concurrent and contradictory, this movement does not constitute dialectic or integration but tension, a tension which constitutes the "critical negativity" of feminism's theory and the "affirmative positivity of its politics" (26). Without discounting the promise of de Lauretis's own lesbian "view from elsewhere," a feminist critic can surely view and subvert ideology from other elsewhere. Seen as a binding, monolithic institution like cinematic or theatrical apparatus, heterosexism must also emerge as challengeable and changeable for feminists who perceive heterosexuality as preference, not identity. And so too does "its stage partner, realism."

Feminist drama theory's absolute rejection of realism as a colonization escapable only by a spectator "necessarily in the outsider's critical position" (Dolan 2) rests still in the binding inside/outside, passivity/resistance conception of a conflated subject/spectator. Cautioning against a recent reverse tendency in film theory to oppose spectator to viewer, Judith Mayne finds in feminist film theory's female spectator the most promising model for a spectatorship conceived as a point of tension between the concepts of the psychoanalytical cinematic subject and the sociological film viewer: Barthian rather than Althusserian, the spectator both is and is not the position of coherence.
determined by the narrative and the person of history mediated but real. The spectator is constituted by the competition between claims of the cinematic institution (dominance, homogeneity) and forces which disrupt that apparatus (resistance, heterogeneity) (353–76). Like De Lauretis's "elsewhere," this point of tension unveils Mulvey "ending without closure." Mayne feels that theorization of spectatorship as an "ordinary activity. . . can open up spaces between seemingly opposing terms, thus leading us to attend more closely to how stubbornly our pleasures in the movies [and mainstream dramatic realism] refuse any rigid dichotomies" (172).

Contemporary drama critics, even those who have moved beyond theatre-as-mimesis criticism, seem still resistant to the pleasures of a realist text. They would do well to resist instead the "facile opposition" (Mayne 8) in spectatorship of inside-passive versus outside-active and in theatre of realism-monolithic versus alternative-contestory. To urge an acknowledgement of a boundary-blurring pleasure in realism, I turn again to Mulvey whose reconsideration of the Oedipal myth applies directly to American drama:

Looking at the Oedipal myth in detail, it is remarkable to what extent it is about father/son relationships and how marginal the feminine is to the story. . . . However, the story's narrative structure and the importance of investigation and telling in the story itself offers a Utopian promise, a pointer towards the transformative power of telling one's own story and the social function of popular culture as the narrativisation of collective fantasy. . . . [F]eminist consciousness can affect the discourse
of patriarchy and upset the polarization between masculinity and femininity that keeps order in place. . . . Curiosity and the riddling spirit of the Sphinx activate questions that open up the closures of repression and maintain the force of an "uncertainty principle." (Visual 199-200)

Surely it is time for feminist drama critics to relinquish the initially requisite stance against realistic American domestic drama, which undeniably does foreground father/son relationships and marginalize the female. When male/female, subject/object, inside/outside boundaries are displaced, that figure in the margins, that "riddling spirit of the Sphinx," can signal contradictions within the Oedipal—Mulvey's liminality, de Lauretis's elsewhere, Mayne's tension—which disrupt order and opens closure. Those plays which constitute the legacy of American drama, all "Oedipal with a vengeance," yield readily to a non-binary epistemology, which can recuperate realist texts for feminists, not merely by access to audience but by a transformative impulse. And if this most well-armed critical force can redeem the legacy of American domestic drama as a liminal realism, such redemption will surely disarm other attackers.

CHAOS THEORY AND FEMINIST LIMINALITY

Mulvey's exaltation of an "uncertainty principle" points to an embryonic direction in current drama criticism which can free feminist critics from the constraints of binarism, the very nemesis of feminism. In advocating the dissolution of still another boundary, Gautam Dasgupta writes: "if both science and theatre seek to comprehend the
nature of reality in all its varied manifestations, surely they must converge at some point in their individual searches" (238); he sees Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle at work in the avant-garde theatre of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Though conceding that such analysis applies more readily to non-traditional theatre, I suggest that its application to mainstream realism may prove not only more challenging but also more radical. Directing avant-garde principles, as Mulvey suggests, to traditional texts yields what Michael Vanden Heuvel terms a "new dialogics of theatre," which creates "ironic and transformative spaces" (53) between the classic realist text and avant-garde performance, a state of complementarity described by quantum mechanics.

This promising intersection of theatre and science materializes in the section of a recent Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism devoted to "Physics and the New Historiography"; here Rosemarie Bank deems the perception of a "new spatio-temporal landscape" (64) unavoidable for a theatre researcher and urges others to explore the relationship of theatre to a universe perceived in terms of relativity physics and quantum mechanics compounded by chaos theory. While Bank filters historiography through this perspective, I find its revisioning even more profound for feminists, who can thereby formulate the "political epistemology" which Nancy Love aligns with political transformation and "an empowerment/knowledge regime" (86). Associating this regime with vocal metaphors, Love urges a
supplanting of epistemological politics rooted in Foucault’s emphasis on visual imagery (the gaze) and its political constraints. My perception of this politically driven epistemology in theatre, that apogee of vocal metaphor, is encouraged by William Demastes’ correlation of chaos theory to Brustein’s analysis of the “crack in the chimney,” that deterministic but illusionary signal in Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* with which Brustein browbeats American drama. Like Ibsen’s, Brustein’s "fogginess" (243) of thought Demastes attributes to a perception of the principle of chaos without the benefit of a scientific/philosophical model.

Though Demastes restricts his identification of a "chaos-informed realism" (253) to Ibsen and selected contemporary playwrights and seems to accept Brustein’s critique of the American theatre tradition as Newtonian, I remain convinced that the key playwrights of that tradition overturned, like Ibsen, the very dynamic which they ironically came to apotheosize and bequeathed that legacy to their progeny in domestic realism. Prompted by film critics’ own confession of traitorous pleasures, I redeem my own by the suggestion that a feminist analysis of American domestic realism, its legacy-leavers and its current exemplars, can reveal a promising political epistemology, which persistently undermines classical visions of reality and, with them, classical realism. And it does so within the context of that most sacred,
mythologized symbol of linearity and continuity—the family.

If family is, as its theorists now insist, not symbol but system, not essence but process, not closed but open, then it, like population growth, the stock market, or any dynamic system, exhibits a pattern of chaos—non-linearity, non-predictability, non-causality—within order. Those playwrights who constitute the American tradition of family drama seem to intuit this pattern of chaos within the most sacred of systems and to reflect it within even that most ordered of dramatic forms. Theirs is a realism wherein the order-chaos-order narrative, like the family, seems to implode, revealing chaos as intrinsic rather than aberrant and stability transient rather than natural. This implosion of an oppositional vision of order and chaos in both content and form parallels that of the oppositional vision of subject and object, observer and observed, gaze and image and frees the spectator, even (or especially) the feminist one, from the specter of colonization by these realistic family plays. Indeed, since the male/female hierarchical opposition has served as paradigm for the binary logic of Western narrative, feminists should greet its implosion—on and off stage—with a celebratory, if not proprietary, eye as the "I" slinks to the wings. Since Woman, again on and off stage, has ever been emblematic of Chaos or the dark, negative pole of existence, a postmodern epistemology holds great promise for feminism, which, in turn, seems uniquely positioned to proclaim its
transformation possibilities in a language of relationality, multiplicity, and uncertainty.

With hasty admission of only a layperson’s grasp, I shall sketch the shifts away from classical science which suggest such a provocative political epistemology for feminism. Extending the Aristotelian concept of the universe as a stable hierarchy, Newton’s identification in 1686 of a single universal law of gravitation revealed any dynamic system as simple and determined and the universe as a clock—a simple, static, stable machine governed by universal, fundamental, time-reversible, mechanical laws. Because dynamic systems follow timeless laws of motion, change is only acceleration or deceleration along a linear trajectory determined by and deducible from an initial state equivalent to all other states, which can define the system completely. Temporality and complexity are thus illusions in an ordered, eternal universe, where the future is always predictable from the past. Philosophically, this conviction of stability is reflected in Descartes’ proclamation of the "Cogito" subject, an individualized, rational, fixated "I," whose mind triumphs over body as the scientist does over nature.

Nineteenth-century thermodynamics posed the first challenge to classical dynamics with its Second Law identifying an unavoidable loss or dissipation of energy, which will ultimately result in no difference in temperature to produce mechanical effects; the universe is thus winding down to a final state of thermal equilibrium.
or "heat death." This evolution to a state of maximum entropy posits irreversible changes within complex systems, refuting the atemporality and stability of classical dynamics with an arrow of time. Isolated systems were revealed to possess a history of entropy production, an ever-increasing weakening of organization and consequent lessening of diversity, a degradation from order to disorder. While Darwinian theory confirmed irreversibility, its evolution moves upward toward increasing complexity and organization through the spontaneous fluctuations of species.

Revolutionary in implication, both concepts of evolution and their threat to classical determinism were disregarded in terms of matter on its most basic levels, even by otherwise revolutionary theories. Though relativity altered concepts of absolute space and time and thus of classical assumptions of objectivity and inadvertently of reversibility, Einstein scorned the notion of irreversibility as an illusion. And though quantum mechanics followed his identification of light as wave as well as (Newtonian) particle, Einstein also resisted its premise that subatomic matter also must be described as particle and wave not alternately but simultaneously. Complicating matter(s) even beyond Bohr’s Principle of Complementarity, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle claims that descriptions of particles and waves not only complement but also preclude each other since manifestation as a particle (position, time) and manifestation as a wave
(momentum, energy) can never be simultaneously measured exactly.

This concept of reality as observer-influenced and uncertain led to a philosophical concept of reality as indeterminate and probabilistic, a concept which prompted Einstein to stand up for classical physics and proclaim: "'I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world'" (qtd. by Zohar 28). And though he was the first to demonstrate that quantum equations inevitably predicted instantaneous action-at-a-distance, Einstein derided as "ghostly and absurd" (qtd. by Zohar 35) this principle of non-locality--"The property of permitting a cause at one place to produce immediate effects at distant places" (Polkinghorne 94). But despite the revolutionary notions of elementary particles transforming into each other and causality as only statistical, quantum mechanics follows Einstein in leaving absolute reversibility intact on the microscopic level.

The significance of irreversibility is paramount for feminism, which cannot endorse an equation of future with past. In extending these revolutionary perspectives to a dismantling of that equation and a displacement of linear determinism, chaos theory offers the most evocative political epistemology. Pervading a multitude of disciplines, chaos theory is most characterized by its insistence on a "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" (Gleick 8, Kellert x), that "Butterfly Effect" of meteorology which precludes accurate prediction of the
weather since a butterfly's wing flap in one part of the world may affect conditions in another. This phenomenon thus imbues quantum theory's principle of non-locality with an element of non-linearity since small, often unidentifiable causes can produce large, non-predictable effects. Systems do not always evidence linear trajectories, whereon the past inevitably predicts the future. This preclusion of predictability should not be confused with randomness or non-determinism since chaos, a "deterministic disorder" (Gleick 69), exists only in systems where cause and effect obtain; but since all initial conditions cannot be calculated, probability rather than predictability reigns. The term "chaos" itself eludes exact definitions as its advocates admit, though Kellert posits a "provisional definition" of chaos theory as "the qualitative study of unstable aperiodic behavior in deterministic nonlinear dynamical systems" (2, emphasis original).

Adherents to a "science of the global nature of systems" (Gleick 5), chaos theorists resist scientific trends toward reductionism in looking for the whole rather than scrutinizing constituent parts and often refer to a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being (Gleick 5, Prigogine 247, 310). They address questions basic to human life such as "in a universe ruled by entropy, drawing inexorably toward greater and greater disorder, how does order arise?" (Gleick 7). These questions are elided even by contemporary sciences like
particle physics, which continue to ignore phenomena on a
human scale, such as turbulence, and leave unresolved the
nineteenth-century paradox between the pessimistic entropy
of equilibrium thermodynamics and the optimistic evolution
of Darwinian theory. Ilya Prigogine sees this paradox
resolved in twentieth century non-equilibrium
thermodynamics, his work in which yielded a 1977 Nobel
Prize and a concept of dissipative structures arising from
non-linear processes.

Though not explicitly identifying himself with chaos
theory, Prigogine strives to unite scientific disciplines
and belie the "clash of two cultures," science and the
humanities. Although the latter aim has incurred charges
of mysticism in some scientific circles, Kellert almost
begrudgingly acknowledges the inevitable philosophical
implications of chaos theory. For feminism, Prigogine
offers a transformative model in his perception of order
from chaos based on a concept of positive entropy.
Insisting that non-equilibrium and complexity are the rule
rather than exception, Prigogine finds that complex systems
at far-from-equilibrium conditions evidence an
"'adaptation'" (165) to outside conditions, a sensitivity
to both internal and external fluctuations. Systems at or
near equilibrium exhibit only one steady state since
structural shifts can result only from large perturbations
of boundary conditions; whereas, systems far from
equilibrium evince the possibility of co-existing, multiple
stationary states since in this non-linear region extreme
sensitivity to fluctuations or turbulence reveals a butterfly effect.

Although turbulence appears chaotic on a macroscopic scale, Prigogine points out that it is organized on a microscopic one, a scale on which he also locates irreversibility emerging from instability's introduction of statistical features. In devising this microscopic formulation of the Second Law's evolutionary paradigm, Prigogine points out that, on both scales, entropy initially has negative connotations: as passive chaos (equilibrium thermal chaos), it prohibits certain classes of initial conditions microscopically and certain processes macroscopically. Yet "It is from the negative aspect that the positive aspect emerges: the existence of entropy together with its probability interpretation. Irreversibility no longer emerges as if by a miracle at some macroscopic level" (285). Though there exist reversible systems, explicable by classical or quantum mechanics, Prigogine asserts that most (including chemical and thus biological) systems reveal a broken time symmetry, an irreversibility which is "the starting point of other symmetry-breakings" (285).

Thus bridging microscopic and macroscopic, dynamic and thermodynamic, biology and physics, Prigogine posits a positive, active chaos (non-equilibrium turbulent chaos), wherein order arises spontaneously out of fluctuations through a process of self-organization; new states of dynamic matter may originate out of thermal chaos through a
system's interaction. Irreversibility thereby acquires a constructive role and reveals its true meaning to be that all is interwoven: "Time is the great arrow which couples all systems together and multiple arrows which constitute bifurcations and changes of each system" (Briggs and Peat 148).

The concept of bifurcations is integral to chaos theory and significant for feminism. A "window of the forking paths" or "place of branching or forking" (Briggs and Peat 143), bifurcation describes that singular instant when amplification of the butterfly's wingflap creates a fork. Primary bifurcation occurs when a system is pushed by random fluctuations beyond the threshold of stability; this point is followed by cascades of bifurcations, revealing the "history" of the system as a "succession of stable regions, where deterministic laws dominate, and of unstable ones, near the bifurcation points, where the system can 'choose' between or among more than one possible future" (Prigogine 169-70). A system in flux either fragments itself (period doubling) toward chaos or stabilizes a new order through feedback loops, a "communication" which makes the system cohere or behave as a whole (Briggs and Peat 143-44). This "choice," impossible to predict, thus reflects both chance and necessity, unpredictability and determinism, time and timelessness: "Time is inexorable, and yet in bifurcations the past is continually recycled, held timeless in a sense—for by stabilizing through feedback the bifurcation path

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it takes, a system embodies the exact conditions of the environment at the moment the bifurcation occurred" (Briggs and Peat 144).

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle therefore obtains on the macroscopic level of living systems since the role of fluctuation in non-equilibrium systems identifies intrinsic randomness and consequent probability; moreover, the quantum concept of wave functions appears when far-from-equilibrium systems "choose" coherence. While the constituent parts of a system at equilibrium behave as "hypnons" or sleepwalkers ignoring each other, "their complexity turned 'inward'" (Prigogine 287), they "wake up" in non-equilibrium systems and evidence correlation and coherence. This possibility of spontaneous self-organization, of new dynamic states of matter, Prigogine connotes by the term "dissipative structures."

Differentiated from the "equilibrium structures," like crystals, of classical thermodynamics, dissipative structures are supramolecular, reflecting "the global situation of non-equilibrium producing them" (Prigogine 144).

The system's interaction with the outside environment and condition of non-equilibrium produce an organization in which, paradoxically, dissipation, waste, and chaos are aligned with structure, conservation, and order. Dissipative structures are open systems which take in energy from the outside and produce entropy, which they work to their advantage by dissipating into the
environment; thus only openness to the environmental flow sustains the system's structure (Briggs and Peat 139). Yet the more coherent and complex the structure, the more unstable since it is always in flux from this increased energy flow, revealing instability itself as the key to transformation. And as each transformation is to a higher level of complexity, one breeds the next (Ferguson 164-65). New orders thus emerge constantly: "At all levels, be it the level of macroscopic physics, the level of fluctuations, or the microscopic level, nonequilibrium is the source of order. Nonequilibrium brings order out of chaos" (Prigogine 286-87, emphasis original).

This scientific dissolution of boundaries and insistence on transformation obviously beg application in other areas; feminism especially should welcome Prigogine's conviction that "the epoch of certainty and absolute oppositions is over" (299) and descry a fruitful model for the transformation of human systems, such as family. Since the biosphere exhibits non-linearity and far-from equilibrium conditions, Prigogine claims that life itself emerges as the quintessential exemplar of the processes of self-organization. The evolution of numerous cultures in human society, for example, testifies to the cascading bifurcations in its history. Conceived according to a non-linear, irreversible, "statistical" model, society exhibits a collective behavior produced by localized interactions, which are not controlled by a global
clockmaker but characterized by averages which reproduce order.

Apparent most obviously in termite colonies, the statistical model obtains equally for human families despite the long-successful efforts of structural functionalism to impose a classical, mechanical epistemology in family theory which naturalized and hierarchized oppositions of public and private, functional and expressive, male and female. Recent versions of family systems theory evince a non-classical epistemology of instability, non-linearity, irreversibility, and interrelationship, whereby family is conceived as an open dynamical system interchanging energy with its environment and evolving constantly through internal and external fluctuations. Though not controlled by the system, individual family members interact simultaneously in such a way as to cohere and spontaneously self-organize. Though many position this non-classical epistemology as the inverse of classical reductionism, such inversion (as in film and drama theory) perpetuates theoretical binarism in placing the whole of the system (family) over its parts (members).

Actually, as Prigogine emphasizes, the self-organization of a far-from-equilibrium system occurs, not through the transcendence of chaotic, elementary, individual processes, but through amplification of those microscopic fluctuations (176). Insignificant in deterministic states, localized behavior near bifurcation
can transform global structure but not just any such behavior since amplification occurs only with those behaviors, ideas, or individuals that are "'dangerous'--that is, those that can exploit to their advantage the nonlinear relations guaranteeing the stability of the preceding regime" (Prigogine 296), relations which both create and destroy.

This stress on individual behavior and non-linearity is rich in implications for feminism as the small yet "dangerous" fluctuation likely to be amplified and thus prompt the evolution of the whole system is conceived as peripheral or marginal to that system. In terms of the cultural, political, social, and familial systems, it is women who have been marginalized into (M)others; inscribed as "expressive function" and family center, the (M)others are ironically silenced and displaced as privatized, irrational, reproductive objects by public, rational, intellectual subjects--those Cartesian "I’s" and "eyes" so determinedly male. Thus coded as body to the mind, emotion to the reason, chaos to the order, the women perturb and disrupt stability and thus exist as monsters: "The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side--these have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities" (Gleick 3); moreover, judging by the Einsteinian disparagement of non-locality as "ghostly," they are ghostly monsters. Yet in their elusiveness, their excess, their thwarting of linearity, these women can emerge from the chrysalis of family as butterflies, whose
wingflaps may amplify into earthquakes, cascading bifurcations in which the traditional, hierarchical family implodes. As Prigoginian "hypnon" wakes up to become Derridian "hymen" (75), the feminized Other signals an alternative future.

An open complex system far-from-equilibrium and thus highly sensitive to fluctuations, family can continually evolve into dissipative structures, wherein boundaries between inside and out, private and public dissolve. Since the system "chooses" its future, a future which is not given in the past, individual behavior affects global outcome, making ethics count in complexity. Released from universal reversibility, linearity, and predictability, the butterflies of the world and the ghost-monsters of the family may infiltrate determinism and signal transformation to a more viable order: "Today we know that time is a construction and therefore carries an ethical responsibility" (Prigogine 312). It is a responsibility most critical for feminists who must construct reality as liminal, a realm between objective and subjective, outside and inside, stable and unstable, ordered and chaotic, atemporal and temporal; for by so doing they displace the paradigm embodied in male/female boundaries so that self can become other.

On the American cultural stage, the Family, in naturalizing gendered boundaries, provides a site for their transgression to reveal a liminal realm; on the American theatrical stage, domestic realism, in naturalizing
gendered roles, provides a site for their transgression to reveal a liminal realism. Performing gender to an excess which subverts structure with flux and realism with theatricalism, the ghost monsters of the definitive plays signal the possibility of transforming the nuclear Family, realistic form, and dominant ideology into dissipative structures. The correlative feminist concept of "masquerade" as a subversion of the coded feminine recalls that "order masquerading as randomness" (Gleick 22, emphasis original) in the model of the Butterfly Effect and reveals a feminist impulse in the legacy of American domestic realism. Here ghost-monsters take Oedipus's excised eye/I on the wing to the borderline, the elsewhere, the tension point, the liminal realm—that "ghostlier demarcation" whence the "keener sounds of transformed family, realism, and reality can reverberate.

NOTES

1 Barrett and McIntosh follow Engels in associating the modern family with the origin of property, class, and, not accidentally, prostitution (38-43); Orthner also sees it as a post-industrial development but precisely because property had become less important. Fraser describes the mythologized Family as a device of capitalism (125-28) while Collier specifies the constructs as an American one, a symbolic opposition to capitalism. Drama critic Scanlan insists that the shift to nuclear families precedes industrialization and that American colonization coincided exactly with shifts in the European family (17). Cheal claims that this construct represents the origin of patriarchy stemming from uncertainty over paternity (9).

2 Liberal feminism's attack on what Betty Friedan identified as the "feminine mystique" reflected a middle-class, individualistic perspective, which conceptualized work as psychological liberation rather than as economic necessity; however, the indictment of the traditional family as a trap for women was important.
See Lyotard for a formulation of postmodernism and Derrida for a discussion of the inevitably hierarchical nature of binary logic and the creation of the "parasite," which is "never simply something that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body 'proper,' shut out from the 'familial' table or house" (90).

Despite Derrida's insistence on the political nature of any oppositional discourse (135-38), some postmodern exponents, especially in America, tend to abnegate agency and the possibility of change. For a reflection of the consequent uneasiness of feminists with postmodern theory, see Linda Nicholson.

Carolyn Bird terms the two-career marriage the major social change of the twentieth century.

Ironically, as Fassel points out, the idealization of the intact, as opposed to "broken," family actually further undermined it by isolating it (38). Such organizations as the Rockford Institute Center on the Family in America scorn feminist "verbicide": "the intact family continues to prove Socrates' assertion that 'things have a permanent essence of their own.' The indiscriminate application of the word family can only signal a betrayal of that essence . . ." (Christensen 54).

Though Popenoe points out that the "'disappearing act by fathers' is as much responsible as the working mother" (22), most lamentations over the family blame the mother, eliding economic and class considerations. Barbara Whitehead's sensational "Dan Quayle Was Right!" cover story for Atlantic Monthly validated widespread equations of the decline of the traditional Family with the decline of social and moral standards.

See Case, Feminism 61-94; Dolan, Feminist Spectator 3-18; Hart 3-5; Austin 4-6. Austin's identification of the three stages as working within, expanding, and exploding the canon (16-20) seems self-limiting since it categorizes any analysis of male-authored plays as "first-stage" and, by implication, regressive.

Janet Brown provides a notable example of this quest-oriented, autonomy-seeking criticism, though she has recently modified her approach.

Karen Malpede, for example, defines a feminine aesthetic by compassion and hope.

The continued impact of this concept upon feminist drama criticism is evidenced by Austin's devoting a chapter to "Feminist Film Theory: 'Man as Bearer of the Look' and the Representation of Women."
Kaja Silverman, on the other hand, finds the male spectator position masochistic or "feminized" since "identity-in castration" (21) occurs when male subjectivity is impaired by the Gaze of the Other.

The pre-Oedipal (first stage of narrative), then, represents possibilities, not because it constitutes an alternative symbolic order (as cultural feminism suggests), but because its metaphors counter a patriarchal symbolic.

Tania Modleski also undermines the male gaze, deconstructing the misogyny of Hitchcock's Oedipal narratives to discover "images of ambiguous sexuality that threaten to destabilize the gender identity of protagonists and viewer alike" (5).

Dasgupta aligns Foreman's images of continuity to an Einstein/Aristotle ethos of classical atomic physics and Wilson's of discontinuity to a Bohr/Zeno ethos of quantum physics (239-46).

Gleick cites six definitions from mathematicians, physicists, and one "evangelist of chaos" (306).

Closing with speculation on "the symbolic and metaphorical dimension of the development of nonlinear dynamics" (156), Kellert even connects the nontreatment of chaos to gender ideology. Gleick also confirms this interdisciplinary dimension in drawing, like Prigogine, epigraphs from literature.

Pointing out that the US Department of Transportation uses Prigogine's theory, Ferguson proposes multiple applications and finds in it "a scientific model for the transformation of society by a dissident minority" (166).

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CHAPTER TWO

HOUSES HAUNTED, A LEGACY BEQUEATHED: O’NEILL, MILLER, WILLIAMS, AND ALBEE

"My Cocoon tightens—Colors tease—
I’m feeling for the Air
A dim capacity for Wings
Degrades the Dress I wear---"

Emily Dickinson

Since it is feminists who have most vilified domestic realism as the American dramatic prototype, it is for feminists to reconsider the terms of that attack. Mounted in a requisite but reactionary spirit, the case against the male-dominated canon targets the domestic subject matter for positioning women characters as silenced and passive or sexual and threatening objects and the realistic form for naturalizing through linear determinism the inevitability of this female position in a reaffirmed objective reality. The post-war canonical playwrights—most notably O’Neill, Miller, Williams, and Albee—are thus consistently labelled misogynist and their plays quarantined by the feminist critic. To admit pleasure therein has been to admit to a fatal contagion of principle, a submission to the male gaze, which could be resisted only by non-exposure to the disease of Oedipal narrative. Bolstered by Brechtian-Brusteinian forces, most feminists remain entrenched in this stand against the American canon of domestic realism.

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Though vital in questioning canonical standards, such a stand now reflects that epistemological politics which Nancy Love deems an impasse since it is grounded in the Foucaultian concept of a disciplinary gaze and colonized bodies. Love locates a possibility of political transformation in an extra-foundationalist political epistemology, an "empowerment/knowledge regime" (86), which Wendy Brown and Joan Cocks also advocate instead of the politics of ressentiment (Nietzsche's "slave morality") still evident in contemporary feminism when Truth and morality are opposed to power. The movement in feminist film criticism away from the colonization of the male gaze to a tension and liminality in spectatorship reflects an abandonment of ressentiment, self-marginalization, universalized oppression, and political impasse. It can thus lift the quarantine from canonical domestic realism for those of us who have guiltily hidden our pleasure therein. Hardly silenced in my own home, I no longer need fear that spectatorship before these plays automatically signifies a tacit ratification of male/female, public/private, dominant/submissive, subject/object, presence/absence dichotomies or acceptance of an essential Truth, "inseparable from gender-based and biased epistemologies" (Diamond 58). A feminist political epistemology allows for the pre-eminence of dialogue over dichotomy and recognizes that the postmodern identification of a western metaphysics of presence poses not political impasse but possible transformation for feminists.
Derridian recovery of the absent term—the "parasitic structure" of "writing," "differance," "undecidable," or "hymen" (103), while arguably essentialist and stultifying to an epistemological politics, actually proves transformative in a political epistemology which finds empowerment in a subversive, yet intrinsic, principle. Derrida saw "phallogocentrism" as grounded upon the paradigmatic binary opposition of speech to writing, the latter the absent yet subversive term in a culture where speech signifies full Presence or Identity. For feminists, of course, the paradigmatic binary opposition is male to female, the latter the absent yet potentially subversive term in a culture where male signifies Presence, Truth, Universality, Identity. In science, the paradigmatic binary opposition is order to chaos, the latter now recognized as not aberrant but integral to any open system. And as chaos haunts order with the possibility of transformation, so the female haunts and threatens male Presence.

I thus venture the admittedly treacherous claim that female characters who perform absence or the body undercut the illusion of presence or the Cartesian rational identity, which theatre putatively fosters, most notoriously in its realistic form. Elin Diamond lucidly encapsulates feminist objections to mimesis and to its most "naive" form, realism, which, "rooted historically in domestic melodrama, retains melodrama's Oedipal family focus, even as it tries to undermine the scenarios that
Victorian culture had reified"; in reaffirming the status quo through its "fetishistic attachment to true referent," realism actually produces "reality" (61). Diamond, however, also points out that Brecht himself did not deny referentiality, only the "psychologized ahistorical referent" (61), thus opening the way for a political dynamic through the theatricalizing of referentiality. Recalling de Lauretis, Diamond looks for mimesis with a vengeance: "the theatre is a privileged site for feminist analysis because of, not in spite of, its long association with mimetic practice and theory. . . . mimesis can be retheorized as a site of, and means of, feminist intervention" (62).

Diamond thus emerges as one of the few drama critics to echo feminist film critics’ acknowledgement of pleasure in and necessary recuperation of mimesis. To assert a destabilization of the referent even in the sign-referent mimetic code, Diamond follows Luce Irigaray’s reading of Plato’s cave as "womb-theatre" and conclusion that representation is not inescapably masculinized; Aristotelian/Platonic patriarchal mimesis, which posits a transcendent real, is subverted by "mimesis-mimicry, in which the production of objects, shadows, and voices is excessive to the truth-illusion structure of mimesis, spilling into mimicry, multiple ‘fake off-spring’" (65). This mimicry or "representation of repetition" (64), like Irigaray’s "elsewhere" of female pleasure (and de Lauretis’s of spectatorship) represents not alterity but
parasite to mimesis. Similarly dismantling the Truth of patriarchal mimesis is Julia Kristeva's concept of the hysteric's (or artist's) "true-real" wherein the signifier (the body) becomes the real rather than a sign for a referent. Although this simultaneous signifying and avoiding signification most obviously occurs in performance art, Diamond insists on the possibility of "hysterical realism—a realism without truth" (68). Thus she concludes that a feminist mimesis, which disrupts rather than imitates gender models, is possible since theatre can play with its plays. While Diamond's optimism extends only to female playwrights and feminist performers, I extend mine to the tradition of American theatre, a tradition prototypically mimetic and Oedipal with a vengeance.

If spectatorship is not gendered fixity but a point of tension and if mimesis is not monolithic but haunted by Derridian parasitism, Brechtian distanciation, Irigaryan mimicry, or Kristevian true-real body, then American domestic realism can offer that "critical staging of gender politics . . . needed to disrupt the theater's ways of producing gendered performers on the stage and in the audience" (181-82) which W. B. Worthen defines as a feminist theatre. Though Worthen would doubtlessly not include male-authored canonical plays in this category, he does assert the possibility of a "critical realism," which strives to avoid "duplication of patriarchal subjection in the theatre by searching out ways of infiltrating the narrative order of realism, the mystified external order
(the environment) and the internal zone (the spirit of psyche) that it emphasizes as the drama's cause" (183). My contention is that those most canonized, hence most maligned, plays in that most-maligned genus, American domestic realism, actually constitute Worthen's "critical," Diamond's "hysterical," or my own "liminal" realism and thus parasite or haunt the host-house of American theatre which they epitomize.

Further, it is those most maligned characters, recruited to malign that most-maligned theatre, that actually signal a realism nascently liminal and thus nascently feminist: the absent or sexualized object-women of these plays create a Brechtian alienation-effect as the performers perform characters who perform a gendered self. Through mimicry and destabilized referentiality, these women point out gender as not essence but performance, one engendered primarily in the family, itself not essence but system—a process, like their theatre, wherein meanings are constructed, hence multiple, and reality construed. If the family, in collusion with capitalism, produces and reproduces the oppression of a patriarchal society (Stacey 56-57), then the realistic family play most epitomizes a patriarchal mimesis and it is this dramatic mode which can most "dramatically" evidence the mutability of such mimesis. At the apogee of structural functionalism in family theory, the most canonized of playwrights presented families wherein the women—ghostly, monstrous, and
excessive—emerge as performance artists who denaturalize
gender and destabilize the system.

In rendering gender and family unnatural, their
constitutive polarizations untenable, and determinism
unpredictable, these disregarded or disavowed female
characters reveal a discontinuity, a nonlinearity, a
butterfly effect. The feminist spectator not staking a
position "outside" perceives a dissolution of
outside/inside, male/female, order/chaos dichotomies. As
the female character on stage discloses points of
bifurcation in the process of family, the spectator off
stage occupies a point of tension in the process of
meaning-making. The presence of these liminal ghosts
(unbodied bodies) or monsters (inhuman humans) suggests
boundary-breakings in time and space, which reveal these
stagings of family systems as virtual stagings of chaos
theory and refute Brusteinian and feminist assumptions of
closed, linear realism. Here are domesticity (patriarchy)
and realism (Truth) undermined as the polarization on which
they rest implodes in the absent presence of the female
character. Feminist critics who relinquish their own
binary stance can forge an escape from the vise of the male
gaze, which imprisons male and female perceptions alike in
its perceived power and reality.

I am not alone in urging feminist drama criticism
beyond a reactionary attack on the canon or the reverse
tyrranny of a feminist aesthetic. Finding "the 'images-of-
women' approach... valuable as an expository device"
(Introduction 12), June Schlueter applauds the shift of feminist criticism "into more sophisticated—and riskier—territory" (13), which permits a "reappraisal of the dramatic canon that renews and revitalizes the interest in these plays that originally secured them canonical stature" (18). Though Schlueter does not mention that the five playwrights chosen for "rereadings" in her anthology—O'Neill, Miller, Williams, Albee, and Shepard—were canonized by their family plays, she does point to the critics' focus on cultural and literary gender constructs. These constructs appear most blatant in a domestic context reified by a realistic narrative, and some critics in Schlueter's volume continue to lambast these male playwrights as misogynist. Others, however, perceive feminist possibilities in these plays despite the Oedipal nature of the narratives or the ghostly nature of the women characters. I further contend that domestic content implicitly centers a female character since woman has been coded as family pivot (perhaps the underlying reason for the trivialization or "feminization" of domestic drama) and that these playwrights, inadvertently or no, portray the performance aspect of the female role and the theatrical nature of the family, undermining its "reality" and the play's "realism."

Though theory and popular culture at the time posited the nuclear, gender-divided family as a universal, fixed, essential system, the linchpin American plays seem to prophesy the theoretical view of family as an open and
ongoing system wherein meanings are constructed, patterns non-linear, and identities unstable. Even at the original productions of these plays, audiences must have been hard pressed to maintain the illusion of a fixed gaze since the playwrights throw into flux that cherished line between family and individual, inside and outside, private and public, past and present, illusion and reality, female and male. This tension differs from that which Tom Scanlan postulates in his study of American domestic drama, published in 1978 but unmarked by the contemporaneous shifts in family theory (as evidenced by the book’s dedication to Mary, the center of our family”). Explicitly conflating American realism with naturalism, Scanlan leaves unquestioned the linearity and causality of narrative to focus on the duality of theme: the family as emblem of security or as obstacle to freedom. He sees these conflicting models of family as reflecting American ambivalence toward social structures in general and American playwrights as perpetuating familialism while revealing its inescapable and tragic contradiction. According to Scanlan, the post-war canonical playwrights, though portraying escape from family as freedom, nonetheless lament the family’s destruction.

Such ambivalence, however, seems to signal a tension beyond the thematic and individualistic to the structure itself—of family and of theatrical realism. Rather than either/or choices, these playwrights expose the fallacy of such binary logic and the unstable nature of family and of
realism, which permits creation as well as destruction. Scanlan's focus on the protagonist's choice and the plays' dualism obscures those elements which subvert that dualism, most notably those female characters who reveal both themselves and their families as representations or performed realities and the plays as representations of an observer-influenced reality. The gist is not that the women are passive victims with no choice but that individual choice—male or female—is constricted by cultural determinations. As Judith Butler puts it, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (270, emphasis original) and thus subject to Diamond's mimicking "representation of repetition." In foregrounding gender as a process, its attributes performative rather than expressive, female characters can foreground the family itself as a process, its attributes performative rather than essential, temporal rather than transhistorical.

If both "realities" are performative, then realism, too, is destabilized and its presumably paralyzing determinism exposed as only remotely causal, eminently unpredictable, and hence hardly fatal for feminists who refute the notion of a gendered gaze. Echoing recent feminist rejection of Althusserian or even Foucaultian determinism, Butler warns of a loss of power in concepts of gender as an inscription upon a passive body and of a
binary gender system as a given. The field is thus fertile for a re-examination of the landmarks of the American dramatic canon as bequeathing a legacy of subversion and transformation to domestic realism through the mimicking and excessive performance of gender:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 271)

In revealing gender, family, narrative, memory, realism, and meaning itself as arbitrary, the canonical plays of American theatre haunt their own house as the women haunt the houses on stage. Threatening a different repetition, like the amplification of a butterfly’s flutter, these ghost-monsters speak of bifurcations and transformations to feminist spectators inside/outside representation—tense in their liminal realm but eager to listen and to forge a political epistemology.

MARY'S FOG-FLUX IN LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

Most difficult to hear perhaps is Mary Tyrone, the wife-mother of Eugene O’Neill’s autobiographical Long Day’s Journey into Night. Produced posthumously in 1957, the play represents for its playwright a shift in style and for its critics a touchstone of American domestic realism. Stressing in the stage directions Mary’s humiliating "extreme nervousness" (12), O’Neill states that "the most appealing quality is the simple, unaffected charm of a shy
convent-girl youthfulness she has never lost— an innate unworldly innocence" (13). Namesake of the Virgin Mary to whom she often appeals, Mary becomes increasingly unworldly as the day journeys into night and she into a morphine haze. Both Marys defined by motherhood, Mary Tyrone follows the Virgin Mother into symbolic abstraction. Objecting M(other) Mary as an ideal, her husband and two sons resent her mental, if not physical, absence in the home: Tyrone predicts that by night Mary will be a "mad ghost" (123), and Edmund confirms at midnight that "She'll be nothing but a ghost haunting the past by this time" (137). Not only the past but the people are haunted as evidenced in O'Neill's dedication of the play to his third wife Carlotta for enabling him to write with "forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones."

Appearing in more of the carefully schematized dialogue exchanges than any other character and delivering the most frequent and pivotal monologues, Mary emerges as central to the play structurally as well as thematically. The day's progression from sunny morning to "a faint haziness" (51) at midday to a "white curtain" (97) of fog at dusk to a "wall of fog" (125) at midnight parallels Mary's journey to the "blank wall" or "bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself" (139). Critics nonetheless follow the male characters' inscription of Mary as silent, passive, and absent; indeed, her "absence" becomes a haunting presence in the play and Mary is often cited as the culmination of O'Neill's recurring depiction of women...
as ghosts, evidence of the playwright’s misogyny. Suzannc Burr notes that such claims are now "fashionable" (36), citing biographer Louis Sheaffer’s assertion that a mother-desperate O’Neill idealizes women to disempower them (a tactic which would obviously reflect the fetishism/voyeurism mechanism of the male gaze). From O’Neill’s experience of his own mother’s isolation, however, Burr concludes that the female ghosts in the plays reflect an empathy with women imprisoned and powerless within a male social order. Injecting "dead silences" into Mary’s dialogue, O’Neill echoes the enforced silence of female solitude and thus, to Burr, evinces a "‘feminist consciousness’" (44).

O’Neill also belies Mac Wellman’s lament that our stage has not portrayed the "dignity of silence" (63), for Mary’s self-willed silences indicate not simply enforced solitude but an abdication of her gendered role, a nascent feminist consciousness in character as well as in playwright. Though Burr feels that Mary has silenced her soul, epitomized by the Virgin, and that access to that "ultimate feminine principle" (46) would prove redemptive, I am convinced that O’Neill is more closely aligned with Ibsen’s "incipient feminist stance" (38) than even Burr asserts. Rather than "self-neglect" (47) and a craving for sisterhood and the Virgin’s principle of maternal sacrifice, Mary exhibits an abnegation of the culturally coded feminine rooted in familial gender construction. Her need is for more than the Truth of either religious or
feminist confession (consciousness-raising) whose foundationalism, as Brown and Cocks point out, merely reflects ressentiment and sanctifies powerlessness.

To deflect claims of misogyny and, implicitly, of a male gaze operative in O'Neill's realism, *Long Day's Journey* should be addressed on just those terms. Mary does appear as the prototypical signifier of the male gaze in representing both object and obstruction of the male trajectory, both fetishized (overvalued) and voyeuristic (undervalued) image. Epitomizing negative space or lack, Mary represents to the men desire and, presumably, to the spectator both the threat and disavowal of castration and the consequent assurance of presence and closure. Thus Anne Fleche says of Mary:

> Oedipal narrative, its struggle for origins, is revealed through the character of the woman who, motivating these things, is herself unmotivated, thrust into a role that is neither character nor narrator but both: the subject and impulse of the narrative. She exists because Oedipal narrativity demands its mother, its monster, its prophet; and it seems natural to overlook the troubled quality of her existence. But the narrativity she makes possible demands an origin and an ending of either redress or atonement, that seem impossible here. (34)

Fleche sees O'Neill consciously reacting against naturalism with predominantly Oedipal narratives centered on an unstable female.

Thus Mary and her like, alternately nurturing and betraying mothers, both inspire and destabilize the male trajectory, emerging as monstrous threats. Associated with the mounting fog, Mary is, as Fleche notes, "the symbol of
this chaos and its borderline" (30). As such, Mary signifies liminality, a subversion rather than inversion of the hierarchical order which the men seek in a gendered family:

The monster in the text is not woman, or the woman writer; rather, it is this repressed vacillation of gender or the instability of identity—the ambiguity of subjectivity itself which returns to wreak havoc on consciousness, on hierarchy, and on unitary schemes designed to repress the otherness of femininity. (Jacobus 5)

As the fog wreaks havoc on the day, so (M)other Mary wreaks havoc on hierarchy. Since chaos is intrinsic to any system rather than merely inverse to its order, Mary's centrality and absent presence, in the play and in the family, reveal both "unitary schemes" to be unstable systems rather than fixed, linear structures.

Though all, including Mary, yearn for such a fixed structure, a universal essence signified by "Home," Mary repeatedly insists on their failure to find it, faulting her husband: "Oh, I'm so sick and tired of pretending this is a home! You won't help me! . . . You don't know how to act in a home! You don't really want one!" (67). While Mary blames his miserliness and migrant life as an actor, Tyrone blames her "Bitterly" for depriving him: "No, it never can be [a home] now. But it was once, before you—" (72); moreover, she, too, faults herself as well as doctors for this failure, evidencing the blame-shifting dynamic in the family. The sons also fault Mary for her willful morphine withdrawal and failure to provide a nurturing presence. Jamie sees the reoccurrence of her addiction
after a period of recovery as the death knell of his own recovery from alcoholic debauchery: "I suppose I can't forgive her--yet. It meant so much. I'd begun to hope, if she'd beaten the game, I could, too" (162). Eugene feels betrayed by his mother's alternating excess and lack of concern about his illness.

All of the men feel betrayed that Mary upsets the cherished duality of Madonna/whore; in keeping with the narrative's Oedipal pattern, Jamie dates the fall from grace to a primal scene discovery: "I've known about Mama so much longer than you. Never forget the first time I got wise. Caught her in the act with a hypo. Christ, I'd never dreamed before that any women but whores took dope!" (163). Mary herself laments her estrangement from idealized motherhood: "You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words!" (107). Her recognition of the inability of words to convey unifying meaning and establish linear connection reflects her increasing displacement of causality and guilt. Having attacked Jamie for attacking Tyrone (whom she, too, repeatedly attacks), Mary absolves her elder son:

But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can't help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever. (61)

This ambivalence between passive and active, blameless and guilty, mediated and autonomous increases in the course of the play as the day's and Mary's (and life's)
thickening fog signals a confusion of causality or extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. A myriad of causes are let fly to explain the dissolution of the Tyrones, their failure to create a Home or to become a capitalized Family of Cartesian selves: the father's acting, cheapness, drinking, and jealousy of his sons; the mother's snobbism, addiction, and neglect; the older son's present debauchery and past fatal exposure, questionably accidental, of baby brother Eugene to measles; the younger brother's present illness and past responsibility for his mother's post-natal illness. None of these causes can be isolated as primal cause, and Mary's compulsive and contradictory recountsings of the family narrative emerge as a reflection not only of her drug haze but also of a nonlinearity in the narrative itself. Though the men dread Mary's "haunting" of the past, they, too, look to it for origins; yet Jamie's assertion of a primal scene as causal and of Mary as their malign creator weakens before his ultimate confession of Edmund as his own creation: "Hell, you're more than my brother. I made you! You're my Frankenstein!" (164). And, intentional or no, Jamie's confusion of creation with creator confirms the play's blurring of such subject/object, cause/effect boundaries.

Born of a love/hate relationship where the contradictory elements co-exist rather than alternate, this monster creator/creation reflects the monster of flux in them all that belies systemic stability. And it is the most monstrous monster of all--the whore-mother--who

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intuits that, as love and hate are complementary rather than oppositional, so Time provides no neat dichotomy: "The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won’t let us" (87). Though coded to represent a consoling and explanatory pre-Oedipal past, Mary, notwithstanding her own search within it, fragments linearity as she does language. She painfully confronts the timelessness of time; seemingly but not actually reversible, time does not permit the past to be retrieved, though it is recycled in the family’s history of cascading bifurcations. Wanting to retreat to the girlhood options of concert pianist or nun, which Tyrone claims were delusional, Mary achieves only an increasingly girlish appearance that clashes with her rheumatoid hands and recurrent drug addiction. Faced with irreversibility and contradiction, Mary flaunts the family’s entropy and its sensitivity near bifurcation to past bifurcation points.

Thus straddling time and timelessness, the ghostly Mary is neither alive nor dead, presence nor absence but signifies the same liminality as the fog, wherein she feels that "nothing is what it seems to be" (98). As the drunken men sit downstairs in the final act, Edmund acknowledges their own state of limbo with Mary upstairs:

Yes she moves above and beyond us, a ghost haunting the past, and here we sit pretending to forget, but straining our ears listening for the slightest sound, hearing the fog drip from the eaves like the uneven tick of a rundown, crazy clock—or like the dreary tears of a trollop.

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spattering in a puddle of stale beer on a honky-tonk table top! (152)

Mary, then, is the fog which obscures origin, the clock which defies linearity, the trollop who defiles woman(mother)hood; as monster-woman, she signifies true monstrosity—the "repressed vacillation of gender or the instability of identity" (Jacobus 5), the chaos to any order, the unpredictability of determinism that renders Newton’s universe only a "crazy clock."

So conflicting yet complementary are the cross-currents of cause and the network of guilt here and so sensitive is this system to initial conditions that the "guilt-mongering" to which Brustein reduces American theatre becomes not psychological causality but amplified wingflaps. As Mary warns, "the things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain" (85). If this play is a "domestic courtroom," then it yields not verdict but hung jury as Mary’s dreaded appearance downstairs and final monologue hardly reset the clock to align Time to an Oedipal trajectory of recognition/resolution. Dragging her wedding dress and searching for something she has lost but cannot identify, Mary closes the play with the recollection of her departure from the convent school and the Blessed Virgin: "Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time" (176). In this closing there is no closure as Mary performs the past but finds no answer in it. Since origins and selves are contradictory, lost
rather than identified, the future holds no resolution. The fog has permeated the home—in Mary’s head, on Tyrone’s clothes—and the journey into night signifies a temporal but nonlinear progression into chaos.¹²

Though the only transformation within the play is Mary’s by morphine, her final line does point to the possibility of systemic transformation. It is the inscriptions of romantic love which calcified Mary into a role played with increasingly difficulty. Her relationship with her father, with her husband, with her sons demanded a passivity and sacrifice which effected an isolation directly proportionate to the succor she provided for them: idolizing an alcoholic and consumptive father, waiting in hotel rooms for a drunken Tyrone to be delivered, refusing a nurse for the boys in an effort to provide stability. Disillusioned in her girlish narrative of romance, motherhood, and happiness, she gradually abdicated the throne/threat position she occupied in the male narratives, leaving them with no object of desire on which to fix their gaze. Failing to represent a past of identifiable origins, a wifehood of unwavering devotion, a motherhood of unquestioning sacrifice,¹³ Mary denaturalized the haven of the private realm. Denied a permanent home, a stage on which to perform her gender identity, Mary proceeds to destabilize gender in breaking that “stylised repetition of acts through time” and foregrounding their arbitrary relation in an irreversible non-equilibrium system.
Forced into a theatrical life, Mary reacts against it: "Before I met Tyrone I hardly knew there was such a thing as a theatre. . . . I've never felt at home" (102). Ironically, however, she, not her husband, is expected to deliver the ultimate performance with no set. Unable to maintain this illusion of a stable, gendered identity or a stable family structure, Mary sought the "strange detachment" delivered by her drugs. Notwithstanding an initial acquiescence to doctor's orders, there is now an undeniable willfulness in Mary's drugged detachment, an abnegation of her role as nurturing center of the family—the expressive function of the mother, according to structural functionalism. It is this deliberate refusal to uphold polarized stability which most galls her youngest son, presumably O'Neill's surrogate: "Deliberately, that's the hell of it! You know something in her does it deliberately—to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us, to forget we're alive! It's as if, in spite of loving us, she hated us!" (139).

The "something in her" is a perception that both gender and family are performative—temporal, social, political constructs made "real" only through the performance. Refusing Tyrone's insistence on the summer house as a "Real Home," Mary ceases to expect permanence and stability; her contradictory responses are the symptoms of a contradictory, multiple self. Though she earlier bemoans the loss of the "true self," by play's end she cannot even identify the object lost; for the "true self,"
that Cartesian cogito aligned with Newtonian causality, divides the mind or Virgin's soul from the body, a division which Tyrone validates in claiming that the young Mary's sexuality precluded options other than marriage. Mary seeks a drug-induced irrationality to retreat from a rationalist notion of an individualistic, stable, gendered self that she has found inoperative. In a clock-like world where self and family are posited as fixed stable structures, Mary becomes "otherworldly." Her inability to play the poles of mother and whore, private and public, inside and outside signals, not a fault in Mary, but an epistemological fallacy in the world which constrains her.

Edmund's reference to the "Stammering" of the fog people as "faithful realism" reflects O'Neill's perception that the linear realism of this play is undermined by Mary's fragmented and contradictory yet oracular stammerings and perception of mediated consciousness. Her dissolution cries for another conception of self as the dissolution of the Tyrones cries for another conception of family. In far-from-equilibrium conditions and at a bifurcation point, the system can "choose" a future in the fog of flux. An order can emerge from the chaos, a dissipative structure open to its environment and sustained by exchange with it. As the (M)other Marys perturb order with Mulvey's "riddling spirit of the Sphinx," they stammer out the possibilities for a system where "hypnons" wake up and entropy becomes positive. They thus stammer out O'Neill's transformative and feminist impulse, an impulse
which contributes to a theatrical legacy of reality and realism enervated to a liminal point where day blurs with night and self with Other.

**LINDA'S SALESMANSHIP IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN**

Arthur Miller's little-noticed subtitle for 1949's *Death of a Salesman*, "Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem," prophesies the evolution in family theory to a view of family as produced, like a play, through dialogue, that "conversational interaction" which constructs and manifests a "political order" (Ochs and Taylor 301) and an open system. The "private conversations" transpire not only between family members but also between past and present in Willy's consciousness, not, Miller insists, as flashbacks but as a "mobile concurrency of past and present" (Introduction 26), which suggests again a heightened sensitivity near crystallized memories of past bifurcations. Miller's *a priori* image of an enormous head opening inspired the original title, *The Inside of His Head*, half-humorous since a "mass of contradictions" lay within:

> The Salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes 'next' but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be 'brought forward' in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to. (Introduction 23)

The play therefore subverts unified identity, classical determinism, and linear narrative, its stage directions insisting on an implosion of dualistic boundaries:
"Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall onto the forestage'" (12).

This breaking of boundaries, temporal and spatial, opens the possibility of feminist readings since inside/outside and female/male boundaries emerge as "imaginary wall-lines." This is not to suggest that Miller consciously deconstructed gendered oppositions or the traditional Family. His interest obviously lay in creating a tragic hero of a low man, thereby subverting the Aristotelian criteria for tragedy through Willy Loman; critical interest followed suit in an immediate and enduring debate over the play’s stature as tragedy or pathos. I am convinced, however, that the calling into question of other Aristotelian premises, namely linear determinism and hierarchical order, proves even more subversive. Though Willy follows a prototypical Oedipal trajectory in sounding the past for origins and identity, the play emerges as one of those narratives for which de Lauretis calls: "Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario" (157) in theatricalizing the "essence" of linear causality as well as gendered identity.

In a conscious effort to subvert form, Miller felt compelled not only to claim a rejection of realism but also to downplay the focus on family. In "The Family in Modern
Drama," he stresses that his play "extends itself out of the family circle and into society" (37) and thus expresses the theme of all "great" drama:

How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family? (36-37)

Miller posits a "natural union of the family and realism as opposed to society and the poetic" (39). Though realism is a created form as "artistic" as any other, he insists that a playwright like Ibsen had to move beyond the strictly psychological and prosaic limitations of his own created form to achieve a poetic universality; in other words, the depiction of men (not a generic term here) yearning for the familial must transpire outside the family context to embrace the "whole gamut of causation" (40). Realism cannot "bridge the widening gap between the private life and the social life" (40) since the realistic family play evokes only an emotional response:

In any case, what we feel is always more "real" to us than what we know, and we feel the family relation while we only know the social one. Thus the former is the very apotheosis of the real and has an inevitability and a foundation indisputably actual, while the social relation is always relatively mutable, accidental, and consequently of a profoundly arbitrary nature to us. (40)

Miller clearly considers Salesman the "right dramatic form" to wage an "onslaught upon the veils that cloak the present" (41). I, too, perceive in the play transformative
possibilities but for quite different reasons, at the risk of presumption, than Miller. Aside from the obvious universalizing fallacy (even bracketing sexism) that "the life of the generality of men . . . is our society and our world" (41), there lies in Miller's argument the a priori fallacy that the private is naturally in opposition to the public and that the family is a real, inevitable, and actual haven—the fallacy, that is, of structural functionalism. If instead, the family relation is every bit as "mutable, accidental, and . . . arbitrary" as the social relation, then oppositions collapse, including that between domestic realism and poetic "universality."

Miller's disavowal ratifies critical consensus in underestimating his own and others' subversion of realism from within the form and of Family from within the system. Few critics regard *Death of a Salesman* as other than expressionistically embellished realism despite Miller's protestations and foreswearing of O'Neill: "[S]o long as the family and family relations are at the center of his plays his form remains—indeed, it is held prisoner by—Realism" (36).

As with O'Neill, however, it is not realism as form nor family as center that imprisons but the perception of both as closed hegemonies. With Family epitomizing "surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor" which the past represents to all "men," Miller asserts the temporal paradox of irreversibility, that "we [guess who!] cannot go home again," as the

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"central force" in all (my restraint weakens!) "large and thrusting" (37) plays. The language here signals a phallocentric equation of the female with the "enfolding family" and thus both impulse and obstacle to the quest. If, as Mary Tyrone insists, "home" never existed, if the Family is an ideological, political construct rather than transhistorical inevitability, then the quest itself—for identity, for Truth, for a pre-Oedipal past—is exposed as futile and linearity as illusory. Thus, it is within that centering of family and that primacy of realism, which its playwright disclaims, that Death of a Salesman is most subversive, in lifting the "veil" or the stable gaze illusion from the spectator’s vision to reveal a reconceptualized family and a liminal realism.

Miller critically undermines his own division of the familial and the social by asserting that Willy’s victory is the knowledge of his son’s love, which gives him "his existence, so to speak—his fatherhood" (Introduction 34). Taking his cue from this "grand insight," Harold Bloom perceives Miller’s tragedy as familial rather than social since Willy is "slain by his need for love, for familial love," his claim to tragic dignity arising from "his relation to fatherhood" (Introduction, Willy Loman 1) and his noble and normative pathos from "the death of a father, rather than the death of a salesman" (4). Seeing Miller, unlike Ibsen, as "richly confused" (2) about the fact that "A tragedy of familial love is not primarily a social drama" (1), Bloom attributes this confusion to Miller’s
Jewish heritage, wherein "family tragedy and social realities are inextricably linked" (2), a linkage which also constitutes the female heritage. It is not the dream of social success which kills Loman but "the dream of a more perfect family love" (4). Bloom's counter to Miller's putative intent also counters critical consensus that a predominance of domestic realism inevitably limits American theatre. If Miller's "confusion" between the familial and the social is actually a futilely resisted intuition that one inhabits rather than opposes the other, then domestic realism can denaturalize American myths and point to a transformative epistemology. The desire for "a more perfect family love" and a haven-home in the universe grounds the American Dream and is the stuff of tragedy because the myth of Family with male over (M)other is paradigmatic of those other myths of Presence, of stable identity, of Truth in the past, of order over chaos—the sources of gendered violence and the subjects of "great" and "universal" and Oedipal literature.

Miller's description, then, of the play's setting is infinitely suggestive, for the Loman's is a "small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality" (11). Though Miller determinedly attributes the home's fragility, like Willy's fate, to external, social factors, suggested by the "angry" orange glow of the surrounding apartment buildings, the fragility is internal as well, rooted in the "mutable" and "arbitrary" quality of the familial as well as the social.
Spectatorial access to this recognition lies in the character of Linda, who, as wife-mother, provides the foundation of the family, yet who alone perceives that the family has neither an "inevitability" nor a "foundation indisputably actual" (40). Not transhistorical essence but historically specific construct, the Loman family in the post-war era of determined stability is sustained by Linda as support and mediator. Though it can hardly be argued that Linda, like Mary, occupies the central position in the play, it is her self-conscious "salesmanship" which centers the salesman in the family and in the play. In both opening and closing the play with Linda’s voice, Miller implicitly positions her as the site of identification for the audience; it is not surprising, then, that Linda’s importance appears obvious to more than the contemporary spectator as Miller reports receiving letters from women proclaiming Linda to be the main character (Introduction 28) and reviewer William Boyer saw the play as "essentially the mother’s tragedy" (230).

The fact that this claim has also been made for Biff and even Happy, despite Miller’s title and own analyses, reflects the play’s foregrounding of conflicting perspectives, "histories," and "truths" which serves to expose the family as a site of the "whole gamut of causation" and of a "construal of reality" (Broderick 57). Biff finally explodes with the recognition that "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" (131), but Linda seems "always already" conscious of this
perspectival reality. Her opening, off-stage "Willy!" conveys her fear that she can no longer protect the males from this consciousness and that they will collapse before the realization that the foundation of home, family, and nation is not natural but constructed. So subordinate is her inscribed role that neither husband nor sons recognize that she and not the father is the talented carpenter of the house, though Willy does at one point call her his "foundation and support" (18). Critics, too, lock into this perception of Linda, feminists especially citing her passivity as emblematic of the patriarchal vision of the playwright and the patriarchal ideology of realism and mainstream American drama. The play's "private conversations" a political order so hierarchical that even those who go beyond positive-role-model criticism stumble before the Loman family, such as Gayle Austin, who finds Death of a Salesman dangerous: "It is the Oedipus Rex of American drama for many people, and the continuation of its centrality effectively cuts women's experience out of consideration for 'serious drama'" (63). Austin insists that Linda thus personifies Rubin's identification of women as objects of exchange among men to cement the preeminent bond between them.

The play's frontal staging of this "sex-gender system" actually provides the format for a feminist consciousness. Miller's initial description of Linda foregrounds the constraints of hierarchical gendering: "Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to
Willy's behavior" (12). Implicit here is the suggestion that Linda's joviality is produced not by her life, which has hardly been joyous, but by an iron will evident in the conscious development of an "iron repression." Much has been made of Miller's comment that Linda manages to love and admire Willy because she translates his behavioral extremities as signs of "longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end" (12). If, however, "temperament" is read as gender, a culturally inscribed position rather than a "natural" passivity, Linda emerges as a subject whose agency, rather than non-existent, is circumscribed. The America of 1949, in post-war after-shock, equated woman with home more so even than before, thus stridently perpetuating western narrative's exclusion of women from the quest. The "longings" are male, the play's flute-motif associating them with the desertion of the family first by Willy's flute-making father and then by the "hero"-brother.

Linda's agency, then, has been directed toward performing her role as tender of the hearth. Kay Stanton suggests that Linda is more tragically noble than Willy: "Her only flaw was in harnessing all of her talents and energies to support the self-destructive American masculine mythos that requires Woman's subjugation and exploitation" (96). Like Austin, Stanton sees the play as dramatizing the mythic competition/bonding between men which necessarily must be played out against a subjugated female presence, but Stanton's "fiercely feminist" (Bloom,
"Editor's Note" xv) analysis describes in the male self-destructiveness an affirmation of a feminine ethos. The American Dream's version of the male mythos involves three competing worlds, each a site of male struggle for presence against female absence:

Just as Woman was unacknowledged creator-sustainer of life [trivialized Earth Mother (71)] in the Green World and determiner of value [trivialized Bitch-Goddess Success (71)] in the Business World, in the Home, Woman, through Linda as submerged element, is the measure of human dignity and the accountant of worth. (77)

Stanton views the women in the play as finally providing a synthesis of the three worlds and a corrective to the "unbalanced, immature, illogical, lying, thieving, self-contradictory, and self-destructive" (95) male American dream.

Rather than balance, synthesis, and a counter-ethic, which leave intact notions of binary opposition and linear causality, I perceive in the play an even more profound feminist possibility, one that pro-offers a political epistemology. Long before her "emergence" when she castigates her sons' deserting their father in a restaurant for some "lousy rotten whores" (124), Linda has evidenced a will, a resiliency, a non-reactive subjectivity, and an awareness lacking in the males, though intuited by younger son, Happy: "Somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom" (25). To their Oedipal plumbing of the past for origins and pursuit in the present for presence, Linda provides an alternative epistemological stance:
WILLY: Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it.
LINDA: Well, dear, life is a casting off. It's always that way. (15)

Linda's philosophical acceptance of the empty nest juxtaposed against Willy's nostalgic suffering of the syndrome belies gender expectations and signals the possibility that she is aware of gender as performative—an identity, in Butler's terms, "put on, invariably, under constraint" (282)—and of all identity as gendered, thus arbitrary, and of meaning as constructed, thus multiple.

Willfully and skillfully performing her role as wife and mother, Linda may share Willy's longing but suffers none of his or his sons' delusions. No audience would regard Linda as such a total imbecile that her tolerance of Willy's abuse of her and flagrant self-contradictions (well-liked/laughed at, in shape/a walrus) is anything but conscious script-playing, a performance whose excess mimics gender. Not sharing the males' delusions of past recognitions and present reconciliations, Linda refutes their delusions about future unity, telling Biff: "Oh, my dear, you should do a lot of things, but there's nothing to do, so go to sleep" (53) and "You've got to make up your mind now, darling, there's no leeway any more. Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here" (55). Aware that Family and Home are constructed since she has served as chief carpenter, Linda mythologizes neither. She recognizes Willy as a struggling liar, Biff as a "boy," and Happy as "a philandering bum"
(57) but loves them all and attempts to hold the family together as an open system of relationship rather than a fixed structure of unity, one which provides a space for conflicting identities within and among each rather than a site for a stable (gendered) self. Her cry for Willy is, of course, Miller's cry: "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid" (56). The "terrible thing" is the fragility of home, the destabilization of Truth, Identity, and Presence—the slippage on the quicksand boundary between dream and reality, past and present, private and public, internal and external.

Always positioned as (M)other bolsterer and bulwark, Linda is the only one to recognize that the binary sex-gender system cannot hold and finally informs her adult sons: "I'm not your maid any more" (124). She abdicates the male scripting of her through their gaze, which alternately undervalues (Biff's "He always, always wiped the floor with you" [55]) and overvalues (Happy's "They broke the mold when they made her" [66]). Only an awareness of unstable identities, which reveals the home as internally fragile and their roles as externally scripted, can account for the equanimity with which she insists to both Biff and Willy that the prodigal son must leave home forever. Rejecting the mythic pattern of coming home as recognition/reconciliation, Linda looks for no natural balance or meaning in truth-telling. Her final speech,

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like Mary's, closes the play but offers no closure, for as Brustein lamented in his initial castigation of American drama and of this play, there are no answers, even in the "hero's" death:

Forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, but I can't cry. I don't understand. Why did you ever do that? Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you. Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. A sob rises in her throat. We're free and clear. Sobbing more fully, released: We're free. Biff comes slowly toward her. We're free. . . . We're free . . . (139, ellipses original)

Having long known of Willy's plans for suicide and attributed his motivation to not insanity but exhaustion,24 Linda here voices the play's epistemological undercurrent. She has obviously understood her husband, decoding even his verbal abuse of her as an identity-defining mechanism; yet Linda cannot understand his fate because Willy's suicide reflects a confusion of causality, a non-predictable determinism. Miller himself describes the suicide as "so mixed in motive as to be unfathomable' (Introduction 30). The prototypical recognition scene of the play—the teen-aged Biff's discovery of Willy in a Boston hotel room with "the Woman" laughing—yields no Truth to the audience when finally revealed. A parodic primal scene as son discovers father with (M)other, it mimics not only the males' idealization of mother but also primal cause and past origins as stabilizers of identity; indeed, Biff and the audience's "discovery" subverts that binary logic on which

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Oedipal identity is based. Cherished boundaries between mother/whore, private/public, past/present, subject/object, order/chaos emerge as "imaginary wall-lines" when the males fail to triumph over the chaos that they externalize and feminize. Though Willy persists in believing that Biff's life is the direct effect of that primal scene, even Biff rejects this causal chain:

WILLY: Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing! And when you're down and out, remember what did it. When you're rotting somewhere beside the railroad tracks, remember, and don't you dare blame it on me! BIFF: I'm not blaming it on you! WILLY: I won't take the rap for this, you hear? BIFF: That's just what I'm telling you! (130)

Like Biff's life, Willy's suicide reflects a butterfly effect; Willy "explains" it variously as an end to Linda's suffering or a final "sale" ($20,000 insurance) for Biff, who miraculously "Loves me!" (135), but his non-event funeral concretizes the nonlinearity and irreversibility of this "domestic courtroom." Each juror—Biff, Happy, Charley—pronounces a different verdict, none the Truth, and only Linda's "Why?" resounds.26 Recalling her earlier perplexity over Oedipal battles ("Why must everybody conquer the world?" [85]), Linda's question underscores the play's liminal realism since remoteness inhabits causality; the internal, the external; the private, the public; chaos, order. Miller himself acknowledges an epistemology from non-classical science in referring to the Uncertainty Principle: "however closely [man] is measured and systematically accounted for, he is more than the sum of
his stimuli and is unpredictable beyond a certain point. A drama, like a history, which stops at this point, is not reflecting reality” (Introduction 54).

Miller’s call for a new “poem” embracing “both determinism and the paradox of will” (55) retroactively reveals an epistemologically evolved realism in Salesman’s theatricalization of gender, consciousness, and perception. As Linda is designated observer of family and play, her perceptual stance is significant and suggests an observer-influenced and unpredictable reality and the dangers of boundary building. Though the family members are “Free,” there’s nobody home at play’s end because Linda apparently is shutting its doors; in clinging to the myth of Home and Family and gendered identity, the men denied the relationality of themselves and of the Family system and thus destroyed its dialogic possibilities. The spectator, however, poised through Linda at that present/absent point of tension, can envision beyond the low man’s search for Presence to a multiple identity, beyond a gendered dynamic of domination/submission to one of reciprocity.

Had attention been paid to Linda, the house she haunted could have witnessed the transformation of a family system on which the hierarchical state is modelled; for in feminizing Willy into Other as he did his wife, society refines patriarchal binarism. Had the males attempted not to retrieve but to redeem the past and to celebrate flux, the family at this bifurcation point could have evolved to a dissipative structure of energy exchange with an equally
evolved society. Miller's preference for the vocal (drama) over the visual (film) precisely because the former sustains a non-linear "pattern of relationship" and a "tension" (Introduction 27) echoes Love's perception of vocal metaphors as signalling a feminist political epistemology. Thus from a playwright who disparaged family-centered realism through a character whose "salesmanship" both promotes and undermines the product in performing it comes a transformative direction for the family and the form.

**AMANDA AND BLANCHE'S MENAGERIES OF DESIRE IN THE GLASS MENAGERIE AND A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**

This impulse for transformation and possibility of a new epistemology also marks the plays of Tennessee Williams, who is persistently viewed as antithesis to Miller. Scanlan, for example, schematizes the two playwrights as opposite reactions to O'Neill's stalemate between the family of security and the family of freedom as well as to O'Neill's preclusion of any order outside the disintegrating nuclear family. While Miller's reaction, according to Scanlan, to the family's failure was to turn outward, Williams's reaction was to turn inward, his psychological focus pre-empting social concerns. This schemata, which represents a standard in American theatre criticism,27 validates dichotomies not only between the two playwrights but between the outside and inside, public and private, society and family, social and psychological, present and past, mind and body--those constructed

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polarities which, to feminists, invariably perpetuate a hierarchized polarization between male and female. In fact, it is doubtlessly Williams’s atypical focus on female characters which causes critics to convert surface differences with Miller into oppositions since the female keys in a code of private, familial, internalized.

Yet Williams’s temporally suspended characters parallel Miller’s own as his dissolution of boundaries parallels Miller’s "imaginary wall-lines" between home and outside world. Bigsby notes that "The social and political seldom disappear entirely from Williams’s work," citing the playwright’s own early insistence that "'My interest in social problems is as great as my interest in the theatre . . . I try to write all my plays so that they carry some social message along with the story'" (Modern American Drama 34, ellipsis original). Though the canonized plays are a far cry from the initial protest plays, Williams’s signature plays—The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire—both evidence, within the format of domestic realism, an attenuation of Family to expose a social/political ideology and an attendant enervation of the dramatic form itself. Williams’s "portraits of individuals pressed to the margins of social concern, trapped in a diminishing social and psychological space" (Bigsby, Modern American Drama 37) reveal the nuclear family as paradigmatic of that nuclear-age space; classical realism appears arbitrary as actors perform roles of characters performing roles in Williams’s metatheatre.
Bigsby cites these two plays with *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* as signalling "the end of a particular model of America and of individual character" (32); I am convinced that both, like Miller's and O'Neill's signature plays, evince a postmodern and feminist awareness of performative national and personal identities and that they do so through "ghostly" female characters, who haunt home, past, and text.

Williams's first Broadway success, *The Glass Menagerie* opened in March of 1945, four months before the bombing of Hiroshima. Though the most flagrantly autobiographical of the plays with the narrator, Tom, Williams's namesake, the *Glass Menagerie* nonetheless resonates with a sociopolitical subtextuality. Whereas the Loman family sought refuge in a house, the blue sky over which fights the "angry orange" of encroaching apartments, the Wingfield family has already succumbed to displacement, their apartment building

> one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism. (27)

Williams's stage directions signal a post-war perception of "fluidity and differentiation," a fragmentation of the self itself which no longer signifies a modernist unity to counter an alienating, impersonal society. Now, Williams suggests, the defense against spacio-temporal
disorientation is to replace a futile striving for autonomy with a defeatist sinking to automatism.

The appearance of Tom in a merchant sailor's uniform before the "dark" and "grim" (27) tenement and "murky" (28) alleys forces home a social context of Depression America on the cusp of war; moreover, his opening speech summarizes the "social background of the play" as the "quaint" 1930s when the "huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind" and juxtaposed against the revolution in Spain were "only shouting and confusion" (29) over a depressed economy. Williams does not make these his subject, but his menagerie of three blind mice mirrors the general social confusion as well as the socio-political nature of the American Family. In introducing his memory play, Tom lists the characters, concluding with a fifth "who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel" (30). The "ineluctably smiling" (28) father in a World War I cap, "the bastard . . . absent going on sixteen years!" (97), still exerts a dominating presence in the household, serving as reminder that the Wingfields are not a "normal," "intact" family. Deserted by its normative head, this "broken" household, like Willy's childhood home, is headed by a single mother, who has reared two children between two World Wars, a time when such deviation from the Family was an aberration of the American way in fact as well as in fiction. While single-mother families today are still coded by the state as failed families, they are at least
recognized by virtue of their numbers. For Amanda Wingfield, her status signifies a shameful female failure to hold a man and an insurmountable marginalization of her family unit.

Though male critics of the play have regularly sounded psychology's leitmotif of mother-blaming and feminist critics have for that reason spurned the play, I find validity in Williams's own insistence that Amanda has "endurance and a kind of heroism" and that not she but "her life is paranoia" (21). Admittedly, from the opening scene, Amanda gives offense as she performs the table-clearing ritual, saying to daughter Laura, "you be the lady this time and I'll be the darky" (32). The scene, however, also exposes Amanda as produced by class, race, and gender codes which, with her husband, have deserted her. Reared as a Delta (more Southern than Southern) belle, Amanda "put on under constraint" the roles and learned to perform them well so as to be an object of desire for a mythic male gaze. In a South which denies Time, its myth, based like all myths on idealizations, is reified by its ladies who perform as (m)others to empower their men and to protect themselves through that performance.

Amanda's continuation of that performance when her intended audience has deserted the theatre throws into relief the inscription of her own subjectivity as well as the cultural construction of gender, class, race, age, and history so foregrounded in the South. Her amplification of the past of Blue Mountain through the compulsively repeated
narrative of the "seventeen!—gentleman callers!" (33, emphasis original) counters the material conditions of her present as failed woman (no husband), failed white (no darkies), and failed elite (no plantation). It also reflects Williams’s recognition of history as cascading bifurcations, of gender as a repetition of acts, and of origins and self as "fluidity." Cultural limitations notwithstanding, Amanda evidences the valor of endurance in accepting this fluidity and resisting, despite all odds, unity in "automatism," attempting instead to narrate a self.

Performing the fiction of gentility while peddling magazine subscriptions to her fellow D.A.R. "elite," Amanda is acutely conscious of the "real" and of her failure to fulfill cultural scripts. Telling Tom, "I’ve had to put up a solitary battle all these years" (60), she nonetheless accepts responsibility for not securing as a girl the normative "happily-ever-after" future: "And I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But--I picked your father!" (35, emphasis original). Her discovery that Laura has dropped out of a business course after vomiting elicits an incipiently feminist response:

What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters. . . . little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! (42-43).

Fear that her crippled daughter, who occupies herself with glass animals and the father’s phonograph, will prove such
a case cements Amanda’s obsession with the son’s procuring a gentleman caller to assure Laura’s future.

Though her treatment of the pathologically shy Laura is often regarded as cruel, a "desperate need to exploit motherhood as a means of reviving 'the legend of her youth'" (Levy 529, emphasis original), Williams describes Amanda’s "unwittingly cruel" (21) acts as desperate survival stratagems by one who is herself circumscribed by economic and gender constraints. The "Gay Deceivers" with which mother stuffs daughter’s bodice for the arrival of the gentleman caller are emblematic of a culturally perpetuated role for women as objects of desire and exchange: "All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be" (86). Desperately aware that Laura is ill-equipped for this stage and that she herself has tripped upon it, Amanda performs almost at the level of parody as she utters litanies whose words numb her listeners’ ears and flirts reflexively with Jim, the "emissary from a world of reality" (30), a world of "Knowledge—Zzzzzp! Money—Zzzzzp!—Power!" (120, emphasis original), which has so marginalized her.35

Her defeat is the defeat of those (M)others (like Mary Tyrone and Linda Loman) who must perform from the wings; her final pantomime reveals that, viewed "as though through soundproof glass" (136) without the language in which all subjectivity is constituted, Amanda evinces a "dignity and tragic beauty" (136) in comforting her daughter, whom she has finally acknowledged as crippled. Deprived of the
"natural" identity of wife-and-mother and left sole producer and director on this flawed family stage, this (m)other was forced into the recognition of family and gendered roles as fluctuating constructs and of each member as an intersection of relationships rather than an autonomous being. In performing gender to excess, Amanda mimics patriarchal mimesis and directs us to an unstable terrain.

Her son, of course, resists such recognition by deserting like his father, trying to escape not only spatially but temporally—"for time is the longest distance between two places" (137). With no absolutes of time or space, however, Tom confronts a perspectival reality and bifurcation sensitivity to crystallized memories as Amanda and Laura remain present in his present, haunting it as Amanda has her past. She has warned him "that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it!" (77). The seeming illogicality of planning for the past warns of loss, entropy, and irreversibility yet it suggests the possibility of change.

As Tom’s memory, the play foregrounds perspective and mocks the power of his "male gaze" to assure full Presence or identity. Though claiming to present "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (29), Tom can present only an ironic staging of truth as illusion. Like Oedipus, this narrator has produced a dualistic narrative grounded in sexual difference; however, this quest through the past to
define the present and the self against (M)other emerges as performance. Tom enters the narrative by a second stage entrance, dividing the portiers to walk into the private, familial arena upstage: "The audience hears and sees the opening scene in the dining room through both the transparent fourth wall of the building and the transparent gauze portieres of the dining-room arch" (28). In this attenuation of boundaries, Williams exposes the theatricalism of the Oedipal scenario as that past reveals no origins, delivers no truths, exorcises no guilt. Positioning the female as that past, object of and obstacle to the male quest, has failed to disguise internal flux, "fluidity and differentiation," in the garb of sexual difference.

In warning that, as memory, the play "is not realistic" (29), Tom reflects William’s own distrust of classical realism, subverted here through the home-as-theatre set, the "undisguised convention" (29) of the narrator, and the screen projection of images and legends to underscore Tom’s ironic tone. Brian Parker points out that, although apparently only one director has used this device, its intent is to set up a tension between the realism and theatricalism of the play ("Composition" 19-20). This tension resonates even without the device and beyond other expressionistic techniques since Amanda’s self-conscious theatricalism asserts a subversive level of mimesis and a performative dimension of identity; it serves to destabilize the spectator and to preclude an assurance
of Presence through Tom’s gendered gaze. In "The Timeless World of a Play," Williams asserts the possibility of consciously creating rather than discovering one’s identity and alludes to the performance element therein (evidenced by his female characters despite the gendered reference): "The great and possible dignity of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live as steadfastly as if he, too, like a character in a play, were immured against the corrupting rush of time" (ix).

Though her performance is necessarily flawed, Amanda confronts irreversibility by flaunting it; as Bigsby confirms, Williams’s characters theatricalize to survive, distrustting "alike the causal implications and the temporal logic of narratives which can have only one conclusion for them" (Modern American Drama 44). In undermining gender stability, Amanda undermines the Oedipal trajectory’s basis in linear determinism and, fluttering at the margins, signals the possibility of a new, more differentiated order. Although critics persist in deeming the play classical realism, Williams furthers the American legacy in creating from aggressively Oedipal narratives a liminal realism, where chaos inhabits order and familial and formal borders implode. As Williams represents Tom representing his mother representing them, a metatheatrical consciousness about consciousness signals the uncertainty of a multilayered reality. The Glass Menagerie, play and symbol, thus emerges as metaphor for the fragility of the
collection of relationships which is self and family and for the transparency of boundaries in a nonlinear realm.

Perhaps premier among Williams's performers is Blanche DuBois of 1947's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who exceeds even Amanda's theatricalizing. Like Amanda, Blanche has been inscribed by Southern myth, Blue Mountain here becoming Belle Reve plantation, the site of subjectivity a "beautiful dream" outside of Time. Yet, myth notwithstanding, Time has assaulted Blanche, who at thirty has lost a homosexual husband to suicide; Belle Reve to the "epic fornications" (43) of male ancestors and deaths over which she stood watch; her reputation to a series of soldiers; and a schoolteaching job to the seduction of a student. Desperate, she leaves Mississippi for New Orleans, riding literally now the "Desire" streetcar and transferring to one called "Cemeteries" to arrive at Elysian Fields, the French Quarter home of sister Stella and domain of the black musicians' "Blue Piano." Bred to be the "white of the woods," an aristocratic and virginal Southern maiden-to-mother, Blanche, like Amanda and the South, has lost her stage and become a homeless ghost. Her husband's own transgressive sexuality subverted her position as object of desire, denying her both the male gaze before which to perform her gender and the maternity with which to fulfill it. Proclaiming that death's "opposite is desire" (120), Blanche has sought life in sexual connections, but her world does not grant admittance to a desiring female subject.  

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Thus Blanche performs as object, her desire not running counter to but "transferring," like the streetcar, to death, when she finds herself on brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski's stage, on which the immigrant mechanic enthrones male desire, its gaze, and its narrative: "Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women. . . . everything that is his . . . bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer" (29). Blanche is forced to perpetuate her role as object, both by flirting with Stanley and by seeking protection in the intellectually backward Mitch: "I want to deceive him enough to make him--want me" (81, emphasis original). Like Amanda, Blanche subscribes to the art of the "Gay Deceiver" to avoid becoming one of those "little birdlike women without a nest," a fate which looms large since Blanche stands at the threshold of the age when men expect women just to "put out" (81), their market value having diminished. The play presents her increasingly tenuous performances within male narrative and the ultimate silencing of her own.

Ironically conscious of the illusory nature of her position as Stanley-opposite, Blanche performs, like Amanda, to the point of excess so that gender and class emerge as parodic constructions, transparent travesties. The fake furs, the rhinestone tiara, the frilly frocks, the paper lantern over the light bulb, the incessant bathing, the exaggerated chatter--none can long sustain the illusion of boundaries between real and imagined, lady and whore, soul and body, male and female. Blanche's transgression of
these boundaries undermines her desperate performance as Southern belle and Stanley-Other and enables that monolithic male to vacate her theatre for his jungle, taking Mitch, the last gentleman caller, and, finally, Stella with him.

The past which Blanche haunts provides, of course, Stanley's weapon against her. Having beaten the pregnant Stella and then begged her back to his bed, Stanley overhears the next morning Blanche's urging Stella to leave with her:

Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is--Stanley Kowalski--survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you--you here--waiting for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! . . . Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella--my sister--there has been some progress since then. . . . Don't--don't hang back with the brutes! (72, emphasis original)

Here Blanche echoes Williams's own equation of dignity with the deliberate choosing of certain values by which to define oneself like a time-immune character in a play. Her attempted choice, however, has been compromised by the constraints of gender as well as time since her culture does not long accord to the woman her own stage. It is at this point that Stanley considers the battlelines drawn between competing stages, his epitomized by that competitive poker table as evidenced in The Poker Night being Williams's original title. Blanche's performance represents a threat to Stanley's role as chief stud and

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patriarch, and her "parasiting" his home, a threat to the boundaries of his nascent nuclear Family.

Blanche's stance against Stanley's bestial nature is undermined by her own sexual secrets and closet drinking, and she herself has mused that "maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve" (44); however, Blanche rightly differentiates Stanley's desire as "brutal" (70) since it is marked by a dominant/submissive, sadomasochistic dynamic absent from her own. Williams confirms this distinction in exposing the engendering and gendering of violence before wife-battering was even a social issue. Stella's sexual satiety, reflected in "that almost narcotized tranquility that is on the faces of Eastern idols" (62), seduces this wife into accepting an abusive relationship as the norm, which, judging by their neighbors, it is in this French Quarter world (as in too many still). Stanley performs his macho role on her docile body, bulwarking his male gaze against (M)other and confining her to object position.

Since Blanche threatens this dynamic and reveals it as unstable, she must be separated from mother-to-be Stella by being excluded as whore, a task for which Stanley is eminently trained since "He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications" (24). Stanley first reveals the "truth" of her past to Mitch, whose parodic Oedipal script, which he lacks the imagination to transcend, could have been "resolved" by marriage. Mitch, however, rejects Blanche as "not clean enough to bring in the house with my
mother” (121), though Blanche has tried to explain her reasons for performing a reality into existence: “I don’t want realism. I want magic! . . . Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. . . . I don’t tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that’s sinful, then let me be damned for it!” (117, emphasis original). Alone among them with an awareness of representation, of constructed identities, of performative gender, and of constitutive language, she nonetheless is crushed by the representation of Woman. Blanche-as-whore must be ever divided from Stella-as-Madonna to maintain the binary logic of representation, the male gaze in its voyeuristic aspect undervaluing the one as, in its fetishistic aspect, it overvalues the other.

Thus while Stella is in labor, Stanley finalizes Blanche’s fate by fixating her representation, a fixation she had bravely, if desperately and even repulsively, resisted. Seeing that Blanche has lost all hold and has retreated, terrified, into her fairy-tale delusion of rescue by a prince, Stanley nonetheless rapes her, proclaiming, “Tiger—tiger! Drop the bottle top! Drop it! We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!” (130). Though Blanche is as far here from being a tiger as this encounter is from a “date” since it is “her inert figure” (130) he carries to bed, Stanley must script her as bestial, as body. And so, too, did the original audience, whose “waves of titillated laughter” (Falk, “Profitable World” 175), reflect a cultural naturalization of
sexualized power plays that still obtains. Since, as the play's last line announces, "This game is seven-card stud" (142), the winner in this post-war world is the Oedipally triumphant ex-soldier, who continues to play conqueror on a stage which inevitably is a feminized body, whether within families or among nations. That a private/public boundary is illusory is signified by the transparent back wall, which permits a counterpointing of Blanche's violation by a violent street scene. Having raped and disempowered one woman, Stanley seeks to secure at play's end the other by fondling her breast and positioning her as wife-mother.

In the Earth-Mother role of all-suffering nurturer, Stella must deny her role as sister and banish her own from the nucleus. Her committing Blanche to an institution represents a conscious choice of husband's narrative over sister's: "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (33). This choice reflects both the circumscribed position of women and an awareness of the totalizing ideology of Family and the gender-divided roles prescribed within it. Anna Vlasopolos reads the play as a contest between Stanley and Blanche's narratives, which alternate as the authoritative historical discourse; Stanley's ultimate and violent victimization of Blanche and Stella's validation of his narrative reflect the process of history-making as deriving from power instead of logic. The audience, experiencing oscillating identifications and denied the "hypocrisy of catharsis" (152), is asked to reject the equation of violence with regeneration.
Vlasopolos sees the play's "hidden determinism" as having less to do with Southern history than with "gender-determined exclusion from the larger historical discourse" (152).

Yet in Blanche's attempt to narrate a past and present and thus choose a future lie possibilities beyond the binary logic which Stanley has forced upon Stella. In a pre-opening comment on the play, Williams validates Blanche's self-conscious performance by describing the self as the "sum of our actions and so . . . constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition" ("On a Streetcar" 10). His emphasis on process here prophesies the epistemology of a science of becoming, which was to retrieve flux and chaos from exclusion as parasite or aberration. Blanche has haunted Stanley's home with flux, parasited his order with chaos to reveal boundaries as illusory. Like the set, Blanche herself consists of transparencies: "There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth" (15); her first appearance thus signals an absence-in-presence, a ghostly, obfuscated butterfly whose effect is to undermine linearity. Blanche subverts the sexual/textual order by transgressing boundaries as the play, superficially realistic enough to attract an audience, subverts from within its narrative and destabilizes its audience. Widespread criticisms of the play's ambiguity of form, theme, and character 43 are slowly losing ground to an awareness that non-fixity is the crux
rather than the defect of the play. Kathleen Hulley points out that, as "a series of productions or stagings," the play insists that "Any 'reality' to which the stage refers is purely a construction of its audience" (90) and thus "puts context-making into the forefront" (93) along with the power structure behind it.

As Blanche cannot fixate a self but dwells in that liminal space between past and present, soul and body, death and desire, this realism offers not closure or Presence but an epistemology of flux. The onstage triumph of the male objectifying gaze provides no recognition/resolution except a flagrantly arbitrary familial unity in the final tableau of batter and battered. Complicity in Stella's opting for survival requires acceptance of the exclusionary tactics deployed to protect the "natural," "transhistorical" unity embodied by myths such as Family. Blanche has "always depended on the kindness of strangers" (142) because, having been denied her gender and class-prescribed role in Family, she poses a danger to the order that it represents. Both inside and outside that guarded haven, she exposes the violence inherent in scripting chaos as dichotomous to order and female, to male. Blanche's streetcar derails because the Oedipal trajectory is a violently sustained illusion, one in which Williams, too, as a homosexual, was doomed to perish as feminized Other. In rejecting linear causality since history here is arbitrary narrative, Streetcar poses the possibility of a system to choose, unlike Stella, the
openness to the environment and exchange of energy of a dissipative structure. Williams thus furthers the legacy of a prophetic postmodern and feminist consciousness in American domestic realism, a consciousness about consciousness which demands a revision of, rather than a revelation from, the past to transform rather than to predict the future.

**MARTHA'S WOLF IN WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?**

Since, not surprisingly, most playwrights in the 1950s perpetuated the surface, not the subversion, of domestic drama, this legacy lay dormant until Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was produced in 1962. A product of the nuclear age in history and the absurdist era in drama, Albee overtly parodies his predecessors with references in his play to O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* and Williams’s *Streetcar*. Yet though Albee may have considered himself as breaking with tradition and critics verify this notion of a break, *Virginia Woolf* actually takes up that subversive and transformative strain of American domestic realism, revealing as ideologically constructed and thus deconstructible the Family, Oedipal narrative, individual identity, the male gaze, dramatic realism and ultimately the binarism on which these are founded. And, again, it is through the female as performance artist that this deconstructive impulse emerges as Albee’s Martha—like Mary, Linda, Amanda, and Blanche—haunts the text as ghost-monster.
Though Albee's audience in a newly decentralized and experimental theatre was doubtlessly less ideologically rigid than that of previous playwrights, the ideology of Family as closed, essential, and universal structure remained entrenched in the America of the '60s as did a resistance to the dynamic of the absurd which, as Bigsby notes, "was in radical conflict with basic American myths having to do with the integral self and the inevitability of progress" (Modern American Drama 127). Though Albee experimented with Absurdism, he seems to find his most evocative voice in a format where disorder is not merely random "noise" but an intrinsic aspect of a deterministic system; when he takes on American myths in a realistic format, he stages an order inhabited by chaos. His most noteworthy achievement is thus to deepen an American dramatic tradition of liminal realism, which had already destabilized these myths in theatricalizing them. This postmodern consciousness intersects with a feminist one not often recognized but nonetheless inherent in the title and vital to the implications of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Like its forerunners, Albee's play foregrounds binary oppositions only to invert and ultimately displace the poles, exposing them as theatrical and cultural constructs. Here, the gender roles of Streetcar are reversed with Martha ostensibly representing the body and sexuality and George, the mind and civilized refinement. From play's opening, the terms of this dichotomy provide the weapons on
the linguistic and libidinal battleground that is their marriage. Returning from a faculty party at the home of the university president, who, unfortunately for George, is Martha’s father, the drunken wife assaults History-professor husband for his Prufrockian paralysis: "You didn’t do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk" (7, emphasis original). George’s failure to "mix" comes to assume sexual as well as social overtones as Martha describes him as a "flop" who "doesn’t cotton much to body talk" (53), and he describes himself as castrated by her father’s position, "having sacrificed a "private portion of the anatomy" (28) and still failed to become Daddy’s successor.

Against her target of impotence George pits Martha’s animal sexuality: "Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody, the way you do?" (7, emphasis original). Despite her denials, Martha confirms this charge by "Braying" that "I DON’T BRAY!" (7); moreover, having invited, at Daddy’s suggestion, the new Biology professor and his wife for cocktails at 2:00 a.m., she flagrantly seduces him, humiliating both her wimpy husband and his simpy wife. Yet Martha’s sexuality rings hollow as her chosen "stud" proves also a "flop" (188) while George’s casting her as pre-evolutionary fails to bolster his intellectual stance as defender of civilized sensibilities. As with Blanche and Stanley, oppositions implode, Martha eventually acknowledging George as the one man who made her sexually happy and George acknowledging Martha as
intellectual equal ("a devil with language"[21]), though he threatens to commit her for alcoholism and insanity.

Act I’s title, "Fun and Games," evokes a performance element in these Punic Wars in George and Martha’s town of New Carthage and, by implication, in the first First Family’s New America. Critical focus on the paradigmatic gender wars between the castrating American Mommy and the initially castrated male attests to the play’s Oedipal narrative. Yet these battles consist of a series of games—"Humiliate the Host," "Hump the Hostess," "Get the Guests"—which do more than suggest avoidance of sex by George or of intimacy by Martha and of "reality" by both. These battle games are staged on the battlefield and performed for an audience, the guests Nick and Honey, in a self-conscious production which spotlights the theatrical nature of Oedipal narrative and of gendered identity as exacerbated in the American Family and in the American myth which it feeds. George and Martha’s weapon of choice, language, is inevitably, as Albee acknowledges, "a mask" ("An Interview" 19).

Not a vehicle of communication, language parodies meaning as the play parodies Oedipal assumptions, exposing family and gender as socially and temporally constructed and subjectivity as linguistically constituted. George’s novel, the publication of which Martha’s father forbade, fictionalized his own purported history, which he recounts to Nick in the third person. It is a history in which the Oedipal trajectory is mimicked as George supposedly killed
both of his parents. That his fictionalized self was institutionalized and "for these thirty years he has . . . not . . . uttered . . . one . . . sound" (96, ellipses original) implies that George sees his excessive verbal litanies as tantamount to silence in their non-communicative results. As George fictionalized his childhood, so he and Martha have fictionalized a family, creating an imaginary son whose own scenario is parodically Oedipal. In his final game of "bringing up baby" (214), George accuses Martha of "climbing all over the poor bastard, trying to break the bathroom door down to wash him in the tub when he's sixteen" (215) while Martha counters with a rendition of George as the impotent father, "the shadow of a man flickering around the edges of a house" (226).

Though it is George who professes a problematic history and sees his own as linguistic "accommodation" (102), it is Martha who emerges as the supreme performance artist and subversive energy of the play. Her Bette-Davis lines upon entering their house—"'What a dump!'"(3)—signal an identity acted into existence; moreover, the role reflects the monstrosity spawned by the pressurized performance of gender:

[5]he’s got this black fright wig she wears all through the picture and she gets peritonitis, and she’s married to Joseph Cotton or something (4). . . . and she tries to put her lipstick on, but she can’t . . . and she gets it all over her face. (5)
George's grammatical correction, "Somebody" (5, emphasis original), calls attention to the "something" of marriage in which the afflicted Davis, according to Martha, was "discontent" (6). As the image of the lipstick-smeared actress suggests the monstrosity of gender, so Martha is described by George as "some sub-human monster" (19); of all the labels, it is this which Martha most determinedly resists: "I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to, but I am not a monster. I am not" (157, emphasis original).

Martha's protest suggests an awareness of the gender constraints under which she has created her role. Playing Daddy's girl to a widowed, doting father, who George asserts is not so doting, Martha was "revirginized" after a "junior Lady Chatterley" marriage to a gardener at Miss Muff's Academy for Young Ladies, though "theoretically you can't get an annulment if there's entrance" (78). A product made re-marketable by the linguistic power of Daddy and Miss Muff, Martha became the object of exchange for an heir-apparent, though she feebly insists, "I wasn't the albatross... you didn't have to take me to get the prize" (79). Marrying an insufficiently assertive (masculine) candidate and failing to produce a substitute in a child, Martha has flubbed her gender-dictated role in Daddy's world. She can now only over-act what is already an act in a masculinist, Oedipally-inscribed culture, her performance of body aggressively and self-consciously undermining through excess the theatre of gender.
Martha's childlessness denies her "natural" access to this theatre; even today, "Women who are not mothers are seen as failed and unfeminine women, and achievements and pleasures gained outside motherhood are condemned within patriarchy as substitutes for 'normal' femininity" (Nicholson 202). Her sexuality not having procured its "natural" result and only patriarchally condoned justification, the fifty-two-year-old Martha now performs both maternity and sexuality in mothering her younger husband: "give your Mommy a big sloppy kiss" (15). The intentional offensiveness of this parodic Oedipal gender-divide and of her deliberately crude seduction of Nick forces identification of Martha as not-mother, inscribed in a mythic dichotomy as whore. Allowed to be the Madonna only in her version of the fantasy golden son, Martha is left to play sexual mother, coded as perversity in a masculinist culture.

Act II's title, "Walpurgisnacht" evokes the collapse of this Madonna/whore dichotomy as the May Day Eve celebration of witches' Sabbath derives its name from St Walpurgis, an English nun. Berating Nick on this night, not about his sexual "potential" but about his "goddamn performance" (188), Martha mocks her own: "I am the Earth Mother, and you're all flops. (More or less to herself) I disgust me. I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities . . . (Laughs ruefully) would-be infidelities" (189, emphasis original). As she recounts the scenario of her monotonous seduction scenes, Martha reveals a
consciousness of gender as an identity which, again as Butler notes, is "instituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts" (270, emphasis original). She parodies both the Earth Mother image and the male quest thereof: ". . . Martha-poo sits there with her dress up over her head . . . suffocating—you don’t know how stuffy it is with your dress up over your head—suffocating! waiting for the lunk-heads. . . . But that’s how it is in a civilized society" (189, emphasis original).

In mocking the dualistic quester/quested dynamic of this "civilized society," Martha threatens its order; moreover, her grotesquely sexualized Earth-Mother performance spotlights the incest taboo and the consequent sex-gender system to serve reproductive interests. Marriage, exposed here as a series of staged and gendered power plays, capsulizes the subject/object, domination/submission machinations involved in maintaining a national identity, especially one with such mythic proportions as America’s. Albee evinces a consciousness in exposing the ideologically constructed and negatively defined Oedipal nature of personal, familial, and national identities, though recent critics have inveighed against the playwright’s misogyny: "his implicit idea, however, is that the malignancies . . . that pervade the American experience stem from the confused, craven, or contemptible influence of women" (Pearlman 190).

Such readings misplace their adjectives, for it is the American experience itself, in its Oedipal binarism, which
emerges with this George and Martha as "craven, confused, and contemptible." Martha is a monster, yes, but a culturally constructed sexual and textual one. Positioned as object of the quest and of the male gaze, she denaturalizes both quest and gaze from her "unnatural" position of a (M)other who is not a mother. Forcibly decentered in a childless, "unnatural" family (like America's first First Family), Martha theatricalizes gendered identity, the Oedipal configuration of woman as body, lack, absence, or castrated Other. Even defenses of Martha perpetuate this polarized inscription so deep-rooted is the myth; Lara Julier, for example, applauds Albee's evolving sympathy for the Mommy character, seeing "mother" Martha as delivering "daughter" Honey from the perverse "emotional sterility," (35) empty marriage, and betrayal of the race which childlessness represents.

These essentialist readings notwithstanding, Honey's tearful and pathetic "I want a baby" (223), prompted by Martha and George's patently fictitious narrative of parenthood, actually undermines rather than reaffirms gendered inscriptions. The devil exorcised in Act III's "The Exorcism" is not merely the virginal Honey's fear of childbirth nor even the fictitious child, which George "kills" in an imitation of his own previously narrated patricidal car accident. Killer of both father and son and thus Oedipal victor, George plays priest to toll a "Dies Irae" on which to exorcise binarily bolstered myths of individual, family, and nation. Nick, the self-proclaimed
Norm and observer like Gatsby’s Nick Carraway, has volunteered to "play in your language. . . . I’ll be what you say I am" to which George responds, "you already are. . . . you just don’t know it" (150). This American dream male, one of the "wave-of-the-future boys" (107) falters, for his scientific causality or "historical inevitability" (114) cannot provide a viable epistemology.

His science having fought George’s History and his future, George’s past for Martha, both are "flops" since linearity and classical determinism are illusory. Bigsby points out Albee’s adherence to Beckett’s concept of Time, wherein "yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone in the beaten track of the years and irretrievably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous" (Modern American Drama 136). Martha, "heavy and dangerous" like yesterday, threatens the order, perturbing the system to a bifurcation point where memories of past bifurcations crystallize and sensitivity to initial conditions heightens. This butterfly effect reveals a nonlinear region and removes the play from the realm of the maligned "domestic courtroom" where causation is identified and guilt absolved; critical consensus that the play’s end exposes a structural flaw reflects an unwillingness to release domestic realism from self-limiting tenets of structural unity and linear causality in both familial content and dramatic form.48  

The play’s exorcism is of just these tenets, breaking ground for a feminist political epistemology. Pushed by
Martha to a threshold of instability, George exults in irreversibility's pattern of cascading bifurcations. His celebration of history's "unpredictability...the surprise, the multiplexity, the sea-changing rhythm" against the "order and constancy" (67) sought by Nick's science pits a chaos ethos against classical determinism. And if the future is indeed unpredictable, then possibility prevails. The "hint of communion" in George and Martha's "We couldn't" (238, emphasis original) confession of childlessness absolves either of individualized guilt. Nor can the childlessness be tagged as the discovered first cause of disintegration since the theatre audience as opposed to the stage one has long suspected it; moreover, the couple's Oedipal-in-extremis childhoods, George's professional impasse, and Martha's drinking are also offered and mocked as causal. What does emerge at play's end is not causality and closure but an exorcised language and its order, with and within which Martha is no longer a "devil." The fragmented, minimalist voices of George and Martha alone, without their stage audience, reflect, "very softly, very slowly" (239) an awareness of linguistically constituted subjectivity, mediated consciousness, and culturally constructed meanings.

This Long Night's Journey into Day has yielded an implosion of those dichotomies on which Western culture founds its myths and which American culture, in turn, hones into the violence latent in all hierarchized oppositions—sexual, marital, national. The violence in George and
Martha's marriage, systemic and political rather than individual and domestic, is a byproduct of the production of the mythic gender-divided Family and Nation. With the liminality of dawn comes Martha's admission that she is indeed afraid of Virginia Woolf. Having played she-wolf by default in an excessive performance of the gendered script, Martha actually reflects Virginia Woolf in her roles of Daddy-shadowed daughter, childless wife, and tormented woman in a masculinist culture desperate to sustain itself by negative mimesis of a feminized Other. Yet there is also in Woolf's legacy a feminist consciousness, a transgressive sexuality, and a transformative impulse that Martha's energy, exorcised of cultural coding, may evolve. The suicide here is of self-created yet culturally generated illusions, of borders between female and male, the imagined and the real, the inside and the outside. As past and present give up their ghosts, they yield to a future of nonlinear potentiality and non-dichotomous subjectivity; here Martha no longer performs body to George's mind nor (M)other to the males nor chaos to the American order nor monster to the text. Thus we can believe, albeit tentatively with George, that, with a dialogic awareness of multiple and conflictual selves, "it will be better" (242).

From Mary to Martha, the ghost-monsters of American domestic realism have signalled this possibility of transformation rather than resolution. Their textual liminality parallels a liminality in the spectator
position, which the linchpin plays of the American tradition foreground. In a metaphysics and theatre of presence, these women theatricalize the absence and otherness that they have been recruited to signify; in a psychology of the phallus, they theatricalize lack; in a culture of the present, they theatricalize the past; in a religion of the soul, they theatricalize the body; in a family of the patriarchy, they theatricalize motherhood; in a drama of realism, they theatricalize the real; in an epistemology of order, they theatricalize chaos. In so doing, they theatricalize theatricalism, displacing the dichotomies so exigent to these mythic stances, denaturalizing the violence inherent in them, and decentering the gendered gaze recruited for this violence. In an era when the Cartesian divided mind/body self and the gender-divided Family were most sanctified, America’s now-canonical playwrights fired their cannons into the fog, striking those "imaginary wall lines," whose collapse takes with them American-refined unifying myths. On this field, still in their ever-tightening cocoons, nascent butterflies sense "A dim capacity for Air," which presages female and familial and theatrical transformation.

NOTES

1 Brown, as noted in Chapter One, considers the current modernist identity politics and "reactionary foundationalism" to constitute antipolitical "feminist hesitations"; Cocks warns that resistance politics risks becoming a "sanctification of powerlessness, a celebration of weakness, a champion of victim status" (145).

2 Fittingly, Derrida’s "different logic of mimesis" finds in theatre a notable example of the "normal" being
"parasited, harboring and haunted by the possibility of being repeated in all kinds of ways, of which the theatre, poetry or soliloquy are only examples, albeit examples that are more revelatory" (90, emphasis original).

3 Diamond is among a finally emerging number who extricate Irigaray from the mold of an essentialist French Feminism epitomized by "l’écriture feminine."

4 Barlow notes that Mary speaks more lines in the first three acts than do all of the men combined (109).

5 Doris Nelson, for example, regards most of "O’Neill’s Women" as "defined only by their biological roles" (3), a "somewhat limited," if not misogynist, perspective. Drucker scorns O’Neill’s stereotypes of women, such as "the All-Loving Mother and the Gold-Hearted Whore" (7). Bette Mandl finds The Iceman Cometh more than a "parable of misogyny" since O’Neill conveys the recognition "that women are often interposed between men and the realities of life and death" (13). Nugent argues that in the Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy O’Neill displaces "non-Oedipal sexual relations and particularly feminine desire" (55) onto his own writing.

6 Though Mary mocks the possibility of this return to religion for redemption, O’Neill’s own mother, Ella, did finally cure her drug addiction by leaving the family and entering a convent (Sheaffer 280-81).

7 Descrying in O’Neill an American paradoxical desire for both belonging and freedom, Pfefferkorn equates Mary’s lack of a home with loss of her soul. Since at the time American women were defined by interrelatedness, Pfefferkorn claims that Mary is denied definition and implies that a return to religion would have provided a home.

8 Drucker laments O’Neill’s own "notable inability to distinguish virgin from whore" (8) and upholding of a dualism which works against women more than a "faulty sense of identity" (8). Torrey asserts that O’Neill’s women are "all variations on the mythic mother-wife-whore that haunted O’Neill’s own life" (169). Swortzell recounts how, on a foggy night in 1903, a drug-desperate Ella O’Neill ran to the river to drown herself and was restrained by husband and sons. On a psychological chart, O’Neill depicted this "’Discovery of Mother’s inadequacy’" as the end of adolescence (147-48).

9 Barlow notes that, though Mary is the "most insistent apostle of determinism" (106), her fault-finding betrays a belief in free will.
Barlow’s comparison of scenario with finished text suggests that O’Neill deliberately complicated motive, as in delaying Mary’s first injection so that the men’s suspicions compound her anxiety over Edmond’s illness. Further, O’Neill’s abandonment of a wedding anniversary setting and softening of character “mutes all the Tyrones’ culpability” (84).

Roger Brown claims that, despite O’Neill’s denial of Freudian influence, the play presents a “spectacle of involuntary repetitions” (43)—of addictions and conversations—which “creates a crushing sense of inevitability without introducing any gods” (41) and evidences O’Neill’s depressive attributional style. Barlow, however, sees Greek gods replaced with heredity, environment, psychology, and refashioned original sin to complicate causality: “It is in this sense of guilt and guiltlessness that O’Neill most closely approximates the Greek idea of fate he hoped to translate” (107).

Tornqvist concludes that O’Neill conceived of both a linear and circular movement in the play (98).

Barlow suggests that Mary’s ambivalence about her mother contributes to her own “uneasiness with the maternal role.” (86).

O’Neill’s view of family as theatre, obviously born out by the very writing of the play, most permeates Mary’s character as indicated in the original scenario by a comment to Edmund about his illness: “‘You can’t make me remember,’ she says, ‘except from outside, like a stranger—audience at a play’” (qtd. in Barlow 63).

See Miller’s “Tragedy and the Common Man” and the Introduction to the Collected Plays, pp. 22-26.

Reviewers immediately drew the battlelines with Atkinson claiming that Willy’s “tragedy is great” (1) and Nathan, that Willy’s mindlessness and Miller’s common language result in only a “pathetic picture” (285). Among critics, Gassner sees Salesman as “low tragedy” (21); Bentley, as both social drama and tragedy (132); and Jackson, as a “Contemporary tragic myth” (11). The debate, however, still rages as evidenced in Bloom’s Introductions to two recent critical anthologies: “Whether it has the aesthetic dignity of tragedy is not clear” (Death of a Salesman 3), but “If there is a legitimate tragic drama by an American author, then it must be Death of a Salesman” (Willy Loman 1).

Miller compares Willy to Oedipus in his limited self-awareness and breaking of the law, not of incest but of success (Introduction 35); Gassner, in his pursuit of truth (26); Vogel, in his “inevitable tendency to self-
delusion ironically induced by uncontrollable external powers" (60).

18 Dorothy Parker, for example, speaks of Miller's "didactic realism" (Introduction xi); Hadomi argues that realism and expressionism conflate structurally as reality and dream do thematically (112).

19 Interestingly, however, Miller later defines heroic stature in terms which uncannily recall *Long Day's Journey*: the questioning of how to live "so that the world is a home, instead of a battleground or a fog in which disembodied spirits pass each other in an endless twilight" (Introduction 32).

20 Though some critics, like Choudhuri (77), concur on the "richness" of this confusion, Bentley (133), Driver (10), and Kauffman (20-21) exemplify the legions who see the confusion between social causation and individual responsibility as an unequivocal flaw.

21 The focus of the play is obviously Willy's construction of reality; however, though Miller sees Linda as "having been made by him" (Introduction 30), Hadomi argues that Linda's function alone is not "determined by the operations of Willy's consciousness" (117).

22 Robert Wilson exemplifies most critics in labelling Linda a "resigned observer" (87). Those who do perceive Linda's role as more than passive actually blame her for Willy's downfall. Bliquez sees Linda as structurally central in "prodding Willy to his doom" (383); Brian Parker finds her encouragement of Willy's self-delusion "stupid and immoral" ("Point of View" 54); Harshbarger considers the loving wife role a "show" (7) to cover her conscious destruction of Willy through her sexuality.

23 Jackson recognizes the performative element in identity-making but associates it only with Willy as "actor--observer-creator" (13) of reality.

24 Cohn finds that the articulate Linda's "astonishment is astonishing" and evidence that she is merely a "tear-making tool for Miller" (55).

25 Hadomi notes that "Willy and his sons have an inner conflict in which they fluctuate between loyalty to the mother-woman figure and an attraction to women as sexual objects" (118). Benjamin Nelson actually blames Linda for fostering the Madonna/whore opposition in the males, retarding their sexual attitudes by setting herself up, albeit inadvertently, as a "paragon of virtue" (Arthur Miller 113).
Bigsby confirms the ambiguity of the conclusion since Biff's "epiphany" cannot translate into social action; his flight to the frontier actually repeats the male ancestral mistake of "seeking in movement and in space what he should perhaps have sought in relationship" ("Death of a Salesman" 127).

See, for example, Tynan (124); Sievers (139); and Dorothy Parker, who articulates the Miller-Ibsen/Williams-Chekhov duality implicit in other assessments (Introduction xi).

Like Tom, Williams worked in a shoe factory, forced by his father to leave school for the monotonous job, which contributed to a breakdown in 1935. Like the father, Williams's father dominated the family, though he never deserted them. Like Amanda, Williams's mother was a Southern belle displaced to St. Louis in 1918. Like Laura, Williams's sister Rose, though not physically handicapped, suffered from schizophrenia, was eventually institutionalized, and in 1937 lobotomized, for which Williams blamed himself even though he was not informed until later (Jordan Miller 1-7).

Stein emphasizes this "larger canvas" (14) to the point of devaluing Williams's perception of a socio-political dynamic in individual and familial identities; however, to under-emphasize, like Debusscher, the significance of the socio-political context is also to devaluate this perception.

See Koprince for a discussion of this "fifth character."

Most recent in this vein is Levy, who astutely associates the glass motif in the play with a mirroring of self-image; however, Levy indicts Amanda along with Jim for using others as mirrors to flatter oneself when actually it is Tom who most threateningly objectifies others as reflecting devices.

Sue-Ellen Case, for example, cites the play to elucidate the gender-bias of Method Acting: "In building such characters as Amanda in Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie, the female character learns to be passive, weak and dependent in her sexual role, with a fragile inner life that reveals no sexual desire" (122).

Krutch was among the first to recognize the symbolic significance of Williams's "helpless survivors from the past," who are obsessed with being "ladies" and with "the sense that her parents and her remoter ancestors lived in accordance with some code to which she herself should like to be loyal but which no one with whom she comes in contact acknowledges" (126).
Reynolds points out that "Williams's recurring use of common domestic technologies . . . in critical episodes would seem to render futile Marx's hope for a society in which technology satisfies human needs" (523). Thus not only capitalism but also Marxism fail materially constrained people like Amanda and her family.

Colanzi castigates both Amanda and Tom for practicing Sartrean "bad faith" in defining themselves by the past and thus willfully evading "existence as lack of being or transcendence" (455).

See, for example, Jones, who regards Williams's early heroines as more "passive pawns of social forces and their own emotions than active participants" (218). Benjamin Nelson also finds that "There is no sense of individual responsibility in this deterministic view of existence and without this responsibility no one can attain tragic fulfillment" (Tennessee Williams 290).

Nor do critics as evidenced in Falk's assessment of Blanche as a "glamorized neurotic . . . another self-centered, dishonest woman, perhaps a nymphomaniac" ("Profitable World" 178) and certainly a "sentimental prostitute" (175). Even more telling is Hulley's assumption, in the midst of a cogent postmodern feminist analysis, that Williams has "Blanche equate uncontrolled desire with death" and that she makes community impossible (94).

Though Falk regards Williams's description of Stanley as a "paean" ("Southern Gentlewoman" 97) to a romanticized Laurentian "primitive hero" (96), I find Williams's attitude toward his animal sexuality ambivalent, if not fearful and revolted.

Sievers sees Blanche as "unconsciously playing a role . . . a sincere role, for it is the only one a sheltered Southern belle was raised to know" (139). Colanzi, however, faults Blanche's "bad faith that asserts 'I am my past'" in reviving the "stale, transparent 'act'" of Southern lady, a role in which "she has miscast herself" (457) to the point of self-incurred ridicule.

In describing Stella as "the normal, happy, and average woman" ("Southern Gentlewoman" 94-95), Falk reflects structural functionalism's insidious normalization of female acquiescence to male dominance and brutality.

Audiences obviously felt that Blanche deserved punishment or a long-desired fulfillment a la Scarlett O'Hara. Though Falk is convinced that Williams sought this effect, I feel that the scene reveals his horror, a horror still justified by the insistence of many of my students--male and female—that Blanche "asks for it" and in a 1991
poll revealing that over 50% of adults over fifty feel that a woman is at least "partly to blame" for rape if she is under the influence of alcohol or drugs or dresses provocatively (Gibbs 51).

42 Bigsby, however, is not alone in seeing Stella as the "real hero of the play" ("Tennessee Williams" 107) since her sexual fulfillment calls up an awareness of the need for tenderness on which Williams insisted; though rejecting Stanley's "mindless sensuality" as an alternative, Bigsby perceives "some slight hope for the future" (108) in the tenderness between the Kowalskis.

43 Though director Kazan's view of "a poetic tragedy" (21) finds echo in such critics as Jordan Miller (10-14), Sievers (141), and Harwood (104-15), others find the play a failure both as tragedy and as realism because of its contradictions, which undermine the resolution. See Falk, who concentrates on the contradictions in Blanche's character ("Southern Gentlewoman" 94-102) and Riddell, who finds that the lack of a dialectic between the Apollonian and Dionysian dynamics precludes tragedy while the archetypal subtext subverts realism (80-89).

44 As a native Louisianian, I can no longer resist injecting that "Desire" is actually (and fittingly) not streetcar but bus.

45 Bruhm brilliantly argues that Williams exposes as constructed social myth the homosexual as a threat to national security. Though focusing on Suddenly Last Summer, the analysis sheds light on Streetcar as Bruhm points out the illusory nature of the boundaries between the libidinal and political economies so graphically represented by New Orleans's Canal Street boundary between the French Quarter and commercial/residential sectors.

46 See, for example, Gabbard and Amacher.

47 Both Flasch and Raymond Wilson apply Eric Berne's 1964 book, Games People Play, to illuminate the dynamic of George and Martha's relationship, though Wilson extends his analysis to the dynamics of the stage as well as of "game-life."

48 Dozier, for example, notes that the reconciliation puts a "new construction" on the previous action which can only seem "arbitrary" (436).

49 Having briefly believed this intertextual inversion to be my own, I should acknowledge the frequency of its application and attribute its first apparent usage to Adler.
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CHAPTER THREE

OEDIPUS FLOUTED, GHOSTS FREED:
SAM SHEPARD AND THE FAMILY PLAYS

"Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

"Daddy"
Sylvia Plath

Though many may have taken issue with Martin Esslin's 1980 assertion that Sam Shepard "is contemporary American theatre" (qtd. in Coe 58, emphasis original), few would argue that it is Shepard's shift from avant-garde experimentalism to domestic realism which has secured his current pre-eminence.¹ The 1978 American productions of both *Curse of the Starving Class* and the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Buried Child* marked Shepard's gravitation to the tradition of the American theatre, a move which, as Berkowitz points out, seems inevitable even among those who try to challenge the hegemony of this "natural mode" (190). Freedman applauds the move, noting that "Whatever else any great American playwright has done, each one has created, and in turn become identified with a personal vision of the American family" (7). Acknowledging this gravitational pull, Shepard concedes that family is the "soil you're born into" (qtd. in Wyatt 341), "a thing that everybody can relate to. . . . a field for people to relate in. It's interesting to me that it is those ties that you never really get away from--as much as you might want to try"

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No longer convinced that "it was boring, uninteresting to write about the family" (qtd. in Freedman 7), Shepard was nonetheless determined not to write "a treatise on the American family" ("Conversation" 3) nor "the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff" ("Metaphors" 16).

Critics disagree as to the attainment of this realistic domestic drama with a difference. Some regard Shepard's shift as a successful incorporation of the avant-garde impulse of earlier works into a more accessible mainstream format, citing metalinguistic or metatheatrical elements as subversions of the realistic surface of the family plays. Coinage of the terms "sur-Naturalism (Susan Smith 73), "hyperrealism" (Wetzsteon 7), "nova-realism" (Glore 57), "super-realism" (Zinman, "Sam Shepard" 423), and "'suprareal'" (DeRose, Sam Shepard 96) reflects the difficulty of categorizing Shepard's preferred form of late. Still, there are those who insist that such postmodern assessments over-emphasize techniques which are merely veneer on essentially realistic—in the classical, naturalistic sense—plays. Feminists, especially, are insistent on the underlying conservative ethic of the family series and vehement in the attack on Shepard, whose own movie-made, macho-mythic status as the "right stuff" seems to verify this mythic drama as the apotheosis of the misogynist, if not pornographic, tradition of American theatre.
Not presuming to offer a defense of Shepard’s collusion with, in his own terms, Hollywood "hallucination" ("Silent Tongues" 40) and conceding the irony of this de-mythologizer constructing his own "self-made myth" (DeRose, Sam Shepard 1), I shall nonetheless venture a defense of his drama grounded in the previous chapter’s defense of the "real" legacy of American realism. If that legacy, traced through its linchpin plays, indeed emerges as destabilizing rather than re-entrenching familial and national myths, then Shepard’s turn to the tradition of domestic realism can be viewed as resurrecting the subversive layers in that tradition rather than the conservative surface slickened further by Neil Simon and his like. It was, of course, this conservatism that Shepard and other avant-garde dramatists rebelled against in their theatrical experiments of the 1960s and ’70s, countering the dominance of author and text with a focus on actor and performance and thwarting mimetic assumptions by an overthrow of linear narrative, psychological causality, and transparent language. In retrospect, much of this attempt to overturn the hegemony of the text with the body, this veneration of performance "as the panacea for postmodern consciousness" (Vanden Heuvel 233) resulted only in what Blau describes as "minor constellations of atomized banality" (The Eye 43).

Shepard’s shift reflects, then, not the betrayal of a transformative impulse by a crass concession to commercial realities and calcifying realism, but, as Vanden Heuvel points out, the seeking of a space between performance and
textuality or expressionism and realism and thus a dynamic oscillation rather than a linear evolution (197). In the "fruitful tension between indeterminacy [performance] and order [textuality]" (Vanden Heuvel 198), Shepard exhibits recognition that theatre cannot be transcended but that, within the bounds of irresolvable contradiction between performance and textuality, body and mind, absence and presence, it can be transformative. He is explicit in this hope that a play "would be something that would transform the emotions of the people watching" ("Metaphors" 12) but not through the resolution of contradictions: "If you can stay right in the middle of a contradiction, that's where life is" ("Sam Shepard" 78). This theatre of a space between, of tension underscoring the tension of spectatorship, reflects an incorporation not only of avant-garde principles but also of that legacy of liminal realism which I have described in American drama; moreover, its transformative impulse offers a feminist counter to those attacks on Shepard chiseled to a lethal point, if not originally crafted, by feminist critics.

This line of attack again lambastes the unassailable stability of the realistic text and its consequent validation of the dominant ideology—unacceptable for postmodernists, unbearable for feminists. In foregrounding the father-son conflict and the quest for stable identity or presence, the content of Shepard's family plays does seem to flout postmodernism's "devastating critique of the oedipal drama as the repressive instrument of logocentric
power" (Blau, "Hysteria" 7). If indeed Shepard's violent
dramaturgy unequivocally represents the hierarchical
binarism of subject/object, reality/illusion,
presence/absence, parasited/parasite—all encoded as
male/female, there exists no access for a feminist
spectator since such drama produces as well as reproduces
the masculinist violence of subjectivity by exclusion.

Most vitriolic in this claim is Lynda Hart, who
denounces "Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions," questioning
why Florence Falk's indictment of this dramaturgy as the
realm of "Male Homo Erectus" failed, not only to thwart
Shepard's pre-eminence as America's dramatic voice, but
also to effect recognition of any critical problem (69-71).
Specifying Shepard's original political sin as choosing the
"realistic structure which perpetuates and indeed
reproduces the male dread of women rather than
deconstructing it" (80) and conflating playwright with his
macho "heroes," Hart concurs with David Savran that Shepard
dramatizes "'the immutability of the present'" (71),
reinforcing the macho American past and the structure of
traditional theatre, which he only ostensibly subverts.
She grants no transformative impulse in his shift in
dramatic form but only a basic contradiction rendered more
obvious and ironic:

Thus Shepard's chronological "progress" is in
fact a regressive return to structures that
demand the invisibility of women who are
merely terms in an economy that constructs male
subjectivity. Rather than moving from what he
seemed to recognize as undeveloped images of
women determined by male fantasy, Shepard
regresses ironically to representations of women determined by the male gaze. (77)

Ascribing immutability to the present/presence of the male gaze, Hart falls prey to the binary calcification for which she assails Shepard and thus epitomizes the self-willed limitations of current feminist drama criticism.

But, as Shepard’s shift reflects the seeking of a liminal realm, a productive tension between performance and textuality, absence and presence, it implicitly reflects film criticism’s evolved conceptualization of spectatorship as the point of tension or elsewhere of an eminently unstable and mutable gaze. Dramatized, in fact, on this family stage, where narrative is "Oedipal with a vengeance," is the male’s desperate defense of his gaze and his identity and the violence inherent in such a bunker mentality. Reproducing the production of the gaze, Shepard’s dramaturgy is undeniably male and the woman’s position, inevitably problematical. Even Blau, who singles out Shepard as one of America’s few viable dramatists, identities the macho nature of rebellion in the plays as their major limitation: "[I]t remains to be seen . . . whether he can portray the female body as something other than the old stuff, camouflaged, concessive, evasive/passive" (The Eye 44). Feminists, not surprisingly, go even further in berating Shepard’s female characters: Bonnie Marranca identifies the "zero gravity of women" (30); Doris Auerbach, mother figures too powerless "to bring about a family in balance" (53); and Florence
Falk, the "whore-wife-mothers" (100), who confirm Shepard as an "unlikely defender of the patriarchal system and sexual asymmetry" (95). Shepard's canonized comment that "the real mystery in American life lies between men, not between men and women" (Baym 2281) served to stoke the already blazing feminist fire intended as a pyre for American domestic realism. Scorning Shepard's chosen form and nostalgic ratification of the past, Hart concludes that in the family plays "the violence against women is growing more pronounced with less critique of its origins" (81).

I am convinced, however, that Shepard critiques precisely the origins of violence against women in foregrounding father/son relationships and Oedipal politics within a realistic frame. His oft-cited observation about violence, taken as endorsement, reflects instead a personalized perception of just these origins:

I think there's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, its very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it, because it has to do with humiliation. There's some hidden, deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always, continually having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent. (qtd. in Kakutani 26).

Bracketing for the moment the implication of performative identity, I turn again to Laura Mulvey, with whose film criticism feminist Shepard critics forge their munitions. Dismissing Oedipal desire for the mother as only a symptom, Mulvey postulates in place of the male gaze a neurotic father-son rivalry rooted in a repressed, homo-erotic, pre-
Oedipal father and neutralized by patriarchal suppression of women. Thus she seems to presage recent research which overturns previous assumptions by identifying the determining factor in date rape as the degree of hostility toward the father rather than the mother in gender-divided households (Lisak 238-62).

Concluding that the feminine is inevitably marginalized in Oedipal narratives but that transformative power lies within the telling, Mulvey offers the alternative demanded by feminists without the ransom of an "outside" theatre or spectatorship. Her revision of male-gaze criticism makes clear not only that "The image of the primal father confuses the neat polarization between pre- and post-Oedipal that produces a polarization between mother and father" (199) but also that the feminist spectator's fluctuating gaze can discern sites of intervention within a violent, father-son dominated drama like Shepard's. Having been "raised violently" by his own father, Shepard experienced an inevitable fascination with violence; but he insists that age has tempered that fascination and rejects any notion of redemptive violence: "I think violence is absolutely hopeless. It's the main source of tragedy. It's an incredibly hopeless pit that we can't seem to escape from" ("Sam Shepard" 76).

Rather than ratifying violence and its inevitability, then, the Oedipal paroxysms of Shepard's "heroes" dismantle the male gaze despite the characters' violent efforts to sustain a polarized position against the feminized (m)other.
within and without. The dramaturgy of Shepard's family plays reveals, not a "suppression of the feminine as a site for deliverance into an alternatively conceptualized future" (Hart 71), but a recognition that the suppressed feminine is that site for deliverance. Of his increasing attention to female characters, Shepard notes:

There wasn't even any room to consider the female, because the men were so fucked up. You spent the whole play trying to figure out what these men were about, who had no idea themselves. But then, when the women characters began to emerge, then something began to make more sense for the men, too. ("Silent Tongues" 36).

As Vanden Heuvel points out, Shepard's "double consciousness" (200), reflecting performance and text oppositions, is usually dramatized as female and male principles, which though never united, offer transformation in their interactive space: "Operating strongly within his most orthodox 'realist' texts are remnants of performance which haunt the plays as a latent possibility for positive action, acting as an ontological escape valve for the alienation and objectification he sees as the state of contemporary society" (203, emphasis mine).

This feminized ghost who haunts consciousness, this parasite who perturbs the system in Shepard's family plays, recalls, of course, the female ghost-monsters who haunt the heritage of American drama, destabilizing its myth and its form. As in O'Neill, Miller, Williams, and Albee's signature plays, Shepard's female performance artists in the family series uproot assumptions of family and of narrative as linear, causal, and closed. Admittedly, it is
the sons (Shepard, in all fairness, is one) who most obviously embody that "moment of singularity" in a text redefined as the "site of a stable chaos, which . . . might well suggest new and more complex systems of social, erotic, and epistemological order" (Vanden Heuvel 229); but it is the (m)others who signal this transformation.

If the men are the haunted, then the women are the haunters of the family castle, the stable text, the present/Presence. Parasites perturbing the system, they seem to have abdicated the illusion of family as a timeless, linear system in equilibrium, exhibiting a theatricalized sense of family as well as a self-consciousness about consciousness, a fracturing of language, and an unfixing of reality. Often absent physically and mentally, the feminized Others in the plays block resolution and the assurance of presence within families whose nuclearity looms as entropic. DeRose notes that the one constant of the family plays is the "autobiographical presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family, father, and personal heritage" (Sam Shepard 91). Haunted most by the differences and multiplicity of the (M)other, the male figures fail to discover resolution and attempt to perform themselves into being, to act out the action that Aristotle's stage was to imitate. As Wyatt observes, for Shepard, unlike Aristotle, recognition does not constitute the promise of drama since character is reduced to the drive to perform and there is no cogito (334-37).
Yet the involuntary nature of this drive apples only to the males since the female characters seem to expect no ergo of psychological or social causality but evince a consciousness about consciousness. Shepard has stated that the "idea of consciousness" is the subject of theatre ("American Experimental Theatre" 212) and that "Many of my plays center around a character in a critical state of consciousness" (qtd. in Weiner 14). This observation doubtlessly referring to the males, it is nonetheless the females who perceive the nature of perception in an observer-influenced reality and the Prigoginian moment of singularity in systems at bifurcation. It is thus through a non-classical epistemology that Shepard seems to perceive that possibility of transformation which those other than feminist critics increasingly intuit in his dramas. In the dissolution of the families on stage, there is also a dissolution of boundaries and of nuclear polarized space, revealing a space wherein chaos inhabits order and female, male. These families emerge as open systems, whose very complexity and turbulence promise the possibility of a new, higher and more differentiated level of organization—a dissipative structure.10

Though Shepard uses myth to encourage a communal consciousness of this possibility in his family plays, it is a myth left no more intact than that of his experimental theatre.11 The American myth of Family, as Bigsby notes, becomes "a metonymic parody of a theatrical culture" (166), where simulacra abound in a fragmented reality. Though
these plays reflect a desire for wholeness and "search for origins" (DeRose, *Sam Shepard* 139) not evidenced in the earlier plays, meaning is not to be found in Family as literal or figurative universal essence. These families, in fact, stage the danger of sanctifying Family as a closed system; the claustrophobia on stage signifies the hypostasis of a cultural construct which denies its ideological, political base, the inevitable entropy of a system which seeks equilibrium.\(^2\) Seduced by the "realism" of Shepard's family dramas, we are unprepared for, thus decentered by, the denaturalization of interwoven psycho/cultural myths: the Oedipus (castration) complex and consequent male gaze; the nuclear, gendered Family; the frontier past; the American dream, the ideality of the *logos*. Impelled, like all myths, by the "restoration of inner purity" or Presence, the American varieties necessarily repress the unconscious, excessive, the "parasitic structure" or "hymen" (Derrida *Limited* 103)—the feminized Other. In dramatizing the flux generated by this suppressed term, indeed in foregoing the "strangulation" or "complete lie" ("Conversation" 5) of resolution by foregrounding this flux, Shepard thwarts reassurance of a fixed, gendered identity for individual or nation. If, as he claims, theatre serves to make the "invisible" visible ("Metaphors" 9), then the feminized "ghosts" of the family plays emerge as vital catalysts of change.

Shepard's late '70s' dramaturgical shift parallels that paradigm shift from Newton's clock to Prigogine's
dissipative structures intuited by the playwright’s predecessors. Such a shift, therefore, reflects, not Hart’s “regressive return” but a progressive return to the communal function of theatre widely possible in this country only through an initial seduction by realism. As Demastes notes, Shepard’s shift marks the incorporation of Richard Schechner’s “historical avant-garde,” which calls for collective spiritual renewal, into the essentially escapist and isolationist “experimental avant-garde,” which Schechner associates with American theatre of the late ’70s (6). Thus, the (re)turn of this playwright to the domestic stage spotlights the radicalism of its legacy in verifying the liminal nature of its realism, the transformative impulse of its domesticity, and the feminist promise of its epistemology.

**EMMA’S CURSE ON THE CURSE IN CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS**

Shepard’s first family play was initially produced in 1977 in London, where the playwright had recently concluded a four-year exile. *Curse of the Starving Class* reflects Shepard’s return to America and to the American heritage of domestic drama with a vengeance as it evokes a frontier poetics of space and a nuclear Family’s fear of invasion, autobiographically dramatizing this space as an avocado farm in an increasingly suburbanized Southern California. Realism also reflected with a vengeance, the play literalizes “kitchen-sink” realism as the one set is the family kitchen with working refrigerator and stove. Yet
these appear suspended in space just as the ruffled curtains are "Suspended in midair" (135); moreover, the outside door has been broken down, further undermining the illusion of "fourth-wall" realism. Though Curse is often regarded even by proponents of Shepard as the least subversive of the family plays, its set signals a formal and thematic breakdown immediately underscored by the opening dialogue.

Rather than communication,\textsuperscript{13} this dialogue between Ella, the mother, and Wesley, the son, suggests the undercurrent of the illogical, the non-transparency of language, and the arbitrariness of family which pervade the play. Defending the previous evening's decision to call the police as her husband, Weston, broke down the door, Ella insists that her life was threatened:

\begin{quote}
ELLA: I was scared.
WESLEY: You thought he was going to kill you?
Ella: I thought--I thought, "I don't know who this is. I don't know who this is trying to break in here. Who is this? It could be anyone." (136)
\end{quote}

Much is contradictory here from Emma's refusal to identify her husband despite the acknowledged recognition of Weston's skin-smell "right through the door" (136) to her offer (and subsequent cooking and consumption) of food in a family which is presumably part of the "starving class." As is often noted, their hunger is more spiritual than physical,\textsuperscript{14} the leitmotif opening and closing of the refrigerator suggesting a search for individual, familial, and national fulfillment. Claiming to have felt "this
country close like it was part of my bones" (137), Wesley desperately seeks self-presence, a stable identity grounded in the land of family and nation.

Yet his mother, presumably the familial center, exposes family as arbitrary and its members as mismatched and detached as the "Four mismatched metal chairs... set one at each side of the table" (135). Though their names—Ella/Emma, Weston/Wesley—suggest continuity, reversibility, and inevitability, the family in its disintegration reveals itself as constructed rather than essential, its reversibility and inevitability an illusion and its conception as a closed, stable system a prescription for negative entropy. Any identity engendered and gendered herein looms as absurd as the artichokes with which the father fills the refrigerator upon his return from the desert at the end of Act I. By this point, the mother has exited with the lawyer to whom she plans to sell the farm (which the father has already sold) for a housing development, an act which signifies the ultimate betrayal to her children, especially Wesley. His pitiful attempt to replace the door cannot block the "zombie invasion" (104); the purchase of the farm by Taylor, "the head zombie," rather than by "Mr and Mrs. America," signifies to him "more than losing a house. It means losing a country" (163–64).

Wesley later describes to his father this Milleresque encroachment on the American dream by the faceless, capitalistic "they." The returning Weston—bathed, shaved,
and sober—espouses a rebirth through home and hearth into "A WHOLE NEW PERSON," who doesn't "have to pay for my past now!" (192). The son, however, insists on the futility of the attempt by the father to renege on his sale of the farm to repay gambling debts and to finish the son's rebuilt door, which will not keep out the invaders: "They've moved in on us like a creeping disease. We didn't even notice" (193). This disease is reified in the maggots infesting the lamb which Wesley has brought on stage in a theatrical subversion of realism and a thematic subversion of the defining boundaries of family; thus Weston queries upon his return: "Is this inside or outside? This is inside, right? . . . Even with the door out it's still the inside" (156).

Despite the latter-day efforts of the father to restore and protect the family's privatized territory and its very definition as a closed system therein, the primal invasion was his. Apparently alternating between desertion and brutalization of his wife, Weston has violated the family from within, exposing its politicized power structure. Wesley's initial monologue, with its sensory impressions of last night's break-in, aligns Weston's violence with gendered, militaristic power: lying on his bed beneath his model warplanes and feeling "Like any second something could invade me" (137), Wesley heard "Man cursing. Man going insane. . . . Whole body crashing. Woman screaming. Mom screaming. . . . Mom crying soft. . . Then, far off the freeway could be heard" (138). The
feminized position of the invaded—frightened child, castrated lamb, battered wife, family farm—exposes the nuclear, entropic Family as wellspring of the external socio/economic system of gendered power plays.

This motif of an invasive disease crystallizes in the "curse" of this family, each of whom nonetheless rejects identification with the "starving class." Though Weston returns with artichokes and Ella with groceries, the family members remain starving since it is self-presence—a stable, finite identity—for which they hunger. These pangs continue unabated despite efforts to perform an identity into existence. Weston’s archetypal narration to his son of his cleansing and rebirth describes a reattachment to land, home, and family through stripping off his old clothes and laundering the family’s:

And I felt like I knew every single one of you. Every one. Like I knew you through the flesh and blood. Like our bodies were connected and we could never escape that. But I didn’t feel like escaping. I felt like it was a good thing. It was good to be connected by blood like that. That a family wasn’t just a social thing. It was an animal thing. It was a reason of nature that we were all together under the same roof. Not that we had to be but that we were supposed to be. And I started feeling glad about it. I started feeling full of hope. (186)

The patriarch’s mystical perception of family as sanctified biological essence is immediately undermined by the son’s response: "I’m starving" (186); the self-defining ritual of the father, who had earlier proclaimed identity as perspective ("What else is there to envy but an outlook?" [167]), is rendered parodic as Wesley acts out Weston’s
narration of rebirth, dazedly wandering on stage naked but unnoticed and donning his father's filthy, discarded clothing so that "I could feel him coming in and me going out" (196). Wesley's butchering of the healing lamb mocks the ritual of rebirth; his grotesque gorging on food undercuts the possibility of fulfillment in self-presence; his purely theatrical assumption of his father's identity undermines the notion of family as essence: "I just grew up here" (196).

Thus the family is indeed cursed and its dissolution inevitable, in part because of this insistence on linear determinism and reversibility, a stance which breeds only territorial and gendered imperatives—the violent enthronement of the identity of the nuclear family against an Other without and of the identity of the individual against a (M)other within. Daughter Emma, threatening the lawyer with her father's violence, is the first to describe it as "Something in the blood... Nitroglycerine" (152). Weston later informs Wesley of this poison in the "outlook," handed down from his own detached father: "I saw myself infected with it... His poison in my body" (167). The ex-military flyer, who threatens easy slaughter of his unfaithful wife since he has made a mental "adjustment" (170) to killing, instructs his obtuse son by an analogy to the slaughter of coyotes with poison placed "in the belly of a dead lamb" (168).

Ella has tried to extricate her son from this lineage by comically comparing his penis to her father's, not
Weston’s: "You’re circumcised just like him" (144). Her parodic resistance, however, soon gives way to resigned recognition:

It’s a curse. I can feel it. It’s invisible but it’s there. . . . It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things making up their minds without us. Plotting in the womb. Before that even. In the air. We’re surrounded with it. It’s bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (173-74)

These autonomous "little swimming things" invade the womb like the poison in the lamb’s belly, suggesting an inexorable legacy of male violence, which does indeed destroy this family despite the resistance of the females. Yet in their resistance lies the possibility of an antidote to the poison, an immunity to the disease.

Though critics rarely incorporate the onset of Emma’s menstrual cycle, announced early in the play, with the titular curse,¹⁶ this female "curse" not only presages but counterpoints the male curse generally equated with the title. Ella’s pre-emptory explanation of bleeding to her initially off-stage daughter seems a non-sequitur to Wesley’s imagistic recounting of his father’s intrusion. Yet Ella’s misrepresentation of "all the facts" links this life-changing "thing [which] is no joke" (139) with vulnerability to invasion: swimming can "cause you to bleed to death. The water draws it out of you" (139). Further, like the swimming things "bigger than government," all-
American germs await the opportunity to attack from sanitary napkin machines: "Those quarters carry germs. Those innocent looking silver quarters with Washington’s head staring straight ahead. His handsome jaw jutting out. Spewing germs all over those napkins" (139). Having doubtlessly confused Emma further by describing napkins as something you "stick up in there" (139), Ella ignores her question: "Stick up in where?" (140); to the daughter’s later assertion that having babies is "what bleeding’s for," the mother replies, "Don’t talk silly, and go change your uniform" (148).

Vacillating between warning her daughter of female vulnerability and upholding the ignorance of gendered roles, Ella counters Emma’s dream of being a fisherwoman/mechanic/cook/writer in Mexico with "That’s not for you, that stuff. You can do beautiful embroidery" (149). Although Ella mocks Emma’s dreams of escape and orders her to stay off the horse, it is she who has instigated the attempted getaway by consuming the chicken designated for Emma’s 4-H demonstration and by not preventing Wesley from peeing on the charts; the mother diminishes the daughter’s good-little-girl identity and prompts Emma’s query: "What kind of a family is this?" (142). While Ella plans for them all to go to Europe after the land-sale, Emma recognizes that "we’d all be the same people" (148). Her desire is for an imaginative leap outside familial roles and a transformation that her mother ultimately sparks. When she exits with the home-buyer,
Ella leaves daughter in son's care, warning that "She's got the curse" (155), but the mother's overnight absence spawns the daughter's recognition of the non-biological nature of that curse.

Recognizing her mother's adultery as a search for esteem, Emma tells Wesley that Pop "wouldn't let her think. She just went along with things" (161). Having shed her 4-H uniform for riding clothes, Emma spins a far-fetched tale of revenge on mother and lover in Mexico but rejects Wesley's suggestion of going to Alaska since that "frontier" is "full of rapers" (163). As Ella has countered the vulnerability of women to invasion and submission by flouting the mother/whore dichotomy, so the straight-A, all-American farm girl counters her gendered inscription by riding the horse, which had previously thrown her, into a bar owned by her father's creditors. Shooting wildly, she, rather than the catatonic Wesley, emulates the cowboy-hero. Left in jail by a returned but detached Ella, Emma secures her release by "sexual overtures to the sergeant" (196) and plans a life of crime, "the perfect self-employment" (197). As the abused mother had sought escape from being "a foreigner in my own house" (173), so the daughter attempts to reject gendered oppression through a performance of sexuality and capitalism.

Rather than active female sexuality, however, this is sexuality as commodity, the women rejecting a male-dominated private realm only to succumb to a male-dominated public realm since the inside is the outside. Emma's
assumption of her father's "nitroglycerine" explosiveness leaves gendered divisions intact and results in her own eradication in a "gelignite-nitro" (199) car explosion intended for her father. Her curse, then, is not biology but the masculinist insistence on biology as destiny; in this sex-gender system, reproduction has been converted from biological fact to cultural production of gendered private/public, body/mind dichotomies and the prototype for invasion and vulnerability. The newly menstruating Emma protests such objectification: "That bastard [horse] almost killed me. . . . Suddenly everything changed. I wasn't the same person anymore. I was just a hunk of meat tied to a big animal" (148). Like the lamb, first nurtured, then slaughtered by Wesley and ridiculed by the farm-buyers as "somebody's afterbirth" (198), Emma has been slaughtered by male violence directed at erecting and maintaining territorial boundaries; a father who has threatened to "slaughter" (170) the mother inadvertently sacrifices his daughter in his stead.

Yet in the females' transgression of their roles lies the potential for transformation. As Ella subverts mother with monster-whore and Ella subverts passive victim with active agent, their performances confuse sexual/textual boundaries. Unlike the males, who perform their identities as if they are real, unmediated, and mythic, the females exhibit a self-consciousness about their performance. Wesley's frontal assertion of manhood in peeing on Emma's charts becomes a dazed nakedness followed by a semi-
conscious retrieving of his father's clothes to staunch the lamb's blood, which he mistakes for his own. Like an automaton, he assumes his familial heritage of slaughter of a castrated Other to resist the feminization of invasion; the sacrifice of the lamb presages the sacrifice of the transgressive daughter, who flouts gender as a travesty, a performance as readily assumed as clothing. While her brother pathetically perpetuates the father's role of gender-identity-maintenance, she emulates her mother's transgression, performing the female role of sexpot as well as the male roles of cowboy and criminal and narrating scripts of a future not circumscribed by the cultural "curse" of womanhood. In these exaggerated narrations, Emma consciously creates a self, not only replicating the theatrical process but also evincing the transformative possibilities of story-telling, which Mulvey perceives as displacing a gendered gaze. Performance/text boundaries dissolved on stage, the spectator is destabilized to that point of tension wherein female/male, body/mind polarization implodes in a mirror image of Emma's explosion.

Dichotomies can thus be defused by narrativity, and the mother takes up her daughter's legacy in supplementing the father's earlier story of the eagle, which swooped down to swipe the testes of the lambs being castrated. Though Weston was awed by this American symbol's power in claiming manhood, Ella adds that the eagle eventually picks up a tom cat, a competitor for the testes, whom he engages in mid-
air, mortal combat: "And they come crashing down to the earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing" (200). This image of male violence, self-spawned and self-annihilating,\(^\text{18}\) encapsulates the curse of play, family, and nation—that "real mystery of American life," which Shepard so controversially located between men; however, it also inscribes the potential for transformation in the telling and in the perturbation at the bifurcation point that the play presents. Closing the play as she had opened it, Ella, "downstage looking at the lamb" (200), directs our gaze to the ghost of the daughter, to an elsewhere beyond cultural curses of reversible and inevitable (patri)linear progression and binary logic. If the father-son dyad represents the final dissolution of negative entropy, then the mother-daughter counterpoint posits the evolution of positive entropy, the dissipating of energy into an environment which returns it. Emma’s ghost haunts the stage with the possibility of family and nation belying the curse of feminized Otherness and thus dispensing their own curse of inevitable violence. Such systems, willingly open and unstable, can choose futures as dissipative structures sustained rather than threatened by differentiation.

**HALIE’S CHILDB(E)ARING IN BURIED CHILD**

Winner of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize, *Buried Child* triggered the public visibility that has led to the equation of Shepard with his "‘Cowboy-Mouth’" heroes (Falk 93); moreover, of all of the family plays, it is this which

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seemingly most flouts feminism but actually fulfills de Lauretis's call for narrative which is "Oedipal with a vengeance." *Buried Child* conflates Oedipal with American myth as its narrative of incest, infanticide, and patricide unfold on an Illinois family dairy farm. In the very heartland, the family is disintegrating as the farm has become barren--fields fallow, cows dried up. Yet there is no external encroachment as in *Curse of the Starving Class* to blame even initially for the dissolution; instead, the family, having broken the incest taboo, is imploding internally, its claim to universal essence immediately exposed as illusory. Isolated and perversely nuclear, the family tries to live as a closed, linear system, quelling its perturbations in an entropic, non-differentiated void. Incest, however, signals a destabilization of origins paralleled here by a destabilization of linear narrative as confessions finally elicited in the search for the child's origins remain ambiguous, at times contradictory. Desire for Presence through resolution of the Oedipal detective trajectory is thwarted, the tension unrelieved, the gaze unfixed.

Yet in a seeming confirmation of the presence/absence, subject/object binarism of the male gaze, it is as absence that Halie opens the play, her voice, like Linda Loman's, descending from her upstairs, off-stage domain to her husband, on stage. Dodge, however, hardly embodies presence or an identification point for the mastering gaze since this father of sons is prostrate on the couch before
a soundless, imageless television screen. No mirror in which to confirm a unitary subject/self, the television, its "blue light flickering on his face" (63), reduces the patriarch to a mirror, a reflection of empty representation. This self-reflexive image signals simultaneously the play's own complicity in constructing a representational model of subjectivity and its deconstruction of that model. Buried Child's images of impaired male subjectivity expose Freudian gendered identity, rooted in castration anxiety, as a representation which founders on the violence inherent in the prescribed defense of self/(m)other, family/other boundaries and in the father-son rivalry within the ranks.

In this American house of Oedipus, paternal prohibition has been violated, the foundation of family undermined, and the plague--"the rotting canker in the state"--symptomized in the patriarch. Thus Halie accuses Dodge of "Decomposing. Smelling up the house with your putrid body! (76), and Dodge proclaims himself "an invisible man" (68). Beginning with the castration images with which Oedipus Rex ends, Buried Child displaces invisibility or absence, which an aspiring Oedipus must ascribe to the female, onto the males, who replicate the barrenness of the farm. Dodge, who later alludes to his impotence for six years before the birth of the buried child, futilely dons his baseball cap/crown to deflect further mutilation by his son Bradley's hair clippers. Bradley's squeaking wooden leg theatrically foregrounds his
own self-inflicted (a youthful chain-saw accident), yet father-avenged, castration. The oldest son, Tilden, having gotten "mixed up" in New Mexico, has returned home "profoundly burned out and displaced" (69), while his own son Vince returns in Act II in a desperate attempt to fixate an identity by claiming his "heritage" (84).

Though Vince's girlfriend, Shelly, mockingly describes this heritage as "a Norman Rockwell cover" (83), by this point the audience recognizes this quintessential American Family as a sterile patriarchy—mother's milk dried up and a child buried in the back of the house and the psyche. Despite critical assessment of Vince as the Oedipal quester, his assertion of masculine identity remains problematical. Not recognized by his male relatives, Vince performs childish tricks to assert his presence and to deny the invisibility (castration) which Dodge has accepted. Equally futile is his later attempt to "go West," an escape which yields only a mirrored vision of his "mummy's face" (130) in the windshield, blurring with the faces of his forefathers: "I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved" (130). Delivered facing the audience, this speech, like all of Shepard's monologues, undermines classical realism and its Oedipal assurance of stability and linear resolution.

Hardly the realm of "Male Homo Erectus," this farmscape concretizes the dangers of Freud's script for...
resolution of the Oedipal complex through the castration complex. Rather than the fiction of unequivocally gendered identities based on specular recognition of sexual difference, the play dramatizes the foundering of male subjectivity on the shoals of differences. "Castrated," the men find no reassurance of identity in rendering women invisible since they themselves are invisible mirrors of masculinist representation. In psychoanalysis's representation, as Mary Jacobus points out, "to be unmanned means not simply to be impotent, childish, or dead; it means becoming like a woman" (127). These feminized men provide no fixed point of identification for the spectator, whose eye/I oscillates, an oscillation which accounts for critical attention to the character of Shelly. Consensus that her Act II entrance provides the audience a point of identification tacitly verifies the Act I dismantling of the male gaze since Shelly emerges as subject, the males as objects as she ferrets out the secret of the buried child.

Critics diverge radically, however, on whether spectator identification with Shelly remains constant and on whether she is a victim or a survivor. This confusion illuminates not a misogynist vision but Shepard's focus on the contradictions of female subjectivity on the Oedipal stage--literal and theatrical--where gender must be performed. Shelly's "exaggerated" makeup and vamp dress, complete with rabbit coat, underscore her conscious performance of a gendered sexual identity unlike Vince's desperate quest for a unitary self through Family.
Shelly’s stance as a "liberated" woman, who immediately dons Dodge’s cap/crown/penis, soon falters, however; though she laughs at Vince’s American "heritage" and mocks his search for identity within it, Shelly temporarily capitulates to the male demand that she emblemize the (m)otherness of castration, lack, absence, silence—a demand evinced in Vince’s angry "Can’t you bite your tongue or something?" (85). She maternally protects against Vince’s assault the carrots given her by Tilden from the supposedly long-barren fields, whence he had earlier harvested corn. As she complies with Tilden’s request that she stay to cut the carrots, Shelly insists to the departing Vince: "Now that I’ve got the carrots everything is all right" (99).

This comic illogicality and Tilden’s puzzled gaze on Shelly’s cutting parody the castration complex, the male gaze, and hence the very notion of Oedipal identity or self-presence. Though Falk set the critical tone in claiming that Shelly "submits to molestation by Tilden" (100), Shepard’s stage directions (and the Dallas production I attended) argue otherwise: "He reaches out very slowly and touches her arm, feels the fur gently then draws his hand back" (102). Connecting Shelly and Tilden as Oedipal Others, the gesture serves as foil for, rather than foreshadowing of, Shelly’s subsequent submission to Bradley’s shoving his fingers into her mouth. This symbolic rape by the "castrated" Bradley, who dislikes Shelly’s "tone and voice" (106), suggests the problematical
position of the female not only in the Freudian biological scenario, but also in the Lacanian linguistic version, which still postulates the phallus/tongue as universal signifier and subsumes sexual differences under the rubicon of gendered difference.20

Shelly’s Act III transformation evolves from her displacement of gendered and hierarchized family roles. Having spent the night in Halie’s room with the crosses and family photographs, Shelly claims to Dodge that the house feels like her own. A picture of Halie holding a baby by an apple tree, looking lost "like she doesn’t know how she got there and "Like [the baby] didn’t even belong to her" (111), effects Shelly/spectator recognition of Eve’s subversive knowledge: that the body/subjectivity relationship is mediated through the unconscious and language. As Dodge confirms, anatomy is not destiny, the feminine not the maternal, the family not natural: "You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies? Where are you from anyway?" (112). Shelly’s roots in Los Angeles confirm her inscription, despite her "masculine" aggressiveness, in Hollywood’s dream-machine representation of woman as a man-metaphor of biological and linguistic otherness. Rejecting Dodge’s verbal advances, Shelly rejects this prescribed resolution of the female Oedipal complex, the familial inscription into gendered subjectivity and suppression of "original undecidability" (Jacobus 114). Instead, she insists on recognition from
the returning Halie: “I don’t like being ignored. I don’t like being treated like I’m not here. I didn’t like it when I was a kid and I still don’t like it” (119-20).

Like Shelly, Halie threatens the stability of gendered identity and of the family structure in which it breeds, a threat also evidenced in critical divergence about her character. Halie leaves in the rain of Act I dressed in “mourning” (73) black for her rendezvous with the priest, who is to supervise erection of a statue of her dead, possibly imaginary, athlete-son Ansel (“A whole man!” [124]); she returns in the sun of Act III dressed in yellow with a bouquet of matching roses and a drunken, apparently seduced, Father Dewis. In this house of half-men with its Oedipal “stench of sin” (116), Halie emerges as a desiring, if deluded, subject rather than as a mediator of male desire. Though Falk dismisses Halie as another of Shepard’s “whore-wife-mothers” (100), her breaking of mother/whore boundaries signals a rejection of gender as biological and of family as natural. The returning Eve, Halie mocks with her transgressive sexuality the stasis inherent in the male’s violent resistance to non-gendered, shifting subjectivity, gently throwing a rose between Dodge’s knees onto his blanket/mantle/shroud, which mummifies rather than protects that privileged organ of desire and identity. Scripted as familial center, Halie, like Shelly, pushes the system off-center, exposing its entropy as negative disorder rather than the stability it feigns.
Dodge and Bradley’s childish battling over the old brown blanket mocks the male territorial reflex to the threatened exposure of instability associated with the child long buried under the brown earth. Similarly, the shifting possession of Shelly’s rabbit coat parodies the desperate and futile repression of shifting gender identities. Bequeathed the coat by Shelly, Tilden takes it off only after completing his narration of Dodge’s infanticide: "We had a baby. . . . Dodge did. . . . Dodge killed it" (103), a version which contradicts his earlier claim that "I had a son once but we buried him" (92). Bradley later grabs the coat from Tilden, clenching it in one hand while thrusting the other into Shelly’s mouth; he throws it onto Dodge’s head after his "rape" establishes the son as patriarch, the father as weak or womanized. Upon her return, Halie, to observe propriety before the dubious piety of Father Dewis, yanks the coat from Dodge to cover Bradley’s detached leg, ignoring Dodge’s protestation against her misplaced religious/sexual energies: "That coat’s for live flesh not dead wood" (115).

In retaliation for Bradley’s calling her a prostitute before Halie, who objects to "Language!" (120) in her house, Shelly confounds the male attempt to deny instability through denigration of the female. "Kidnapping" both coat and leg, Shelly, along with Halie, who robotically effuses maternal protectiveness only to abandon Bradley to impotent crawling, exposes as travesty the constitution of gender upon the patriarchal stage.
Under the phallogocentric illusion of a unitary subject and universal signifier, all are reduced to rabbits starved for the carrot/phallus; hence, as Vince "dangles [the leg] over Bradley’s head like a carrot" (130), Shelly proclaims "You’re the strangers here, not me" (121) and "I don’t have any business period. I got nothing to lose" (122).

Relinquishing any stake in the Oedipal drama by rejecting the psycho-cultural production of gender, Shelly is no longer estranged by the lack of a fixed identity; she escapes through "taboo territory" (127), the porch on which a drunken Vince wages war against imaginary enemies who threaten to penetrate (or feminize).

Through the civilization-founding incest taboo, farm porch becomes threshold between gendered-family territory and polarized American territory, their masculinist/militaristic identities founded on suppression of difference, be it problematic origins or feminized Others. The negative entropy of this family is the negative entropy of an America which, in resisting a multilateral dissipation of energy, may close and doom itself. Vince assumes the patriarch’s position on the sofa after Dodge has willed him the farm and succumbed unnoticed by (or to) the television. Though critics read this scene variously as regeneration by a new Corn King or as the absence of regeneration, most concur that Vince is the buried child, the Oedipus figure of the play, and his legacy, the future of America. Yet Shepard’s final image insists on Tilden as Oedipus as he passes through the self-
castrated casualties on the patriarchal battlefield to deliver the unburied child to Halie, back upstairs after being deserted by her priest. Regenerative possibilities do not exist in myths of stable origins since Christianity's cross is carved from the same "dead wood" as Bradley's leg and the family's past is an observer-influenced reality; they emerge instead in the destabilization of origins signaled by the incest.

Just as the vegetable props have undermined the formal structure of classical realism with their overt theatricality, so the "bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth" (132) undermine its epistemological foundation in linearity and causality. In a family which does not even accede recognition to its living members, this dead child remains, as Shelly says, "so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (122). In mockery of Shelly's "detective" attempt to "uncover the truth of the matter" (122), Dodge ultimately contradicts his original claim that "My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard!" (77), underscoring Tilden's contradictory narratives and Halie's seemingly incestuous memories of Ansel. None, however, denies that the murderer, if not the father, was Dodge, who felt the order of his "well-established family" (123) threatened: "It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew... Tilden knew" (124). Dodge's violence has failed to sustain
family stability, however, and it is only Halie who recognizes family as process and survival as performance: "We can’t not believe in something. We can’t stop believing. We just end up dying if we stop" (118). Though her religious identity is as arbitrary as the familial one which she rejects, Halie seems completely aware, unlike the males, of the artifice.

No more than the myth of family can the myth of the frontier serve as bulwark for male identity. His family disintegrating, Tilden, former football all-American, followed America’s trajectory westward only to land in jail. Rather than that reactionary glorification of the frontier of which he is often accused, Shepard dramatizes the imprisonment of any construct which mandates stable identity and closed systems: "But you have this personality, and somehow feel locked into it, jailed by all your cultural influences and your psychological ones from your family, and all that. And somehow I feel that that isn’t the whole of it, you know, that there’s another possibility" ("Metaphors" 16). Like Oedipus at Colonus, Tilden is compelled to narratize familial/cultural disintegration. Having lost his voice in New Mexico, Tilden echoes Halie’s survivalist impulse in insisting to Dodge: "Well, you gotta talk or you’ll die" (78) This awareness of consciousness as constituted in language posits "another possibility" in the transformative power of storytelling.
Though the feminized Tilden is often dismissed as demented, albeit nurturing, the theatrical foregrounding of his harvest from a long-fallow field—corn, carrots, child-points to a dramatized foregrounding of the harvester. Not the restoration of the phallus (the corn is shucked; the carrots, cut) but the transformative possibility of the feminine is effected by this tilling/telling. If Tilden’s language is self-conscious and disjointed, so is the subjectivity which it constitutes since Shelly, Halie, and Tilden have exposed gendered sexuality as performance. Among the males, only Tilden, willingly decentered and "demanned," has abdicated the Oedipal legacy, properly his as eldest son, by no longer feigning a stable identity. In so doing, he emerges as an alternative Oedipus. Abrogating male Oedipal resolution of self as not-Other, male as not-female, subject as not-object, text as not-performance, Tilden reflects the vacillating and contradictory position of the female. Though Freud, in describing or, more accurately, prescribing Oedipal resolution, strived to resolve sexual ambiguity by concluding that the woman "develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority" (253), Shepard seems less convinced of Oedipal asymmetry since he locates, as cited above, "that deeply rooted thing," that inferiority in the "Anglo male American."

In a theatre, then, as meta-psychological and meta-mystic as it is meta-linguistic and meta-theatrical, Shepard’s male characters fall victim to a masculinist ethic, which, in defining difference as opposition, ordains
a fixed, gendered subject and a closed, gendered family. Yet the throne of masculinist self and patriarchal family rests on a precarious dias, for, as Jacobus points out, femininity "'inhabits masculinity' as otherness or disruption; it is the uncanny of repression itself . . . a bisexuality that necessarily returns as monstrosity" (16). It is this "deeply rooted" monster which Mary Shelley's namesake in the play detects as the buried child of the Oedipal family structure. Whether or not Tilden is the actual father, only he, having ceased to battle the monster, can unearth it. *Buried Child* thus belies critical accusations of Shepard's textual suppression of the feminine since it is the feminine model of unresolved sexuality or identity which provides the title and inhabits the text of the play. As the gaze follows Tilden with the grotesque stage prop, the play opens at its close, eschewing a reconciliation, hence reification, of oppositions for an insistence on difference.

Dodge attributes the family's demise as much to Tilden's gender cross-over as to the sexual aspect of incest, lamenting to Shelly:

> Tilden was the one who knew. . . . He'd walk for miles with that kid in his arms. . . . He'd tell that kid all kinds a' stories. Even when he knew it couldn't understand him. . . . We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothin'. Everything was canceled out by this one mistake. This one weakness." (124)

In "this one weakness," the destabilization not only of origins but of gender, family, and linear narrative,
Shepard seems to posit possibility, enhanced theatrically through Tilden's physical removal to the borders of the Oedipal stage—a margin from which Halie perceives through the offstage window regeneration from Tilden's harvest:

"It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot... Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun" (132). Visual and verbal emphasis (the pun sun/son) on the dead child suggests that Vince, his family, his America have lost the battle. But Halie and Tilden, her actual son, survive on the borders; and the sun, which, in this subversion of the Wasteland, must signal regeneration, is not simply Halie's fiction since the stage directions specify sunlight.

Recalling Prigogine's description of "dangerous" elements amplifying into systemic flux, the borders of Shepard's stage yield an image of an escape into a new order, of family as a dissipative structure with windows open to a flow of energy. In this monstrous mother and ghostly Other, with their consciousness about consciousness and transgression of gendered binaries and familial borders, lies the possibility of transformation. From the past, Tilden delivers to Halie at her window the future, the "as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary when a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity."
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(Derrida cited by Blau, "Bloody Show" 12). In the insistence on the future as unpredictable, the flesh as spiritual, and chaos as orderly, *Buried Child*—image and play—pulls the spectator's gaze to a liminal realism and shifting reality, a far from equilibrium territory of haunted systems, transgressed boundaries, and transformed epistemologies.

**MOM'S EXIT IN TRUE WEST**

Though 1980's *True West* may appear an "almost cinematic naturalism (Coe 58), its nine-scene structure produces a narrative of dissolution which again eschews psychological causality while centering consciousness. Set in the kitchen and alcove of a suburban home forty miles east of Los Angeles, the play dramatizes the arbitrariness which Shepard associates with this scene of his youth: "These towns are obsessions of mine because of their accidentalness. . . . They grew out of nothing and nowhere. . . . They hold a kind of junk magic" (qtd. in Orbison 507). It is this "junk magic" which *True West* presents, as the magic of myth collides with the junk which eventually overtakes the stage, subverting through excess the myths of Frontier, Freud, Family, and Realism; moreover, the geographical proximity of the premier "junk magic" factory—Hollywood—is literally brought home as two brothers battle over their respective screenplays.

The play opens upon Austin in the alcove, at work by candlelight on a script for a romantic western. Having left his family "up North," the Ivy-League educated Austin
is tending his mother's house and plants while she tours Alaska in search of a new frontier beyond the alcove's artificial grass and Boston ferns. Austin, meanwhile, suffers distraction in his attempt to recreate the old frontier. His older brother, Lee, whom Austin has not seen in five years, materializes in the moonlit kitchen, having emerged from three months on the Mojave desert to burglar the neighborhood. Semi-drunk and filthy, Lee provides immediate physical and psychological contrast to Austin, the sane, sober suburbanite. Replaying the Cain and Abel myth, Shepard sets up the light brother/dark brother duality only to reveal that the source of its violence lies in scripts which convert differences to oppositions and the consequent myths which posit synthesis and resolution. Since the traditional Family represents an originary site of identity fixated through opposition, Lee and Austin instantly resume their childhood rivalry. Resentful that Austin has appropriated Mom's place, Lee aligns himself with the "Old Man," another of Shepard's deserting and desert drunks, thereby feminizing Austin and deriding his hand-outs of Hollywood "blood money" to the father.25

Having set up the civilized/savage, mother/father, home/frontier, fiction/fact, illusion/reality poles, Shepard proceeds to expose polarization itself as a theatrical and cultural device and its resolution—whether on stage, in the family, on the frontier, or on the Freudian couch—as a stultifying construct. Seeing through Austin's scripted identity, his "Art" (14), Lee recognizes
the candlelight as a nostalgic attempt to conjure the forefathers in their wilderness cabins; moreover, he mocks his brother’s language as media-dictated and meaningless. To Austin’s "I don’t want any trouble, all right?" Lee replies, "That is a dumb fuckin’ line. You get paid fer dreamin’ up a line like that?" (8). Early on a feminized Other, Austin pretended to be Geronimo as a child while the older, more masculine Lee caught snakes in this "Paradise" (39) landscape. Casting himself as well as others in his scripts, Austin now feels boxed into a civilized image of his own making. When Saul, the pink-shirted producer with the Johnny-Carson golf swing, loses a golf bet to Lee and contracts for his "real West" (35) story with its "ring of truth" (35), Austin rejects his relegation to ghost-writer to assume his brother’s role. After stealing every toaster in the neighborhood to compete with Lee’s television thefts, the drunken Austin remarks that Saul "thinks we’re one and the same" (37).

Not only Saul but most critics regard Austin and Lee as the two sides of an individual psyche, the intellectual and civilized at war with the emotional and savage.26 Shepard, however, cautions against the notion of a balanced self as resolution in True West:

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn’t be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. . . . I think we’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It’s not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. (qtd. in Coe 122)
Despite this warning against symbol-mongering and synthesis-seeking, many critics read the play as Austin's failed quest to individuate or find the "True West" by integrating his darker side, thereby validating the notion of the Oedipal quest and truth itself. With the frontier, the assumption goes, disappeared the possibility for the balance of opposites and stabilization of identity. Richard Wattenberg argues that the frontier myth, as consolidated by Frederick Jackson Turner around the turn of the century, represents not merely a metaphor but "a particular process of Americanization in which the confrontation between eastern civilization and western savagery produced a distinctly American entity" (226, emphasis original). Overpowering the wilderness, the pioneer produces a uniquely American and unequivocally triumphant merger (capitalistic terms apply) of civilization and savagery. Wattenberg places True West in the context of American frontier plays which increasingly revised this myth, abandoning the conclusion of a reconciled duality and a promising future.

Shepard suggests that reconciliation is and has ever been impossible because the oppositions implode. Lee's desert is as barren as the civilization it ostensibly counterpoints, the crickets and coyotes a single chorus by play's midpoint. As Austin points out, Lee's "authentic experience" produces a script with only "illusions of characters... fantasies of a long lost boyhood" (40) no more real than Austin’s romantic images of the past. As
Lee assumes the role of realistic artist, Austin dispels the frontier myth: "There's no such thing as the West anymore. It's a dead issue!" (35) But no more operational is the '50s' family myth, the televised domestic parallel of the westerner's internal stability. The cowboys have grown up to an America whose myths have reached their inevitable implosion, sucking into themselves identities constructed through individualism and opposition. Austin cries out:

There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now--I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself... Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard... There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me! (49)

Rather than an oft-assumed lament for a vanished reality, I find here the suggestion that such a reality--family solidity, frontier individualism--was always already a representation, one created at a cost that contemporary America is now paying. Men are mere images not because the frontier has vanished and the traditional Family has disintegrated but because they have been mythologized as stages on which to seek empowerment. Lee and Austin so facilely and unrealistically reverse roles exactly because they are roles. They have envied, not each other, but pictures of the Other, self-spun images against which they first exalted 'nd then bemoaned their identities, which were at any rate illusory. As youths, they fantasized...
about each other's lives; when Lee confesses, "I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with yer arms fulla' books. Blonds chasin' after ya'," Austin replies, "I always used to picture you somewhere. . . . Different places. Adventures" (26). Now established as the other's fantasy, they proceed to play out Lee's contemporary, "authentic Western" (30), a laughable truck-horse chase scenario in which "Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Now knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going" (27).

No paths to resolution emerging from their childhood, no causality revealed, the brothers remain "illusions of characters" created by language. Vying for narrative authority, the brothers wage their primal war for the creation of self and history. Their polarization stems from the paradigmatic family gender division in a macho culture's concept of its divided psyche as battlefield. The seduction of this binary logic lies in the possibility of the union, or more appropriately, hierarchization of opposites, external and internal. Shepard, however, thwarts such linear expectations of order at quest's end. In the penultimate scene of the play, Lee accepts Austin's offer of his ghost-writing in exchange for co-habitation in the desert. Smelling a la Hemingway salvation in the product of his stolen toasters and sensing possibility in
the dawn, Austin offers the communion plate of "demolished toast" to Lee whose "predatory" (49) circling and "huge crushing bite" (50) hardly prophesy resolution.

Shepard's stage directions for the last scene further subvert mythic expectations of union through communion with or triumph over one's opposite. Mimicking the classic western resolution, Shepard instructs that the stage "effect should be like a desert junkyard at high noon" (50). No Hollywood triumph of cowboy, pioneer, or good brother flash on the screen here, just "junk magic" as suburbia and desert, civilized and savage conflate in similarity rather than merge in opposition. Shepard perceives a wasteland in western myths, which embody a binary, inevitably hierarchical, epistemology exacerbated in America's cowboy culture. There is no longer a true West because there never was truth in the West—only a frontier myth created to provide an American quest narrative. The quester/pioneer perspective, ever a male gaze, codified the West and its native inhabitants, who hardly saw the land as frontier, as primitive, feminized others to be conquered and absorbed. Now disenfranchised from the land, non-Native Americans have institutionalized it into a myth of wildness, whence springs the icon of Male Individualism.

The violence implicit in this myth stems from the same scripted polarization that undergirds the myth of family. Mom's return in the last scene dramatizes the casualties of oppositional performances. In dismissing Mom as "just a
leftover Halie" (30), Marranca ignores the feminist implications of this disassociated (M)other. Dressed in white and carrying ludicrous red luggage, the figure of Mom "enters unobtrusively" (52) and stands unnoticed and ghostlike in her decimated home. Indeed like Halie, she performs maternity, her vacuity or "fog" concretizing her abdication of gendered identity and of home. Seeking other psychological frontiers, Mom, however, has found only further constraint in Alaska: "Staring out a window. I never felt so desperate before" (59). Her return, variously regarded as "astonishing" (Wyatt 351) and "surreal" (DeRose, Sam Shepard 112), further undercuts the linear realism of the play as it simultaneously propels it to its climax. Vapidly absorbing the spectacle of her toaster-strewn kitchen and dead plants, she dispassionately observes, "Well, it's one hell of a mess in here, isn't it?" and "Oh, they're all dead aren't they" (54) before passionately urging her sons to go with her to meet Picasso, "who's visiting the museum" (55).

This caricature of motherhood "signals the humor bred of absurdities and non-sequiturs like violence" (Bigsby 185), and in this humor lies subversion. Informed of the planned desert escape of her sons, Mom replies that they will "probably wind up on the same desert" (53) as the father since the junkyard landscape seems to be internalized by the violent, territorial males. As Austin attacks Lee for reneging on their art-for-desert pact, Mom "numbly" and "calmly" resumes her '50's mother role,
chiding her "boys": "You've got the whole outdoors to fight
in" (57). The frontier territorial outside, however,
pervades the domestic inside as the desert has invaded this
kitchen. Mom insists to the erstwhile civilized Austin
that strangling Lee is "a savage thing to do" (58) and that
"He won't kill you. He's your brother" (58); however, Lee
has earlier exposed the inner sanctum of domesticity as a
breeding ground for systemic violence:

You go down to the L. A. Police Department there
and ask them what kinda people kill each other
the most. What do you think they'd say? . . .
Cousins. Real American type people. They kill
each other in the heat mostly. . . . Right about
this time of year. (24)

The mother's house has become a battlefield where
Truth is contested as the (M)other's body is the field on
which male psychological warfare is waged under the banner
of the cogito self. Raynette Smith seems to salute this
banner in insisting that, for the brothers, "The task is to
exorcise the Mother. Violence becomes the only means to
this transformation" (282); though frightening, such a
focus does at least signal the significance of the feminine
in the play as does Molly Smith's Jungian reading of the
house as a metaphor for the mother's mind and her sons as
positive and negative aspects of her animus. From this
viewpoint, the mother, though representationally
underpresented, is the central focus; Austin's succumbing
to Lee represents the mother's consciousness usurped by the
repressed aspect of the unconscious and her "de-
individualization" (331) and regression into psychosis.
Her mind, like her home, therefore becomes alien to her. I contend instead that it is the concept of home itself and of enthroned Cogitos which seems alien to Mom, who comments from the site of the power struggle: "This is worse than being homeless" (58) and "I don't recognize it at all" (59). Vacating the site as she has her role, the denaturalized mother exits for a motel, leaving her sons locked, like Curse's cat and eagle, in irresolvable combat --"caught in a vast desert-like landscape" (59).

This inside-outside landscape is a contemporary America in which violence explodes, not from the vanishing of family and frontier but from the polarized mythologizing of and blind battling for them. To script oppositions rather than recognize differences is to court eruptions since balance or equilibrium is as destructive as is the binarism in which the notion is grounded. Frontier as the union of eastern civilization and western savage, Family as the union of passive civilized female and active primitive male, Individual as the union of reason and passion—all are paradigmatic of constructed oppositions reflected in the insistence on a schizophrenic American character, which power must restore to homogenous normalcy. But America, like the families within it, like the subjects within them, is not so much divided as fragmented and contradicted; there exist no Truth and no West and no American Individual not filtered through perspectives as diverse as the citizenry.
Any effort to function as a linear closed system, where stability and equilibrium obtain, leads only to the negative entropy imaged in the claustrophobia of Shepard’s families or in the stasis of the "desert-like landscape." Lee and Austin’s arbitrary violence and unpredictable identity shifts reflect non-linear relationships rather than quests for individuation. Their final tableau evokes that singular moment or bifurcation point, which their chaos and Mom’s void has engendered. Now that home and order have been shattered, the possibility exists for positive entropy, for a new order of family and civilization—a dissipative structure arising from non-linear processes in these "far from equilibrium" conditions. Though the play, like science, thwarts predictability, Shepard suggests the chance of transformation from disorder to self-organization in the sons’ parasitic energy, the mother’s exit, and the final deadlock. As "the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark" (59), we are left in a liminal place where energetic flux can supersede entropic stasis.

**MAY’S FOOL—PLAYING IN FOOL FOR LOVE**

Sibling rivalry *in extremis* takes another form in 1983’s *Fool for Love*, when Shepard consciously turned his attention to the "same mystery between men and women" (qtd. in Kakutani 26) that he had previously restricted to male relationships. In a "stark low-rent motel room on the edge of the Mojave desert" (7), May and Eddie, half-sister and brother, walk the boundary between civilization and desert.
only to discover violently, like Austin and Lee, that one dissolves into the other. Recalling Weston of Curse of the Starving Class, the "Old Man" of True West, and Shepard's own alcoholic father, the prematurely aged Eddie stages desert-disappearing acts; after fifteen years of this pattern, May has escaped their incestuous relationship only to be tracked cross-country. The stillness of her body at play's opening, like the "peculiar broken-down quality" of Eddie's, bespeaks the seeming inexorability of their relationship, echoed, too, by the stage directions: "This play is to be performed relentlessly, without a break" (7).

And performed it is (Shepard being the original director) as doors, equipped with microphones and resonators, are slammed throughout, their amplified sound underscoring the push-and-pull dynamic of Eddie and May. Despite the relentless unity of action, time, and place, Shepard's realism is once again undercut by this reverberating performance element as well as by the presence of the Old Man, who "exists only in the minds of May and Eddie" (8) and rocks at the border of the stage. Moreover, as in the previous plays, narratives compete futilely for the banner of truth as contradictions are left unresolved; and, as in Buried Child, the incest gradually revealed as the secret between Eddie and May serves only to render origins problematic, the revelation verifying and deepening rather than resolving transgressions.

Despite Shepard's avowed focus on women and the play's aggressive subversion of linear realism, feminist critics
usually dismiss it as yet another example of Shepard's reactionary realism. Coinciding with the ascent of Shepard to popular icon status, *Fool for Love*, according to Lynda Hart, represents a culmination in his denigration of women, the original trilogy of nuclear family plays having laid the groundwork for the violence against women in the next two plays. Notwithstanding Shepard's determination to create a female character who could "remain absolutely true to herself" (qtd. in Hart, "Spectacle" 218), to Hart May's body is reduced to mere narrative space and that this play only exacerbates the Oedipal narrative so evident in the previous trilogy, where scenes of recognition reveal an identity-providing secret.

Hart insists that this "essentially realistic" ("Spectacle" 218) play naturalizes patriarchal power structures, faulting critics for concentrating on the dissolution of the family and not the struggle for its maintenance as son overthrows father only to perpetuate the old order. Her analysis recalls the conclusion of feminist sociologists that violence springs, not from the dissolution of the social order, but from the struggle for its maintenance; thus Shepard's focus on this struggle does not inevitably smack of misogyny as it maps violence at its source. If gender is performative, family processual, and identity unstable, then male violence is not inevitable nor patriarchal power structures monolithic. Though Shepard traces their historical continuum, he nonetheless opens, through performative excess, transgressed boundaries, open
systems, and decentered spectators, the possibility of an alternative dynamic.

Hart unwittingly signals this possibility in characterizing May as Irigaray's "hysteric," who drifts unawares, only "acting 'as if'" ("Spectacle" 219), in contrast to Eddies's "obsessive," who purports a mastery of desire and thus power. May's hysteria actually points to a subversive element as suggested by Diamond's contention that the hysteric's Irigarayian excess serves to undermine mimesis. In Fool, it is actually May who exhibits an awareness of the "'as if'" performative nature of gendered identity, and, though the Old Man is a ghost-like presence, it is she who is conscious of her prescribed position as absence. Before speaking, May responds to Eddie's solicitousness by "erupt[ing] furiously, hitting him to Upstage of Stage Left door" (9); convinced of his affair with the "Countess," May insists to Eddie: "You're either gonna' erase me or have me erased" (9), echoing feminist perception of the historical erasure of women.

The positioning of Woman as absence is exactly what May fears, a fear justified by Eddie's fetishization of her which, with voyeurism, represents the technique of the male gaze: "Kept seeing you. Sometimes just a part of you" (10). Eddie's gaze also fosters a nostalgic vision of the frontier life, which May resists as she does her erasure. Mocking the "Marlboro Men" of Wyoming, May exclaims from the bathroom: "I hate all that shit! You know that. You got me confused with somebody else. You keep coming up
with this lame country dream life with chickens and vegetables and I can’t stand any of it” (11). Nonetheless, May’s recognition that “It’s all a fantasy” (12) does not dissolve her tie to Eddie, their attraction-repulsion relationship punctuated by the exit-entrance action of the play. Breaking a tender embrace, May "suddenly knees him in the groin with tremendous force" (13) and slams the bathroom door behind her.

Her emergence with new clothes, however, bespeaks a change which will initially confirm her disempowerment as an erotic object of Eddie’s gaze: "she gradually transforms from her former tough drabness into a very sexy woman" (14). May recognizes that each holds only an image of the other, his of love counterpointed by hers of hate: "I can’t even see you now. All I see is a picture of you. You and her. I don’t even know if the picture’s real anymore. I don’t even care. It’s a made-up picture. It invades my head" (14). Yet her consciousness of reality as perception and her insistence that Eddie "made up" (17) the inevitability of their connection do not shield her from body-absorbing "total grief" (18) when Eddie apparently leaves her as a result of the Old Man’s intervention. As Eddie lies prostrate after May’s attack, the Old Man is spot-lighted in his chair as the male gaze materialized, scorning the slippage of his son’s power: "I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist. Isn’t that basically the deal with you?" (13). Establishing the superior power of his own gaze, the Old Man points to a non-existent picture
of Barbara Mandrell whom he claims as wife. To Eddie’s disclaimer, he replies, “Well, see, now that’s the difference right there. That’s realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind” (13).

Shepard exposes here the theatrical nature of reality and illusory nature of realism as the Old Man’s outside/inside presence claims a metatheatrical authority over the play and insists on multiple levels of reality. Though only his children’s mental image, an illusion like his own “bride,” the Old Man is a physical presence and “treats them as though they all existed in the same time and place” (8). The past made present, the Old Man embodies reversibility and attempts to control the narratives, hence the “realities,” of Eddie and May; and it is a gender-divided reality which he dictates. Eddie’s acquiescence to the Mandrell marriage signals a re-assertion of the male gaze framing of Woman, confirmed by the shot-gun cleaning, tequila drinking stance from which he taunts May with desertion. The Old Man speaks to her also as she lies prostrate, but, rather than encouraging her subjectivity, he narrates an all-American story of a crying female baby in a car figureheaded by a plastic Mayflower, who was quieted by the father removing her to a field of cows.

As she had resisted Eddie’s frontier fantasy, so May resists this romanticized narrative of the past, never acknowledging the Old Man’s voice. After headlights and a pistol shot, presumably the Countess’s, lend credence to
her version of reality, the daughter proceeds to extend the male version performed by Eddie with coaching from the Old Man, who breaks temporal and spatial barriers to reach out for a drink refill from his son. The audience for the ensuing battle of narrative authority is the unsuspecting and just-arrived Martin, May's date. Eddie tells a tale of the father's "Two completely separate lives" (32) with May's mother and his own, which the Old Man clarifies: "It was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all" (32). This split, of course, reflects the illusory splits in the play between reality and illusion, male and female, love and hate, entrances and exits—the dynamics of double consciousness. The father's pattern of "disappearing and re-appearing" (33) suddenly stopped, according to Eddie, who fondly narrates walking with his father one night into town, where the first thing he saw was a drive-in movie screen with Spencer Tracy speaking without words to a woman in a red dress.

This soundless image prefigures Eddie's first vision of May, who appeared behind her kissing mother and crying father, in the white house with the red awning flapping in the breeze: "She's just standing there, staring at me and I'm staring back at her. . . . that very second, we knew we'd never stop being in love" (34). Seeming to contradict Eddie's earlier revelation to Martin that the two had "fooled around" (31) before knowing of their kinship, Eddie's story is hotly disputed by May, who accuses him of both changing the story and repeating himself; seemingly,
Eddie is guilty of his own indictment of Martin's going from "true to false like that, in a second" (35). May usurps Eddie's narrating position to finish the story: "I don't need either one of you. . . . I know it exactly the way it happened. Without any little tricks added on to it" (36). Her story is of the father on the run from her mother, "filled with terror that the two lives would find out about each other and devour him whole" (36); her walk with her mother through town involved no nostalgic bonding or resolution but a desperate tracking, two weeks after which the father disappeared entirely. Consumed with love for Eddie, whom she knew as her brother, May took heed of neither her mother's grief nor her warnings. When May's mother begged Eddie's mother to stop the incestuous relationship, "Eddie's mother blew her brains out" (38).

Protesting this female version of "reality" and usurpation of a gaze rightfully male, the Old Man dissolves reality's boundaries completely as he leaves his platform to chastize Eddie: "You're not gonna' let her off the hook with that one are ya'? That's the dumbest version I ever heard in my whole life. She never blew her brains out. Nobody ever told me that. . . . I wanna' hear the male side a' this thing. You gotta represent me now" (38). Thus does this absent presence and present past underscore the perceptual nature of reality and the power play of narrative.31 The patriarch resists the betrayal in the son's confirmation of the daughter's version of history, drawing on a concept of family as universal, natural
essence. Though earlier he had disowned his children as "Totally unrecognizable" creatures, who "could be anybody's (25), now the Old Man claims that "I was gone. . . . But I wasn't disconnected" and that his love with May's mother, earlier described as "split," made them "completely whole" (38).

His evoking of connections and wholeness, however, fails to cement the patrilinear heritage of gender-based control of the gaze and of history since Eddie now refuses to acknowledge the old Man as May has throughout the play. Their incestuous embrace, despite the father's desperate protests against such betrayal, signals an implosion of binary systems and linear constructs--family, gender, identity, Truth--paralleled by the explosion of Eddie's frontier fantasy (his horse trailer) outside. The revelation of the secret of the past has yielded no ordering of the present nor stabilization of identity; instead, the past itself--like family, like gender--is revealed as a narrative process. As Bank observes, in this heterotopic motel room, the site "for multiple doubling" and the rupturing of history, there emerges no "authoritative version of self and other" because "the gaze here is fractured" (229).

Critics often see Eddie's desertion of May at play's end as a verification of doomed hypostasis, confirmed by the Old Man having the last words. Yet the departing Eddie has rejected his father's edicts, May exits alone the space of representation, and the Old Man loses both his on-stage
and off-stage audiences. Despite his command to look at the picture of "the woman of [his] dreams," the fetishized Barbara, who will be his "Forever" (40), the spectator follows Martin's gaze from door to window and sees only the glowing fire. This after-image of explosion, in which female/male, internal/external, self/other, presence/absence, present/past, reality/illusion boundaries are burned to ash, displaces the Old Man's gaze and confirms spectatorship as a point of tension.
Paradoxically, the Old Man himself embodies the play's destabilization of the gaze and identity that he so tries to fixate. When this mental image of Eddie and May transgresses temporal and spatial boundaries, he drives home the principle of non-locality or action-at-a-distance.

As his children's narratives fail to form a linear continuity and the Old Man criss-crosses planes of "reality" and realism, the play stages an observer-influenced, irreversible, uncertain reality. In this non-classical epistemology lies an exit route from this claustrophobic room and paralyzing patriarchy. As May steps outside for the first time, leaving the door open, she breaks her equation with this space and highlights the threshold as she crosses it. While Eddie chases his horses to a fantasy frontier, May seems calmly to abdicate the quest as well as closed rooms and systems, leaving the subject/object dynamics of Merle Haggard's song, "I'm the One Who Loves You," to echo to a rocking Old Man in a darkening theatre. Again, Shepard images the
non-predictability at a bifurcation point. Chaos has parasited the family order as contradictions have parasited the Old Man's linear narrative; rather than gendered individuation through recognition, transformation into the Other occurs within this "set of relations" (Foucault qtd. in Bank 231) inside which we live.

The family in flux, then, reflects, not a reversibility of Time and inevitability of degeneration, but the possibility of regeneration beyond binaries. As Bank points out: "In a universe in which chaos is natural, self can quickly become other, woman man, and man, woman" (232). Bank sees the "violence" of Shepard's directing of Fool for Love as "the approaching threshold (shift), the energy of ongoing transformation. Impending chaos can be frightening and violent, but it is also the heterotopic climate of postmodern drama" (239). Perhaps there is actually staged here an even more transformative image of impending order. With causality and linearity displaced, "That’s realism" comes to point, not to Eddie’s limited vision nor to the Old Man’s controlling one, but to May’s threshold; no "fool," the female suggests the possibility of a higher order than gendered subject/object love. In this room on the desert’s edge in far-from-equilibrium conditions, an involuted and determinedly closed family has been perturbed to that moment of singularity when an alternative future may be narrated into existence.
BETH’S MINDING THE LIE IN A LIE OF THE MIND

The consequences of male domination and violence assumes a physical manifestation in Shepard’s next directing effort, 1985’s *A Lie of the Mind*, which centers on a wife battered to the point of aphasia. Critical consensus labels this play the most straightforwardly realistic of the family series; for example, DeRose finds it devoid of Shepard’s trademark theatricality and mythic imagery, "A surprisingly tame vision of love and subsequent violence American style" ("Slouching" 69). It is hardly surprising, then, that feminists find this vision another pornographic one, a prototypical example of Shepard’s covert ratification of violence against women through realistic representation. What is actually pornographic and very real, notwithstanding DeRose’s flippancy, is Shepard’s subject rather than his vision—"the "American style" conjunction of love and violence, which results in a battery by an acquaintance every nine seconds in this country (Brecher 6D).

Those who hold to the division of public and private realm and sanctify the Family as a natural, apolitical haven in the latter would do well to remember that: "An American resident ‘is more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten, and killed in the home at the hands of a loved one than anywhere else, or by anyone else’" (Deats and Lenker 1). Most victims, of course, are women, four thousand of whom die from such battery each year (Brecher 6D). As noted in Chapter One, feminists scholars have urged
a recognition of this violence as systemic and political rather than individual and domestic. Albeit an unlikely advocate, Shepard fosters such a recognition through the mythic imagery and theatricality so often overlooked in *A Lie of the Mind*; for these expose the Family and America themselves as empty myths and their inscriptions of gendered identity and Oedipal trajectories as purely theatrical. Violence "American style" remains inevitable only so long as these political systems parade as inevitable, natural, and closed, denying their processual and political nature and propping up the illusion of stability through domination of a feminized Other. In these very Others lies the possibility of transgression—of order by chaos, realism by theatricality, gender by mimicry—and thus of transformation from negatively encroaching entropy to positively dissipating energy.

The "sadly conventional" (DeRose, *Sam Shepard* 123) realism of *A Lie of the Mind*, despite the undeniably more linear narrative and psychologically causal characterization, actually emerges as the subject and the lie of the title.34 Like its forerunners in the American dramatic legacy, this play stages domesticity over an epistemological faultline, the existence of which is sounded by the women. It is they who embody the spirit of the play’s epigraph, Cesar Vallejo’s poem about identification and separation, which signals an irreducibly contradictory dynamic.35 Realism’s promise of resolution is a "lie of the mind" which drives Jake to beat his wife,
Beth, and to splay open the violence of the gaze desperate to fixate and stabilize. The stage set, which physically separates husband from wife until play’s end through the all-American "infinite space" (8) of the "middle neutral territory" (21), concretizes the binary construction of gender, which psychically separates them.

But the set also concretizes a bifurcation point as Shepard positions his characters at a Prigoginian moment of singularity, where boundaries between male and female collapse. Like Shepard’s other symbiotic pairs, Beth and Jake represent a double consciousness, often misconstrued as a divided self demanding a reconciliation of opposites. In fact, the play’s plot theatricalizes the engendering and gendering of this fictitious divided self as both Beth and Jake replay their childhoods at the original site of Oedipal subjectivity, the family home, which neither of them initially recognizes. Both have regressed to a child-like state; Beth, as a result of brain damage from the battering; Jake, as a result of a mental collapse from the belief that he has killed his wife. On each side of the stage is enacted a parallel Oedipal scenario, which mimics the theatricalism inherent in the cultural construction of gender and the consequent production of violence.

Stripped of his pants, the adult Jake is imprisoned in his boyhood bed by a mother driven to incestuous attachment by her husband’s desertion and subsequent death. Again, the absent presence of the father weighs heavily, not only
as "some disease he left behind" (68) in his wife, Lorraine, but also in the pressure on Jake, who comments on the box of his father's ashes retrieved from under his bed: "He's kinda heavy" (33). A military man "always cookin' up some weird code" (31), Jake's father embodies the masculinist monolith which encodes meanings through binary logic. As the pantless Jake stares at the World War II model airplanes dangling from the ceiling (as in Wesley's room in Curse) and dons his father's leather bomber jacket, Shepard provides an image of the originary violence of the Oedipal legacy, again recalling Mulvey in locating the source of violence against women in the father-son relationship. Jake's repeated abuse of Beth ("It was bad this time" [10]) continues a childhood pattern of violence, according to his brother, Frankie: "Well, you kicked the shit out of that [milk] goat you loved so much" (17). Jake himself implicates his father in the violence of his gendered gaze. When the image of Beth, who is "simply his vision" (34), blacks out as he moves toward it, he blows into the box of ashes.

In shocking contrast to Jake's eroticized object, Beth has first appeared to the audience in a hospital bed, head bandaged, face bruised. The horror of witnessing Beth laboriously relearning how to walk and talk lingers even as her precarious steps and fragmented speech metaphorically evoke the construction of subjectivity: "Who fell me? Iza—Iza name? Iza name to come. Itz--Itz--Inza man. Inza name" (12). Permeating the play is this insistence on
subjects constituted linguistically and thus on gendered identity as performative. Moreover, Shepard's alternating narrative and persistent doubling of Beth and Jake do not so much posit Jake as an equal victim of machismo, feminist critics notwithstanding, as emphasize their asymmetrical construction on the Oedipal stage, where gender roles are scripted. The hospitalized Beth's first lucid words, "Am I a Mummy now?" (11), suggest a pun underscored by the further conflation of marriage and maternity with lifelessness and weakness; Meg, Beth's submissive mother, confuses her history with that of her own mother until her scornful husband, Baylor, clarifies who was actually "locked up" (27).

Beth later associates the historical erasure of women, which May feared, with the psychological inscription of castration, both signifying female absence to verify male presence. To Frankie, mistaken for a deer and shot in the leg by her father, Beth suggests the possibility of amputation. Showing an incredulous Frankie the "Knife tracks" of a "nonexistent scar," Beth parodies the Freudian biological fiction of a female scar of inferiority and the Lacanian linguistic fiction of female lack:

FRANKIE. No, Beth, look--They didn't--They didn't operate did they? Nobody said anything about that.
This theatricalization of the fiction of female castration exposes feminine absence or weakness as a masculine binary construct, a lie of the mind to sustain subject/object dominance and foster subjectivity by subjection. Beth rebels against her brother Mike's paternal legacy of defining an identity by creating a feminized Other; resisting inclusion in his script of male-as-hunter-protector to female-as-domestic-dependent, Beth screams: "You make an enemy. In me. In me! An enemy. You. You. You think me. You think you know. You think. You have a big idea" (37).

The "You" accused in the play is the masculinist-militarist-cultural complex, which perpetuates paradigmatic binary logic to maintain the illusion of stability through opposition and exclusion. Here lies the "lie," the source of violence in the world and in the play. Jake's latest beating of Beth erupted (Why didn't I see it comin'. I been good for so long" [10]) from his own envisioning of her infidelity at a play rehearsal; like Mike, Jake "thinks her": "I knew what she was up to even if she didn't (16). His violent aversion to acting ("This acting shit is more real than the real world to her" [16].) signals the threat of subjective reality and of shifting subjectivity: "She was unrecognizable" (15). At risk is a stable personal, familial, and national identity, which the men guard like dogs their territory. Juxtaposed against the bravado of barking dogs is the vulnerability of silent deer, one of whose hindquarters, reminiscent of the lamb in Curse, Mike
plops on stage in triumph over his father in their hunting rivalry. At this image of Oedipal severing, Beth marvels, "You cut him in half"? (60). Even Meg uncharacteristically defies Baylor in claiming that hunting is war, not art, and tells him to go ahead and leave them since the women have actually been self-sustaining anyway. Citing her mother's description of males and females as "Two opposite animals," Meg exasperates Baylor with her claim that now "Beth's got male in her" (77).

Beth responds to her disorientation, however, not with the androgynous resolution of a "balanced" self, but with a denaturalization of gendered roles. Remaining with "naked" feet (35) rather than choosing between fuzzy slippers or work boots, Beth mocks the cultural construction of gender as opposition accepted by her foremothers and encoded in clothes. To Frankie's discomfort, she removes her father's plaid shit, insisting that he "need it" (54) to cover his wound (feminized weakness or castration) and giggles at the burden of fixating gendered identity:

Look how big a man is. So big. He scares himself. His shirt scares him. He puts his scary shirt on so it won't scare himself. He can't see it when it's on him. Now he thinks it's him. . . . Jake was scared of shirts. . . . This is like a custom. . . . For play. Acting. (57)

The custom-costume association of culture, performance, and identity reveals Beth's abdication of Oedipal scripts as she parodies romantic love, though she has claimed to love Jake still. Pushing Frankie down on the sofa and giggling, "You fight but all the time you want . . . me on your face"
Beth mimics the progression from romance to rape mentality and the male fantasy of "her mouth says no but her eyes say yes," which disclaims sexual violence.

Revising the past by rescripting her marriage, Beth directs Frankie to "pretend" the Jake role: "But soft. . . . Like a woman-man. . . . Without hate" (58). Over Frankie's phallic protestations that "It's not good for my leg" (58), Beth proposes pretending their way into "a love we never knew" (59). Attacks on Shepard for validating romantic love's pornographic objectification of women ignore the theatricalism foregrounded in this scene as in the rest of the play, a theatricalism which insists on the theatricalism of post-Heisenberg culture itself. Beth subverts through mimicry and excess the simulacrum of subject-object love and its inscription of violence. Her subsequent appearance in bizarre clothing "straight out of the fifties" (82) mocks the mentality of those like her father who see such a "roadhouse chippie" (82) as fair prey. Further, this presentation of sexuality as a gendered performance, wherein Beth "looks equally like a child playing dress-up and like a hooker" (Rabillard 69), underscores the poison of Jake's gaze, whereby perception equals Truth and contradictions in identity must be brutally quashed.

Beth's recovery of speech by fragments suggests a logic beyond the linear: "I get the thought. Mixed. It dangles. Sometimes the thought just hangs with no words there. . . . It speaks. Speeches. Speaking. In me."
Comes and goes" (55). Shepard's thematics and theatricalism preclude reading as postfeminist foundationalism Beth's Miranda-like assertions to Frankie that "We'll be in a whole new world" (84). Instead, Beth signals the "tempest" itself and the butterfly effect behind it. As Rabillard points out, "Through the women's roles, [Shepard] examines the difference—and the threat—of female theatricality" since the women are "self-regarding in a way that the men are not" (68). Thus, the revelation by Jake's sister, Sally, of the "big terrible secret" (51)—that the son plotted the father's death in Mexico by challenging him to a bar-to-bar, "First one to America! (70) footrace—effects no recognition-resolution pattern.

Initially blamed by the mother for the father's death and for trying to "undermine this entire family" (72), Sally responds that "I'm sick to death of covering everything up. . . . of being locked up in [Jake's] room. In our own house. . . . What're we supposed to be hiding from?" (72). Her question prompts Lorraine's resolve to yank down the airplanes and start a bonfire since maintaining the closed family sanctum was "just a dream of theirs. . . . to keep me on the hook" (72). The mother thus urges her daughter, once banished to re-instate the son in his throne-room, toward freedom from Oedipal rule. They set afire icons of the past and family tradition—photos and " paraphernalia from the men" (84) that convert image to "reality" like the father's family pictures "squeezed in between" (67) pictures of movie stars in his trailer.
Sally imagines her deserting father "Trying to make a family out of us all. So we'd know each other" (67). Lorraine plans for them to "Do a little jig" and then "just walk" (88) as the house burns, released from the negative entropy of the privatized Family.

In jarring juxtaposition, a still pantless Jake emerges in the center space, "walking on his knees straight toward the audience with the American flag between his teeth and stretched taut on either side of his head" (88), the "reins" held by a rifle-armed Mike. Thus confronted, the audience stands implicated in the violence inherent in America's fetishized iconography. Jake is subjugated by the flag with which his country rewarded his dead father's military mind set and in the spirit of which he has rendered his wife "Red and black and blue" (90). Though Mike attempts vengeance in the name of Family, his Oedipal territory, too, is eroding as he inadvertently points his rifle at his father, who has demanded the flag wrapped around it. More concerned with fighting for the blanket (like the males in Buried Child) that has shrouded the feminized Frankie "like a Mummy" (91) and with sanctifying "the flag of our nation" (90) than with Mike's captive, Baylor solicits Meg's help in folding the flag "letter perfect" (94). The disgusted Mike exits, sending in as a substitute Jake, who looks "like [he] could use a family" (92): moreover, Beth's presence is acknowledged by neither parent in this denaturalized nucleus. She hears Jake's confession, which echoes her own previous fragmented
speech: "Everything in me lies. But you. You Stay. You are true" (93). Jake has been driven back to Beth by not a vision but a voice, "a voice I knew once but now it's changed. It doesn't know me either. Now. It used to but not now. I've scared it into something else. Another form" (63).

Although Jake's bequeathing of Beth to his protesting brother obviously raises feminist ire, the feminized Frankie exists only as a vocalization of Beth, whose voice, as Jake has recognized, presages transformation. The feminist possibilities crystallized in Beth's speech find interdisciplinary underscoring in Donna Haraway's call for a postmodernist feminist position of "embodied objectivity" for scientists: "Feminism loves another science: the sciences and politics of interpretation, translations, stuttering and the partly understood. Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject" (589). Though Nancy Love faults Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges" as still too rooted in objectivity and vision, she perceives in the vocal metaphors a subtextual emphasis on democratic discourse, that extra-founderalist "political epistemology and with it, a political transformation . . . an empowerment/knowledge regime" (86).

Feminists' objection to converting to metaphor a brain-damaged victim should be assuaged by de Lauretis's differentiation from actual women the "subject of feminism," a theoretical construct to account for processes like gender, which she is both inside and outside.
(Technologies 10). Shepard's insistence, through Beth and the other female "performance artists," on vocal metaphors pushes the play beyond a "championing of victim status" (Cocks 145) and renders Meg's final vision a created revision rather than the "discovered norms or visions" (Brown 77, emphasis original) of confessional feminism. As Jake exits, shrouded in the patriarchal blanket, and Baylor exits, clinging to its analogue, the flag, Meg refuses to follow her husband, who has rewarded her flag efforts with his first kiss in twenty years. With hand to cheek, Meg describes Lorraine's fire across stage and country: "Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?" (95). Only the most myopic perspective can read this conclusion as an affirmation of traditional marriage and the reinscription of unity. As its sheer theatricalism insists, the bucket fire, which burns as the stage lights fade, images a Phoenix-rite, whereby wives and daughters are no longer locked inside Oedipus's house.

The California fire burning in Montana snow underscores the nonlinear dynamic at work throughout the play, "the parallel time thing" (Shepard, "Silent Tongues" 5) as character and actions illogically connect. This suggestion of a butterfly effect belies linear logic in these Oedipal narratives and foregrounds instead the very process of narrative, of family, and of gender. The inability to fixate personal and familial identity reflects the irresolvable contradiction of absence and presence, performance and text, past and present, stability and
disruption, chance and necessity. Like Beth and Jake, each
ostensible pole of the pair inhabits the other, the
"female" forced to haunt the dominant "male" pole since
this "female part," according to Shepard, is "battered and
beaten up and kicked to shit just like some women in
relationships" ("Silent Tongues" 36). Associating Beth
with a performative consciousness which recuperates rather
than deconstructs textuality, Vanden Heuvel perceives her
essential interchangeability with Jake as imaging Bohr's
quantum leap, where particles disappear and appear
simultaneously elsewhere with no apparent traverse of the
space between (226).

If, like wave and particle, Beth and Jake are
complements rather than "two opposite animals," then the
"infinite space" between them becomes not boundary but its
dissolution, a space for dialogue between erstwhile
paradigmatic foes, a space for becoming the Other.
Applying not only quantum but chaos theory to the play
underscores its transformative impulse in identifying the
future as unpredictable. Given the system's sensitivity to
initial conditions, Beth and the other stammering (M)others
emerge as the ghostly catalysts of a brave new world.
Specifying language as "The only ingredient in the artistic
structure to make leaps into the unknown" ("Language 216),
Shepard seeks this epistemological leap: "the real quest of
a writer is to penetrate into another world. A world
behind the form. The contradiction is that as soon as that
world opens up, I tend to run the other way. It's scary
because I can't answer to it from what I know" ("Language" 217). Thus does this alleged pornographer fulfill Haraway's edict that "The interrogation of the limits and violence of vision is part of the politics of learning to revision" (qtd. in Love 93). And it is a politics undeniably feminist and an epistemology undeniably non-classical that Shepard stages through a realism insistently liminal, a family insistently open. Within these family systems at the bifurcation point, a dissipative structure may spontaneously arise like a fire in the snow.

**GLORY BEE'S TO STUBBS IN STATES OF SHOCK**

"The limits and violence of vision" take center stage in 1991's *States of Shock* as the off-stage explosions of *Curse* and *Fool* become a "Cyclorama upstage covering entire wall and into ceiling" and "lit up with tracer fire, rockets, explosions in the night" (5). This visualization of war obviously emulates the CNN theatricalization of the Gulf War, which Shepard indeed identifies as the play's source:

I was in Kentucky when the war opened. I was in a bar . . . and it was stone silence. The TV was on, and these planes were coming in, and suddenly . . . It just seemed like doomsday to me. I could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it. That there was this punitive attitude—we're going to knock these people off the face of the earth. . . . This is supposed to be what America's about? This fucking military. . . . ("Silent Tongues" 39, some ellipses original).

Subtitled "A Vaudeville Nightmare," Shepard's limited-run violent theatricalization of America's limited-run theatricalized violence met with an inverse response to the
one Desert Storm initially received: widespread disapproval in terms which retrospectively adhere to the war itself—"blustery" (Rich C7) or "wholly pointless" (Simon 71). Rich does condescendingly credit Shepard with the "quaint conviction that the stage is still an effective platform for political dissent and mobilizing public opinion"—an "ingenious faith in the theatre" (Cl), which would seem to belie the choral refrain ascribing "utter pessimism" (Willadt 162) to Shepard's drama.

Any calcification of the status quo seems to reside more in critics than in playwright as they dismiss the "anti-war play" (Rich C1) or defend it as "neither an anti-war play nor '60s' nostalgia" (Bigsby 191).4 Yet Shepard insists on his impulse here as not only political but also transformative: "I can't believe that, having come out of the '60s and the incredible reaction to Vietnam, that voice has all but disappeared. Vanished. There's no voice any more" ("Silent Tongues" 39). This vanished voice and the bar's "stone silence" materializes in States of Shock in the White Man and White Woman, who sit "like cadavers" as the "war panorama" gives way to the stage light, but "not with the sense that they're frozen in time" (5); this qualifier separates their deathly image from the freeze-frame tableaux that end the family plays, including this one, and suggest transformative possibilities.

As those familial plays are political, so this political play is familial, not superficially but integrally. The cursed starving class now seeks satiation
in a "family restaurant," its hunger as institutionalized as its violence and its "private haven" conflated with public space. Into this space enter the after-images of war: Colonel, "dressed in a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or reason" (5), and Stubbs, "in a wheelchair with small American flags, raccoon tails, and various talismans and good-luck charms flapping and dangling" (6). Before the anemic Mommy-Daddy audience, these vaudevillian caricatures proceed to perform with vaudevillian excess a ritual of domination/submission and its reversal, echoing other ostensibly oppositional Shepard pairings. Again the battle rages as masculinized paradigms of order, linearity, textuality, and presence struggle to suppress the feminized underside of chaos, nonlinearity, performance and absence. Again the spoils are the mastery over narrative voice, authorization of history, and stabilization of identity.

Colonel, whom Shepard created as a "monster fascist" ("Silent Tongues" 39), announces that he has brought Stubbs from the hospital to the restaurant to mark the anniversary of the death of his son, who was killed by a hit "from a ninety millimeter" (7) that first passed through Stubbs's chest. Correcting the waitress's assumption that Stubbs is his son, Colonel commands the mutilated veteran to reconstruct the battle scene with eating utensils, the sugar dispenser, and military toys pulled from his bag: "A catastrophe has to be examined from every possible angle. It has to be studied coldly, from the outside, without
investing a lot of stupid emotion" (12). Impatient with Stubbs's talking to the couple and fixation on the moment of the hit, Colonel insists that "Pretending is not for us" (14) and demands that the reluctant Stubbs co-direct his table-top battle in order to establish the "hard facts" (14), to "pinpoint the location" (17), to "fix ourselves there" (24).

His obsession with the "exact moment before" (16, emphasis original) reflects the drive to fixate an identity through a linear trajectory of predictability and thus to control history. The "terrible loss" in the midst of victory, which so "puzzles" (25) Colonel, threatens both personal and national stability; hence, the Colonel pushes Stubbs toward common sense, "An American virtue" (21), and beats him for his resistance: "Your arrogance is a slander on all that I stand for. All that I've slaved for. It's not just me, Stubbs. It's the principles. The codes" (23). Recalling the military codes devised by Jake's father, these codes inscribe the ascendance of masculine identity through an Oedipal march over created, feminized Others, who constitute the subject of Colonel's recurrent toasts to the enemy: "WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE'RE NOTHING!" (13).

Though Stubbs echoes this tribute to binary logic and classical determinism, he occupies the enemy-object position on the familial battlefield. Initially having no voice but a whistle, Stubbs repeatedly confronts the on and off-stage audience with the "massive red scar in the center
of his chest" (7) and informs the white couple and white America that "The middle of me is all dead. The core. I’m eighty percent mutilated" (13). His scar materializing, like Beth’s, Freud’s female scar of inferiority, Stubbs has been forced to perform in national and familial battles to bolster masculinist notions of fixed identity. Though Colonel insists that Stubbs is "the lucky one" (7), the maimed soldier, mummified like other Shepard males beneath a blanket, has been exiled from patrilineal legacy. Gradually finding voice to assert his own narrative, the crucified Stubbs displaces memory of the causal moment of battle with the moment of paternal betrayal: "I remember the moment you forsook me. The moment you gave me up. . . . the moment you invented my death" (20). Again Shepard aligns the father’s desertion with originary violence as Stubbs claims, "It left a hole I can never fill" (20); his scripting as absence, as a castrated stub, he attributes to the father, a self-described "God among men" (28), who changed his forsaken son’s name in the hospital, his "bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me" (37).

Stubbs portrays both the battlefield and the hospital experience as subjugation by a nationalized pater familias since his narrative reveals that "It was friendly fire that took us out" (27). Defying Colonel’s "American virtue" of logic, Stubbs’s contradictory narrative of battle initially describes himself and Colonel’s son standing back to back before he carries the screaming son, who chants the
father's name "like a prayer" (32). No clear version of
the military or familial battle emerges, thwarting both
Colonel's and audience expectations; so ambiguous, in fact,
are the narratives that the play's reviewers ignored
Stubb's claims of kinship. What does emerge is an
Oedipal battlefield on which America's sons follow the
edict to "Keep thinking of 'home'... Lock onto a
picture of glorious, unending expansion!... Lock onto an
image or you'll be blown to KINGDOM COME" (32). Victimized
by the very subject/object binarism that this constructed
image enshrines, the son has been blown to a kingdom where
the father's will is done in a process of obliterating his
presence, a process of feminization or erasure. When
Colonel, dancing with the waitress, threatens to leave
Stubbs to go "spawn children... physically perfect" boys
(30) in Mexico, Stubbs claims that he can "never erase me
completely" (30) or "replace me" (31) as "the Enemy" (30)
with the woman.

This process of identity through subjection emerges as
inevitably sexualized since Colonel casts the waitress as
(M)other and Stubbs attributes paternal disavowal to his
post-war impotence:

STUBBS: MY THING HANGS LIKE DEAD MEAT!
COLONEL: (Dancing.) Exactly. No son of mine has
a "thing" like that. It's not possible.
STUBBS: If my "thing" comes back. If it grows
straight and strong and tall—Will you take me
back?
COLONEL: Too late for that, Stubbs. The time has
passed. On the other hand, things are looking up
for me.
STUBBS: You're in love. (29-30)
Colonel here echoes the insistence of the White Man to the 
waitress that "the time has passed" (22) for the clam 
chowder he had long since ordered. Her dumping the semen-
soup into his lap prompts his masturbation, which is 
punctuated by Stubb’s echoing of Colonel’s "Become a man" 
decree; it reaches climax as Colonel "begins to savagely 
whip Stubbs," the beating accompanied by the visual and 
auditory "war panorama" (24). The father figures thus 
conflate linear time, sexuality, and violence as they 
perform masculinity to the sadistic pleasure of the White 
Woman, who urges Colonel to "Give it to him! You should 
have done that when he was just a little boy" (25). So 
emptied by the blood-letting process of gendering is this 
woman who lives to shop that she performs Mrs. America as 
automaton.43 

Conversely, the other female character, the waitress 
Glory Bee, conveys a self-consciousness in the performance 
of gendered or fixated identities. The play’s comic 
intervals (and most blatant textual subversions of realism) 
come from her singing, dancing, and walking painstakingly 
across stage with objects on her tray because, since 
childhood, she has had "the darnedest time balancing 
liquids" (9). Frustrated by her failure to stabilize on 
the binary battlefield, Colonel undertakes her remedial 
instruction, ordering that she focus, with one eye if 
necessary, on a "point in space" and on her "specific 
mission":

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Repetition and practice. Slowly, a pattern begins to emerge. Slowly, through my own diligence and perseverance, this pattern takes on a beauty and form that would have otherwise been incomprehensible to my random, chaotic laziness. Now I become a master of my own destiny. . . . I understand my purpose in the grand scheme of things. (28)

As inducement to mastering this feminine chaos, unpredictability, fear, and weakness, Colonel threatens a "good beating" (28). Within this ethos, the glory "be’s" to man as god—ascendant, dominant, immutable, and bolstered always by a feminized object-other."

Yet it is Glory Bee’s own singing rather than Colonel’s boot-camp training which enables her to carry the tray "quickly and freely with no concern about spilling" (25). When she abandons Colonel’s dance to support a now-standing Stubbs, who also is "trying desperately to keep his balance" (31), she marks a shift in the Oedipal balance of power. As the staggering couple makes it to a booth, Colonel sits in Stubbs’s wheelchair. Sexual and narrative power merge as Stubb’s potency and history gain ascendence: "My thing is coming back! . . . It’s all coming back to me now! (36). His narrative identifies the paternal legacy: a face of pure guilt. No way of knowing the original moment. Abraham, maybe. Maybe Abraham. Judas. Eve. Maybe her. No way of knowing for sure. Best way is to kill all the sons. Wipe them off the face of the earth. Bleed them of all their blood. . . . Let us go down screaming in the blood of our sons. (37-38)

Again Mulvey’s location of originary violence in the father-son dynamic materializes on Shepard’s stage. It is a violence born not of the destabilization of identity but
of the blind battle for the maintenance of its illusion, the refusal to relinquish gendered perspectives and notions of family and of nation as stable, universal essences. The battle for this stable core violently exposes, as in Stubbs's middle, its deadness; masculine identity maimed, Stubbs must perform the feminine without the mocking self-consciousness of Glory Bee, who tells Mr. and Mrs. America to "Eat my socks" (16).

It is also Glory Bee who is aware that the external and internal inhabit each other, that the battle is not "over there." Having casually informed us that the candle supply is for black-outs, that the cook has been wounded, and that the manager is dead, she muses as Colonel disparages the "stupid boredom of peace time" (33):

The thing I can't get over is, it never occurred to me that "Danny's" could be invaded. I always thought we were invulnerable to attack. . . . Who could touch us? . . . When the first wave of missiles hit us I kept studying the menu. I thought the menu would save me somehow. I worshipped the menu. To me it held a life. An unthreatened life. Better than the Bible. I missed the Cold War with all my heart. (34)

Her last gesture is to put gas masks, excessive like the other props of carcasses, vegetables, and toasters, on herself and Stubbs before curling "into fetal position U. C." (38). As the putative White (M)other America has spawned only herself, it is not an image of female passivity centered here but of nascent possibility from the margins. Like other Shepard women, Glory Bee, as the subject of feminism, signifies not a woman but a process. Her performative excess and self-mocking mimicry signal an
undermining of masculinist territory realized in the father-son reversal imaged in the final tableau.

Still in the wheelchair, Colonel imagines an invincible father-son dyad in the battlefield, revising his earlier offer to Stubbs of adoption in exchange for "absolute, unconditional submission" (36) to the assurance that "It's not too late" (39) for a public proclamation of reclamation. Colonel's abdication of the linear inevitability of "The time has passed," however, is too feeble to prevent Stubbs's "strangle-hold" (39) from behind; nor is bribing with childhood pleasures (mimicked earlier in Colonel's voracious and solitary consumption of the banana split), effective in re-subjugating the son, who exchanges stranglehold for sword. The Oedipal threat of decapitation by the father's own weapon and own son freezes into the play's final image and echoes the cat/eagle deadlock of Shepard's inaugural family play.

In proclaiming "GOD BLESS THE ENEMY!!!!!!" (39), the son/soldier targets the violent foundation of self, family, and nation in the negative mimesis of self against Other, male against female, America against world. As all but Stubbs sing the "Good Night, Irene" lyrics of male conflict between elusive sex object and stable family, the father and son are "frozen" (40) in the deadlock of the male mythos, which refuses to unfix its gaze. Thus Willadt, among others, sees the play as a failure since Shepard remains entrapped, despite his indictment, in a macho ethic and offers no solution: "The plot of the play and
especially its ending can only be seen as a 'strangulation' of a more universal discussion of the origins and 'the essence' of war" (13). Yet this father-son deadlock targets precisely the origins of war and violence while signaling an alternate ethos. The feminized and unstable Stubbs has risen, crippling Colonel's epistemological stance. The play itself unfixes perceptions as internal/external shifts denaturalize home and hearth into that mediatized banner image which failed to protect Stubbs's gender rights in battle. Battle lines are obscured as contradictory narratives fail to uncover truth and linearity falters.

But from the casualty-strewn field emerges the possibility of another plane, an uncertain, observer-influenced reality where past inhabits present; the feminine, the masculine; the son, the father; chaos, order. Though Colonel and Stubbs remain frozen as the stage lights fade, the mutilated, feminized Other has silenced the "monster fascist," exposing his violently closed familial and national systems at points of bifurcation; in these far-from-equilibrium conditions, where entropy may produce a new order, Shepard again evokes an evolution of consciousness to a point elsewhere and spectatorship to a point of tension. It is here that the play gives voice to an alternative feminist epistemology. It is also here that the play most evokes the '60s, whose legacy Shepard specifies: "The only thing which still remains and still persists as the single most important idea is the idea of
consciousness" ("American Experimental Theatre" 212). In the complementaries of consciousness and the liminalities of realism lies recovery from a blanched, bled, post-Vietnam United States of Shock.

**DADDYS DETHRONED**

Indeed, Shepard's six family plays to date each depicts explosions and implosions, which beget states of shock seemingly hereditary and inevitable. It is a legacy now national but originally familial—a curse, a buried child, an untrue West, a romantic foolishness, a mind's lie. Having rejected family personally and domestic realism artistically, Shepard returned with a vengeance to narratives "Oedipal with a vengeance," a return, it seems, as ontologically as commercially motivated:

> What doesn't have to do with the family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other—everyone is born out of a mother and father, and then you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle. (qtd. in Allen 143)

Obviously, the perspective here is male, and Shepard writes as a son locked into this "endless cycle." Schvey claims that "The thread which connects the various phases of Shepard’s work, despite their obvious disparity, is the image of the father" (13). This thread ties Shepard to America's other seminal (literally) playwrights as their legacy is most obviously a drama of father-son relationships. And in the patrilinear, "hereditary curse" (Schvey 25) lies the apparent doom of Shepard's plays, which end "not with triumph over the past but with the
acknowledgement of its dreadful power" (Schvey 25). Willadt concurs that "To achieve a male identity . . . Shepard sees no other way than to continue the ancient male tradition of competitiveness, machismo, and violence which finally leads to war" (162) and in which Shepard is "personally caught up" (163). Thus do persistent feminist attacks on Shepard’s pornographic vision and reinscription of a patriarchal past seem verified.

Yet Shepard also asserts that, though family character is inescapable, "the wholehearted acceptance of it leads to another possibility" ("Silent Tongues" 37). Determinedly resisting the "strangulation" ("Conversation" 5) of resolutions, he ends each of these plays at a stranglehold point of tension, which parallels the spectator’s position and suggests that the past is not to be triumphed over but need not be repeated; moreover, the eye/I--male or otherwise--is not to be enthroned but destabilized. Shepard dramatizes, more violently than his predecessors, Mulvey’s revelation of the objectifying, erotic male gaze as only a symptom of a neurotic father-son rivalry (199). The endless generational cycle need not be an endless gendered cycle of polarization and "maleness"; since the latter is produced, it may be disrupted.

And it is the victims of this cycle, the feminized (M)others and objects of the gaze as well as of the violence deployed to uphold it who signal this disruption. Some of us also "go on" to be mothers, and, though inscribed as emblems of reproductive continuity, the
(M)others can stage discontinuity and disequilibrium, disrupting the illusion of family as a closed system, a private haven centered by a female hearth-tender. Like wave to particle and chaos to order, the feminized Others perturb the family structure, revealing it as an open system dependent on internal/external energy exchange. Consciously and excessively, these ghosts, monsters, parasites, "hypnons," or "hymens"—butterflies all— theatricalize their prescribed roles, their performance disturbing the linear logic and inevitability of classical realism. Heisenberg collides with Newton here, leaving the clock to wind down, its fits and starts exposing cracks in a universe without universal, predictable laws.

In those cracks, in the slashes between such binaries as male/female, order/chaos, text/performance, in the liminal realm and in liminal realism does Shepard evoke the possibility of transformation. At the point of bifurcation which his endings expose, the entropic family may leap to the more differentiated order of a dissipative structure. And at a corresponding point of tension, the spectator can perceive that alternate world which feminists demand—a world in which fathers and sons abdicate the tomb-throne of the patriarch and "castrate" themselves with their inherited scepters, so that, "feminized," they, too can cease to resist so violently the flux within family, the contradictions within identity, the gaps within narrative, the chance within necessity, the multiplicity within coherence. Acknowledging their own performance, they, too,
can play on the borders rather than risking and inflicting
death to defend them.

In his playwrighting, as in his characters' story telling, Shepard seeks the transformation of such play: "The reason I began writing plays was the hope of extending the sensation of play (as in 'kid') on to adult life. If 'play' becomes 'labor' why play?" ("Language" 214). Conscious of our own generational and gendered performances on a shifting stage, we (even, if not especially, feminists) can revel in the flux of Shepard's family plays and our own, engaging in "play of the world," which is no longer the subject/object "play in the world" (Derrida, E r 69, emphasis original)—a play of difference in which Oedipus hides and no one seeks.

NOTES

1 Modern Drama's March 1993 Special Issue is devoted to "Sam Shepard and Contemporary Drama."

2 Shepard's personal experience with the pull of family materializes in his original name of Samuel Shepard Rogers III, though "Steve" was actually the seventh generation to bear the name. Having resisted paternal lineage in changing his name, he has now passed it on to his second son with Jessica Lange.

3 See, for example, Sheila Rabillard, who claims that Shepard regards words as "bearers of power" (60); Toby Zinman, who sees Shepard's characters as striving to "play-write" ("Visual Histrionics" 511) themselves into existence; and Ann Wilson, who speaks of "the complexity of performance which is not simply the performer but the performer before an audience" (46).

4 Shepard followed his original family trilogy with three more family plays until 1995's Simpatico broke the strictly domestic format, though it continues the realistic form.
5 David Savran, for example, insists that Shepard’s early rebellion gave way to “the more conventional forms of his later dramas” (69).

6 See, for example, Florence Falk, Mimi Kramer, Bonnie Marranca, and Lynda Hart. Charles Whiting’s defense of the “Images of Women in Shepard’s Theatre” does little to deflect feminist indictments; finding heroism in the female struggle against fatality, Whiting associates fate with the males to whom he accords far more attention than the females, inadvertently positing them as reactor-victims.

7 Shepard himself considers Long Day’s Journey into Night “truly the great American play” because it goes beyond “just ’working out problems’” like the typical psychological play (“Rolling Stone” 172).

8 Though Tucker identifies the parallel mother positions in the plays as significant, he concludes that their role is to retreat with resignation from a man-made world (135–36). Bigsby, too, describes these women as “baffled witnesses of male aggression or victims of an uncontrolled passion” (169), while Erbens identifies them as collaborators with corporate “other men” (29).

9 Countless critics have commented on this performative dynamic in Shepard’s characters. Bigsby observes that “they are not rooted in a social or psychological world which defines them with any precision. They are their performances” (172); Marranca notes that Shepard reverses usual theatrical practice by “giving his characters the chance to be performers” (14).

10 While my focus is on the family as a dissipative structure, Gary Grant’s is on Shepard’s recent dramaturgy as such a structure: “the more coherent structure of symbolism and realistic dramatic devices is easily perturbed, for example, by the long monologues and excessive violence of language and highly theatrical images of sound and light” (126).

11 Observing that the word “myth” never occurs in his plays, Shepard insists that “We’ve lost touch with the essence of myth” (“Silent Tongues” 35), which enabled people to connect to the present and future through connection to the collective past, not “some lame notion of the past” (35).

12 Bigsby notes that in Shepard “The family becomes a closed system replicating its tensions and contradictions. . . . his characters . . . are caught in a biological trap which condemns them to re-enactment” (182). A self-replicating system, however, need not be either closed or
biologically circumscribed; as with fractals in mathematics, non-linearity can obtain.

13 Randall, conversely, finds that this initial dialogue emphasizes informative and logical norms and that the continuity of realism is not broken until Wesley's sensory monologue.

14 See, for example, Whiting's "Food and Drink in Sam Shepard's Theatre."

15 Tucker sees here "Shepard's working out of his father's anger when the family farm was sold by the grandfather to cover debts" (128) since father and son represent "the continuity of an American dream predicated on a piece/peace of one's own" (127).

16 DeRose tellingly mentions that Ella is "stricken with her first menstrual period, the 'curse' of womanhood" (Sam Shepard 95).

17 Christopher Brookhouse points out that Shepard's family plays foreground the form rather than the content of storytelling.

18 Often critics read the cat-eagle image as one of male/female combat, ignoring the specification of a tom-cat. Tucker, for example sees this "tableau of symbiosis" (129) as reflecting Emma's inextricable tie to her husband.

19 Though Wilson, Zinman ("Sam Shepard"), and Whiting ("Food") claim that audience identification with Shelly does not waver, Susan Smith maintains that spectator estrangement from Shelly effects an evolution beyond her "bourgeois normalcy" (76). Falk and Hart (Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages) regard Shelly as helpless, but Putzel and Westfall, Callens, and Mustazza note her survival stratagems.

20 Constructed as Freudian biological lack or Lacanian symbolic lack in the psycho/cultural scenario, the woman is scripted into an asymmetrical Oedipal experience prompted, rather than resolved like the male's, by the fiction of the castration complex, which impels transferral from mother to father. Whereas the male supposedly replaces original sexual ambiguity with a stable identity by repressing incestuous desire for the castrated mother, the female can only seek compensation from the father for the lack or inferiority she shares with the mother.

21 Hart (Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages) and Callens associate Halie with primal agrarian rituals while Putzel and Westfall regard her instead as a subversion of the mother archetype.
Erbens's derision of Halie as one of Shepard's family-destroyers, aligned with industry-sickness versus land-health, and Whiting's diagnosis of her "rejection of the world and its disorder" following the "tragic loss of married love" (Images 501) reveal in the critics themselves an inscribed expectation of a feminine domestic identity, which the play thwarts.

Nash reads Vince's return as regenerative within the plays mythic framework while Adler, like Putzel and Westfall, reaches the opposite conclusion. Hart encourages viewing the play's end as a "direful repetition" of a "loathsome existence" (Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages 87) with Vince asserting the power of the patriarchy.

Putzell and Westfall, for example, insist on Vince as Oedipus, regarding Shelly as the wrong questioner and Tilden as the wrong respondent to the regenerative question.

Raynette Smith notes that "Shepard consistently imposes on Austin images of Mom and femininity" (280), such as plant watering, dish washing, and diffidence toward Lee.

DeRose sees the brothers as embodying the split "between the 'old' West and the 'new' West" (Sam Shepard 109); Molly Smith sees a Beckettian dichotomy, the intellectual/bestial split of the brothers paralleling the mother/father doubling (328); Tucker sees the split as the two sides of the artist (136) as does Kleb, who regards Austin and Lee as R. D. Laing's divided self (124-25).

Orbison and Raynette Smith, for example, both treat the play in terms of failed integration and individuation.

Most critics, however, concur with DeRose that the brothers become archetypes "fighting hopelessly on" (Sam Shepard 113).

Berkowitz maintains that this play, even more so than True West, is propelled "by the high energy Shepard demands in performance" (189).

DeRose notes that the character of the Old Man was added only in the final draft of the play. Seeing this addition as Shepard's irrepressible theatricality subverting an attempt at psychological realism, DeRose indicts the published text's "rationalization" (Sam Shepard 122) of the Old Man's presence as a conservative suppression of the "old" Shepard.

As Brookhouse emphasizes, the story "is perspective, a storyteller's relationship to facts. And more again--storytelling involves gender; because gender arranges perspective" (71).
DeRose, however, sees "an explosion of truth upon the Old Man's romantic memories" and a "ritual of exorcism" for Eddie and May (Sam Shepard 50).

Steven Putzel concurs that "The simple two-ring acting space actually "closes" the stage, enforcing the naturalistic fiction of the absentee audience" (159); thus he sees Lie as evidence of the degeneration of audience complicity that Shepard has always forced in his plays. Transparent biological elements notwithstanding, I feel that it is Family, not stage, which is closed here.

While DeRose identifies the "lie" as Beth's sexual transgression (Sam Shepard 129), Wyatt equates it with repression and "self-castration" (344).

Vallejo's passage reads:
Something identifies you with the one who leaves you, and it your common power to return: thus your greatest sorrow.
Something separates you from the one who remains with you, and it your common slavery to depart: thus your meagerest rejoicing. (5)

Having established oppositions between same-sex characters, Gregory Lanier nonetheless insists on the "balanced opposition" between male and female and sees tragedy in the "futility of ever achieving a single, unified resolution" (419). See Bigsby, Bank, and Vanden Heuvel for discussion of the double consciousness rather than divided self in the play.

Though subversive in its realism, the play admittedly the most autobiographical. Shepard's own father, a military pilot, kept model planes, and, when he died, Shepard remembers receiving a box of ashes and a flag; moreover, he witnessed aphasia like Beth's in his friends Joyce Aaron and Joseph Chaikin as well as his first mother-in-law.

Shepard does sees his father and himself in his father's wake as victims of machismo ("Rolling Stone" 172).

A recent Time survey indicates that 53% of Americans over age fifty believe that a woman is "partly to blame" for rape if "She dresses provocatively" (Gibbs 51).

Tucker, however, equates the snow with beginnings, the fire with the "warmth of the family house" (149), and play's end with the image of family rejoined (149). Hart sees the play as yet another example of Shepard's view that "heterosexual relationship is profoundly disturbed by a pornographic vision" (81-82) with no possibility of transformation since the perspective throughout remains...
male and Jake's humiliation elicits sympathy and "reinforces a desire for violence" (80).

41 To Willadt, the play's '60s' aspect, which recalls a time "when it still seemed possible to change politics and society" (149) collides with a contemporary "performance art" exemplified in the music and videos, a collision suggesting a third and unsuccessful stage in Shepard's work. To DeRose, the '60s' aspect emerges, not in the politics, but in the visual poetry, which signals a rejuvenation of the mythic level missing in the autobiographical images of the family plays as the battle here is "between pre-Vietnam myths of a righteous American military and the shattered post-Vietnam realities of young men killed" (Sam Shepard 134).

42 See Rich and Simon.

43 Bigsby notes that the couple's slide from the banal to the psychotic "belies the conviction that American society can insulate itself in routines of life (192).

44 The casting of a black actor as Glory Bee in the original New York production underscores the waitress's conscious position of otherness. Willadt, however, contends that the casting adds a racial dimension to "the Shepard stereotype of the sexy, dumb woman . . . . [whose] scope of action is reduced to what Shepard presents as typically female activities: domestic chores and the readiness to be used sexually" (159).

45 Willadt views this position as symbol that Glory Bee, unlike other Shepard women, has restored male potency so that Stubbs can father children like Colonel; however, he in turn unloads it in a symbolic climactic killing (which is like an orgasm). The implication is that female sexuality is the origin of war" (161) and that war "repeats itself in an endless, unbreakable cycle" (163)

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CHAPTER FOUR

CRYPTS UNSEALED, MONSTERS UNBOUND:
NORMAN, HOWE, WILSON, AND MAMET

"my private silence to your public guilt is all i got"

"Admonitions"
Lucille Clifton

If the shift from the radical politics and theatrical experimentation of the 1960s and early 1970s subjected Shepard to charges of conservatism and commercialism, other current practitioners of domestic realism are even more vulnerable to such attacks. Black and women playwrights owe an indisputable debt to that era's political movements, which injected transfusions into the anemic, if not comatose, condition of black and women's theatre in America. The Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, combined auspiciously with the Off-Broadway movement, each engendered highly polemical theatres aimed at raising the consciousness of their respective audiences. Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Ed Bullins as well as Charles Fuller and the Negro Ensemble Company thus sought primarily black audiences while Megan Terry, Maria Irene Fornes, and Roberta Sklar advanced a feminist theatre focused on uniquely female experiences.

Both black and female, such playwrights as Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange bisected racial with sexual
identity, staging their double marginalization and the inherent pitfall of binary definitions. Bigsby points out the irony that the liberal but male-dominated black drama "generated a myth which was a black counterpart of the Southern chivalric code. The male is seen as the warrior, the female as the irreproachable icon or a race-mingling whore" (Beyond Broadway 410). In a further irony, it was an emerging political conservatism with its shift in emphasis from public to private issues, still inscribed as antithetical, which prompted black female resistance to this madonna/whore dichotomy and a turn to feminism. Black women, in turn, forced feminism to evolve in the mid-'70s from a middle-class fixation on sexual difference to a multiple focus on differences.¹

Though inarguably the most politically and theatrically radical theatre is and ever will be located in alternative venues, also inarguably this theatre, whether feminist or minority or both, reaches primarily an already converted audience. The formulation of female and black canons,² though an invaluable compensatory move, underscores the irony of a self-perpetuated marginalization; as playwright Joan Holden cautions, the notion of a feminist aesthetic has become tyrannical itself (qtd. in Stephens 8-9) as have the dictates of an African-American one. Neither can alter, moreover, the fact that the path to a broad audience in American theatre is still forged through the rock of realism, especially the domestic variety. Since only in a broad congregation, rather than
in the choir of the converted, lies the possibility of
broad change, those playwrights working in this tradition
should not be summarily dismissed as traitors to the cause,
be it feminist or African-American, and capitulators to the
current conservative backlash.

If, as I have argued, the truest legacy of the
American dramatic tradition is an epistemological challenge
to the assumptions of classical realism and classical
dynamics, then those who have taken up this legacy from the
margins partake in the feminist or African-American call
for transformation. Eschewing realism as the defining
issue, Helene Keyssar identifies feminist theatre as a
drama of transformation rather than the traditional drama
of recognition (xiii) while Bigsby points out:

The many voices of the actor are a constant
reminder of the fact that transformation is not
only a credible goal but a present fact. For the
woman playwright, for the Chicano, the Indian,
the Chinese and the black dramatist this was
equally a social and political fact. But such a
conviction is surely never far away from the mind
of the writer who chooses what is, after all, the
most public of arts, while to meet together,
actors all, if only for a matter of hours, is
already to assert the possibility of creating at
least a provisional sense of community. It is
perhaps a tenuous basis for hope but it is the
fundamental promise of theatre. . . . (Beyond
Broadway 440)

In our current climate of violent divisiveness, this sense
of community must inevitably be not only provisional but
also self-conscious and perhaps initially performative,
requiring an acknowledgement of community, of family, and
of self as complex, open, fluctuating systems rather than
simple, closed, stable essences.
Those plays which deny discontinuity and irreversibility by staging nostalgic domesticity provide only escapist and temporary reprieves, not transformative impulses; thus, in continuing the tradition of William Inge, such playwrights as Neil Simon and Lanford Wilson actually preclude the possibility of transformation and community since their families remain closed, identities gendered, and linear realism intact. Nor does a dramatist’s race or sex assure an epistemological challenge to dominant power structures. Like Lorraine Hansberry before them, playwrights like Ed Bullins, Beth Henley, and Wendy Wasserstein fail ultimately to undermine the fundamentalist ideology of classical dynamics and classical realism: linearity, causality, transparency of language, and stability. Hence, their plays evoke only ressentiment and posit only an individualized, reactive subjectivity discovered as essence rather than decided as process—a myth of identity which leaves unchallenged myths of Family and of nation grounded in triumph over feminized object/others.

Though mainstream recognition inevitably brings canonical conflation even to voices from the margins, some of those voices are rising above those who either laud their ascension or damn their capitulation. Both the praise and the attacks stubbornly ignore the subversive strain in plays which blur the boundaries between mainstream and avant-garde, text and performance. Rather than ratifying the dominant social and theatrical
structures, these liminal realists stage far-from-equilibrium conditions, where systems can "choose by chance" to self-organize as dissipative rather than entropic structures and thus attain a communal wholeness based on self-similarity rather than self-sameness of its parts. There are an encouraging number of dramatists today who promise to deepen American theatre's strain of liminal realism; my focus on four may therefore smack of the arbitrary, but I find that these have created domestic dramas which most resonate with a transformative impulse: Marsha Norman, whose 'night Mother epitomizes yet undermines the classical unities in form and content; Tina Howe, whose Painting Churches celebrates the subversive possibilities of comic realism; August Wilson, whose Fences and The Piano Lesson release historicism and familialism from linearity; and David Mamet, whose The Cryptogram wrests both language and reality from the illusion of stable referents. The latter also verifies the magnetic pull of domestic realism in American theatre even on those dramatists already safely navigating mainstream theatrical waters by virtue of their sex, race, or success in other dramatic forms.

These plays each dramatize a family at a bifurcation point, where consciousness, ever mediated by a language neither transparent nor meaningful, cannot deliver causality from the past nor order to the present. In their negative entropy, these families are revealed as casualties of the Family—that political, ideological structure which
naturalizes polarization, perpetuating the illusory binarism of public and private, male and female, parent and child, order and chaos. Poised on this faultline, these families continue to deny their systemic nature only at peril of final disintegration. Again in these plays, the possibility resonates for a new order, and again the harbinger of that order is a feminized Other, who, in perturbing the system, paradoxically points to evolution from that very chaos which (s)he has embodied. Consciously performative, these characters again flaunt ghostly absence or monstrous body on an American stage and psyche where the illusion of Presence or the Cogito self has ruled.

**JESSIE’S (M)OTHERING IN ‘NIGHT, MOTHER**

Marsha Norman’s 1983 Pulitzer Prize for ‘night, Mother was the second of three awarded to female dramatists in the 1980s. Throwing into relief the prior total of five to female-authored plays since the Prize’s inception in 1917, the last being in 1958, the 1980s’ total seemed to testify to the ascendance of women playwrights following second-wave feminism. Yet Barbara Kachur warns that the voice of first-wave playwrights was attenuated into a rarely punctuated silence (35), a warning justified by the fact that, of the thirty playwrights in Ruby Cohn’s *New American Dramatists 1960–80*, only five are women; and of the forty included in Philip Kolin’s *American Playwrights since 1945*, only eight. Of this select group, Marsha Norman has been perhaps the most controversial as her rise exposed the purgatorial realm into which success thrusts a woman.
In critiquing the limits of success, Keyssar concludes that most "'hit'" shows by and about women have rested on relatively safe terrain" (149); justifiably dismissing plays by Henley and Wasserstein, Keyssar also includes Norman's dramas in her claim that "no matter how serious the topic, they are all comedies of manners, revelations of the surfaces of sexual identities and sexism; they are not challenges to the deeper social structures that allow these manners to endure" (150).

Conversely, Janet Brown insists that "Marsha Norman stands out as perhaps the most successful author of serious feminist drama today" (61), arguing optimistically that feminist drama is returning drama to its essence as "a public act" (25) by transcending the division between elitist and popular art. Thus blurring the boundary between avant-garde and mainstream theatre, Norman's drama also reflects a feminist imperative in dissolving lines between public and private and male and female. A philosophy major from Louisville, Norman was actually drawn into the theatre as "a public act" when the artistic director of the Actors Theatre, Jon Jory, solicited from her a script dealing with the busing of children to public schools in Louisville.

Though not fulfilling this request, Norman did write for Jory's theatre a play which stemmed from her experience with a public institution. Having worked with disturbed teenagers at Kentucky Central State Hospital, Norman based 1978's Getting Out on a girl who had rebuffed Norman's
efforts and was subsequently imprisoned for murder. The play’s protagonist finds that the first day out of literal prison yields recognition of a figurative prison as the adult Arlene attempts to exorcise Arlie, the teenage personification of her violent past. Reflecting Norman’s epistemological challenge to the classical concept of self as unified and time as reversible, Getting Out foregrounds the importance to Norman of the perception-as-prison metaphor: “[A] man from Terminal Island (that’s a big prison in California) came to see the play and then wanted to know where I’d done my time. And I think that’s a question for all of us about our lives. You know, where have we done our time? Because we all have done it” (qtd. in Gross 201). Less obviously but not less powerfully, this prison metaphor permeates Norman’s most successful play, ‘night, Mother, underscoring its often-overlooked epistemological concern with the nature of consciousness and subjectivity.

As both plays embody the clash of classical and postmodernist perspectives in two female characters, the prison most vividly dramatized is that of gender, which constructs, through a Foucaultian panoptical gaze, a feminized Other. It is in part because she has staged the impossibility of autonomy that Norman is so often discounted as a feminist playwright. Yet, as I have pointed out, feminist drama critics would do well to follow the lead of their film counterparts in yielding notions of unified, autonomous, and fixed identity to concepts of
multiple, interrelational, and processual subjectivity. Admirably revising her own earlier definition of feminist drama, Janet Brown also notes the theoretical shift "from the individual's struggle for autonomy to the need for societal transformation" (21) and asserts that Norman's women struggle for "an autonomy in connection" (61). In this postmodern, post-Freudian sense, Norman emerges as a feminist playwright who has shed that yoke of ressentiment and binary perception still burdening the plays of many mainstream contemporaries. Defensively but convincingly, she claims this position: "If it's feminist to care about women's lives, yes, I'm a feminist writer. I don't have political points to make, although they are certainly made by the plays" ("Interview" 156).

Regrettably, the political point about gendering in 'night, Mother is often obscured by the gendering of its reception. The play catapulted its playwright to the status of cover-girl for the New York Times Magazine which featured Mel Gussow's article "Women Playwrights: New Voices in the Theatre." In praising 'night, Mother's power, Gussow expresses amazement at its source: "an affable, determined and petite young woman who looks more like a graduate student than a serious playwright" (22). For Brustein, the play marked the arrival of an "authentic, universal playwright" (25), his adjectives signalling the admissability of Norman into the canon. Undermining this breakthrough for feminists is not only the patronizing stance of male critics but also the play's subject matter,
which appears to be female defeatism and defeat. Desperate, however, to pass through any crack in the canonical walls, some female critics unquestioningly exalted the play, adopting a liberal feminist view of the suicidal female as a "microcosm of the human condition" (Kachur 29) or a cultural feminist view of the mother/daughter relationship as a mythic one (Burkman 254-63).

Disparaging such perspectives as naive, many notable feminist critics inveigh against 'night, Mother's incompatibility with feminism in form as well as subject matter since realism continues to be viewed as antithetical to the feminist imperative of transformation. Jeanne Forte, in her acknowledgment that realism makes production possible, concedes that 'night, Mother does deliver a marketable, if superficial, feminism. Scoffing at Norman's intentional universality, Jill Dolan focuses on this play as test-case for the exclusionism at the basis of any canonization, be it mainstream or feminist, and the gender bias in theatre production and criticism. Though she belatedly concedes a liberal or cultural feminism to the play, Dolan points out that each is animated by the absent male; furthermore, she castigates both the play's producers for flouting the text in casting the overweight Kathy Bates as Jessie and reviewers for targeting fat rather than epilepsy as the "fatal, tragic flaw" (329).

Ironically, Dolan seems herself chained to the Aristotelian standard which she scorned in Brustein's
according tragic status to the play. Norman, however, undercuts this assumption of an identifiable causal flaw, utilizing the unities of time, place, and action only to challenge the very tenets of classical drama. Seemingly a quintessentially realistic play, set in a deliberately ordinary, "relatively new" (6), rural house, 'night, Mother evolves into metatheatre as Norman stages Jessie Cates's staging before her mother with unrelenting logic an illogical suicide, which belies unity and universality not only in time, in place, and in action but also in self and in family. As the stage clock measures ninety uninterrupted minutes of real time, the spectator is seduced into the narrative of classical realism, this one again "Oedipal with a vengeance," playing detective with the mother Thelma, who frantically probes the familial past for Jessie's motive: the death of the father, the debilitation of epilepsy, the desertion of the husband, the criminality of the son.

Jesse, however, discounts each proposed cause with the same disquieting detachment with which she has announced, "I'm going to kill myself, Mama" (13); her first line of dialogue (and the first to come to Norman), "We got any old towels?" (9), signifies, according to Norman, that the play is "a ritual piece" ("Marsha Norman," Savran 186), the household objects witnesses to Jessie's celebration of a requiem mass. The mass sanctifies the impossibility of a present Presence as the daughter enforces upon the mother consciousness of the irretrievability of the past and the
arbitrariness of the present. Norman makes explicit her interest in perspectival reality in stating that "I wrote two points of view." ("Interview" 156): Thelma’s, that suicide is obscene; Jessie’s, that it is altruistic. The play’s ritual thus involves Jessie’s systematic preparation for her suicide and, more notably, for life thereafter, not hers but Thelma’s, which necessitates instruction in the tedium of household chores; the ritual is to be counterpointed, at Jessie’s insistence, by their usual ritual of Saturday nights, daughter giving mother a manicure although tonight nails go unpainted.

Thus the action enacted in the present and recounted from the past is decidedly female, and Jessie’s dispassionate attitude reflects her conviction of a failed performance of gender. Withdrawn as a girl in a traditional, gender-divided household, Jessie adored her distant father of whom she now forces Thelma to acknowledge her resentment: "You were just jealous because I’d rather talk to him than wash the dishes with you" (33). The now divorced, circa forty-year-old Jessie also confronts Thelma with her manoeuvrings to secure the reclusive daughter a husband, having "flirted him out here to build your porch" (38). Though she loved her husband, Jessie welcomed release from his gaze when he left: "I never was what he wanted to see, so it was better when he wasn’t looking at me all the time" (41). When Thelma counters Jessie’s claim that her smoking broke up her marriage with reference to the epileptic "fits" and another woman, Jessie’s first

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response is "Was she pretty?" (38). Though Dolan's objection to casting Jessie as overweight is well-founded, Norman does implicate Jessie's appearance as a factor in the failure to perform gender effectively. According to Thelma, even the beloved father pitied his daughter: "He said you were a runt and he said it from the day you were born and he said you didn't have a chance" (33).

Also revealed now by Thelma is the fact that Jessie's epilepsy was inherited from the father rather than incurred by a fall from a horse as an adult. Thus homely, epileptic, and isolated from childhood, Jessie retreated totally from a failed foray into a woman's role to the private realm of her mother, who also feels isolated as the result of a loveless marriage and echoes Jessie's own version of female failure: "How could I love him, Jessie? I didn't have a thing he wanted" (32). Norman's explanation of her repeated focus on female characters verifies this concern with gender processing: "I know how women are socialized in this society. And there is now plenty of scientific evidence to back up what I have known all along, that women are socialized very differently from men, and that they are socialized to fail" ("Marsha Norman," DiGaetani 248-49). The daughter underscores her failure to meet gender expectations as a wife with an insistence on her unfitness for maternity as well, attributing her son's criminality to the inheritance of her perspective: "We look out at the world and we see the same thing. Not Fair. . . . And he walks around like there's
loose boards in the floor and you know who laid that floor. I did" (40).

These "loose boards" betray an instability of self on a stage which gendered performance strives futilely to nail down. Unlike Thelma’s litany of her own maternal misdeeds to account for Jessie’s planned suicide when other explanations are rebuffed, Jessie’s emphasis with her son is on perspective rather than acts, misapprehension rather than causality. When Thelma dismisses her daughter’s view of her life as only "what you think is true," Jessie, "Struck by the clarity of that," replies, "That’s right. It’s what I think is true" (26). Trapped for years on her mother’s stage, Jessie finally opposes the perspective of order and stability embodied in Thelma as the stage directions indicate: "She believes that things are what she says they are. Her sturdiness is more a mental quality than a physical one, finally. She is chatty and noisy and this is her house" (5, emphasis original). The conversely silent, "pale and vaguely unsteady" (4) Jessie has haunted this house, now self-consciously performing the contradictory role of a daughter who mothers and remaining, as Thelma says accusingly, "real far back there" (37).

On this evening, Jessie stages a frontal attack on Thelma’s logic, insisting that the long awaited control of her epilepsy actually makes possible the long-contemplated suicide ("Waited until I felt good enough, in fact" [14]). To her mother’s repeated protests ("no, Mam [sic], doesn’t make sense" [16]), Jessie explains only that suicide is her
first, if last, entry into proactive subjectivity, referring to an old baby picture which concretizes her ghostliness:

I am what became of your child . . . . That’s who I started out and this is who is left. (There is no self-pity here.) That’s what this is about. It’s somebody I lost, all right, it’s my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn’t much matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even. I’m what was worth waiting for and I didn’t make it. Me . . . who might have made a difference to me. (50, final ellipsis original)

Here Norman exposes the destructiveness of the quest myth, that standard of Oedipal narrative, of traditional American realism, and ostensibly of her own play. Jessie’s philosophical observation that she "never got there" calls into question the "there"—a unified, fixated, gendered, autonomous self safe from seizures or shifts and centered through familial bonding and stability.9

Though Jessie refuses to target a specific cause for her suicide, she does impugn the entrapment of family inscription. Her failure at the feminine having marked her, in Kintz’s words, as "a transient in terms of the oedipal narrative" (217), Jessie resents her brother, a success on the gendered stage: "He just calls me Jess like he knows who he’s talking to" (19).10 Although Thelma counters that "Family is just accident" (19), reflecting an incipient resistance to its sanctification as essence, she, too, has been complicit, one of the "they," in her daughter’s sacrifice upon the stage of a gendered, stable self, a stage which hides its "loose boards": "They know
things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know it or not. They were there when it happened and it don’t belong to them, it belongs to you, only they got it. Like my mail order bra got delivered to their house" (19). In this notion of mediated identity and authorized histories, Jessie echoes Norman, who links the notion of family inscription to Tennessee Williams and Southern writing:

We share the notion that you cannot escape your family. You can’t escape where you were born, who you were born to and what you’ve inherited. This is a southern version of fate [laughs]... . Our writing is absolutely linked to this problem of how do you change when the perceptions of the people around you don’t change. How do you know who you are when you are made up of these people that you despise? How do you move at all with all these people hanging onto you? ("Marsha Norman," Savran 183, emphasis original).

Walled in by familial perspective, Jessie exposes her mother’s house as an epistemological prison. Scripted as daughter to gender-insistent parents and sister to a domineering brother, Jessie is conscious of having moved through their lives as a ghost. Ghost becomes monster when the seizures, which she prods Thelma to describe, leave her jerking, gagging, blue, urinating, and, in Jessie’s words, "Foaming like a mad dog the whole time" (43). Thelma also confesses that these "fits" necessitate calling her son and keep her friend Agnes from visiting. Vacating her prescribed position and left a present absence, Jessie posits decided rather than discovered identities, embodying a postmodern view rather than the mother’s Newtonian view of a rational, mechanical, stable world; the clock on stage

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notwithstanding, the universe is no predictably moving, pendulum-reversing clock, and the future no predictable point thereon. William Demastes sees 'night, Mother employing a "post-Beckettian realism that suggests a new scientific metaphor" (118) since Norman supplants Aristotelian assumptions of causality and reveals the realistic form as only artifice (11-17). His suggestion that the play be viewed not in terms of feminist social critique but as a philosophical debate on the nature of perception inadvertently echoes the evolution within feminism itself.

The concept of the male gaze having placed perception at the center of feminist thought, its modification reflects a move from the strictly social to the philosophical or epistemological. Jessie rejects more than objectification by the male gaze here, saying "No" not only to her own gender-dictated experience but to "it all" (49, emphasis original), including the Red Chinese. Repeatedly insisting on her suicide as an emblem of choice rather than an act of despair, Jessie refutes her mother's (and critics') logic: "I'm not giving up. This is the other thing I'm trying. . . . This will work. That's why I picked it" (49, emphasis original). The daughter having dwelled always on the faultline of inscribed binary oppositions, her choice represents the displacement of those binaries as it "can be viewed as active protest or passive resignation, as arbitrary decision or inevitable destiny, as coldly logical or neurotically irrational"
(Spencer 372) and, in fact, is both, straddling these paradigmatic male-female poles:

As an action that inextricably unties the forces of idealizing love and irrational hostility, self-assertion and self-negation, sadism and masochism, separation and identity, suicide is but a representation in extreme form of the contradictory relationship mothers and daughters share in our present historical situation. (369)

Affirming as well Thelma’s choice to remain, Norman gives us in this nocturnal dialogue, not dialectic but dialogic. There is no reconciliation, but there is empowerment as Norman stresses Jessie’s "determined" control, her "peaceful energy" (4) through the abnegation of causality, reversibility, and stability and the abdication of the mythology of Family and the ideality of the logos: "Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet" (16) In the discourse of difference on this night, bonds may not be sealed but boundaries are dissolved as Jessie in her mother’s house with her father’s gun rejects the feminized object position and chooses as subject to abandon the quest for identity itself rather than to sanctify powerlessness, signalling to feminists a rejection of ressentiment. Answering Norman’s query as to how to "move at all" within familial, perceptual prisons, Jessie exits through the bedroom door to an "elsewhere." The "focal point of the entire set and "the point of all the action" (6), this door emerges as not boundary but threshold since it is "a point of both threat and promise" (6) and thus a point of tension; it blurs the border between on stage and off as Jessie has blurred the
border between presence and absence and the play, the
border between outside and inside, public and private, text
and performance.

This point of tension also reflects the position of
the spectator, who can find through the play, despite
claims to the contrary, release from her own
epistemological prison. Though Jessie could not herself
transform except physically, she, like those theatrical
ghost-monsters before her, does signal the possibility of
transformation. To perturb the order of this
claustrophobic house and entropic family is to push a
system to a bifurcation point. At Jessie’s door, Thelma is
poised at the threshold of instability and transformation.
Her response to Jessie’s shot, which "sounds like an
answer, it sounds like no" (58) indicates her consciousness
of Jessie’s truth and of her own misapprehension, her
acknowledgement of their cryptic language as coded, her
acceptance of order as chaotic and the non-predictable as
inevitable, and her awareness of family as a system which
constructs meaning and identity. Both self and Other, this
(M)other cries, "Jessie, Jessie, child . . . Forgive me.
(A Pause.) I thought you were mine" (58, ellipsis
original).

Thelma’s movement away from the door and into the
kitchen as per Jessie’s instructions is a movement away
from her stance as detective in search of evidence and
Truth; clutching, also per Jessie’s instructions, the pan
in which mother had nostalgically fixed for daughter a
cocoa both admitted to always detesting, Thelma telephones her son. No longer a mythologized private haven, the house is the site of an open system, haunted now by Jessie as an absent presence which evokes her former present absence. Rather than following Jessie or castigating her for her defeat, feminists can mark her disruption and follow Thelma away from closure into a new order of family as a dissipative structure, which exchanges energy with the environment as its house lets the outside in. To criticism that the play offers no possibility for social change since society is elided, Norman insists that there is no society for these women because

We have no national society. We are all, at this moment, in a terrible state of despair about even being associated with certain people who are also Americans. . . . I think that Americans in general function out of a family context. The violence is all domestic, by and large. ("Marsha Norman," Savran 190).

In lamenting a lack of community and the gendered power structure that constitutes family and nation, Norman implicitly calls for a dissolution of boundaries between public and private, outside and inside, day and night, male and female worlds. Such dissolution would release mother and daughter from their prison houses into structures with permeable walls, where energy is dissipated and differences celebrated.

**FANNY'S ALTAR IN PAINTING CHURCHES**

If Norman is caught in the crossfire of mainstream and feminist critics, Tina Howe has been denied access to the battlefield itself. Not included either in Kolin's eight
or Cohn's five women playwrights, Howe is neglected in part because of her chosen form, which seems to confirm Keyssar's disparagement of mainstream female-authored plays as comedies of manners. Yet Howe has not received the scholarly attention accorded even to Henley or Wasserstein, her brand of tragicomedy apparently not so Pulitzerly palatable as theirs. While these other playwrights ultimately deliver the resolution and closure traditional to comedy, often through an identity solidified in familial bonds, Howe resists such resolution, instead mocking the linearity of the quest narrative by staging identity formation as an artistic process, a performance text. She is linked, then, epistemologically with Norman in challenging the tenets of classical realism. And again it is Howe's female characters, many of them artists, who signal this subversion. Resisting the temptation to employ comedy to soften the subversiveness, Howe deploys it to underscore the threat and to blur the boundaries of realism when she works within them at all.

Though she disparages American theatre's proliferation of "kitchen sink dramas" (qtd. in Lamont 27) and considers realism a concession to public taste, Howe nonetheless seems another captive of the lure of the American domestic legacy. After the failure in 1969 of The Nest, her first Off-Broadway production, Howe wrote Birth and After Birth about the "primitive landscape" of child-rearing, "its horrors and its glories" ("Tina Howe" 223) and thus took on "the sanctity of the American family itself" ("Antic
Vision" 12). When this absurdist play was judged too appalling for production and cost Howe her agent, Howe deliberately staked out "less threatening" ("Tina Howe" 225) territory, first with exotic settings and then with a return to a domestic setting rendered in more conventional form in 1983's Painting Churches. Though Howe concedes a conservatism in the play's conventional setting, she resists categorization of the play as realistic: "God help me if I ever write a realistic play. Oh please, don't call Painting Churches realistic . . . it's quite off-center" ("Tina Howe" 228). It is, nevertheless, this play's undeniable, if reluctant, realism which accounts for its success within Howe's canon just as it was the death of her parents which made its writing possible, despite claims that it is "not autobiographical" ("Tina Howe" 231). Recognition of an "off-center" or liminal realism in Painting Churches (implicit in Howe's praise of the "heightened reality" of the Second Stage City's production ["Tina Howe" 228]) resolves the impasse and locates the play firmly in the tradition of American drama, both in form and content.

Equally as problematical as Howe's form is her relation to feminism since her female characters are not the strong role models decreed by liberal feminists and her preoccupation is with food and art rather than with the political agenda of materialist feminists: "My concerns are much more aesthetic than they are social or political" ("Tina Howe" 234). Yet her characters' obsession with food
reflects not only Howe's own neurosis but a specifically female one, a consequence of gender acquisition. The staging of this process is a recurrent motif in Howe's plays despite the diversity of their forms, and it is a motif which confirms Howe's focus as a feminist one:

My plays have been wildly female. There's something very "feely" about them, yet because of Painting Churches I'm perceived as a willow aesthete who writes about art. I'm not identified as a feminist writer, yet I'm convinced I am one--and one of the fiercer ones to boot. . . . [P]erhaps--and this is a dicey thing to say, though it's been true in my case--the only way a woman can have a career in the theatre at this time is to cover her scent a bit. ("Antic Vision" 14)

The "balancing act" or "edginess" required of woman dramatists reflects the feminist subversiveness of liminal realism. When Howe commented in 1992 that "These days most men write about issues. I prefer to explore the mysteries of the hearth" (qtd. in Lamont 31), she reconfirmed her original impulse to "take on the sanctity of the American family," for the hearth mysteries are inherently the most political of subjects. In eschewing overt social issues, Howe does "cover her scent" but uncovers the politics of Oedipus in the family temple and discovers the possibility of transformation therein, a possibility which marks her drama as feminist: "Women playwrights are finally coming out of the woodwork. . . . Wait until we yoke our delicate touch and way with words with the darker impulses of theatre. All I can say is when that moment comes . . . LOOK OUT BELOW!" ("Tina Howe" 235, final ellipsis original).
Though Howe still apologizes for her reflexive conservatism\(^1\) and though *Painting Churches* remains the apex of her commercial success, she nonetheless asserts that in this play her "female and aesthetic voices were fused at last" ("Antic Vision" 14). The title alludes to the effort of an artist, Mags Church, to paint a portrait of her parents, Fanny and Gardner, Boston Brahmins who are moving from their Beacon Hill townhouse to their Cape Cod cottage. It also alludes to Howe's "painting" of the sanctified American Family and the identities "painted" therein. The artifice of this representation is immediately signified by the setting, the living room of the family as Church: "What makes the room remarkable, though, is the play of light that pours through soaring arched windows. At one hour it's hard-edged and brilliant; the next, it's dappled and yielding. It transforms whatever it touches, giving the room a distinct feeling of unreality" (131).\(^1\) Howe's image of light as complementary particle and wave signals the play's dramatization of the uncertainty of an observer-influenced reality. Assuming the position of observer and becoming a point of identification for the audience is the artist-daughter, who has bartered her help with packing for her parents' posing.

Mag's return home to convert her creators into her creations and thereby fixate her own identity aligns the play with others which stage this American variation of the quest narrative, specifically those which expose its artifice and the dangers of the Oedipal scenario. The
play's opening underscores Howe's emphasis on the intergenerational construction of female subjectivity within the sanctified and gender-polarized family as the mother, packing while the father types off-stage, regards her reflection in her own mother's silver tray. Ridiculing the tray's weight ("They must have been amazons in the old days" [135]) and relegating the antique to the auction pile, Fanny nonetheless is burdened by a generationally reproduced female image, playing nurturer now for a Pulitzer-poet husband going deaf and "getting quite gaga" (141). After Mags "comes staggering in" (135), Fanny reenters and "staggers around blindly" (136), her dress with the zipper stuck over her head. As mother remains "lost in her dress" (136), daughter recalls falling at the feet of an art critic, skirt over her head and no underwear beneath. This shared female instability, however, creates no mother-daughter bond as Fanny incessantly berates Mags with the image of the "Boston girl" who marries well: "You'll never catch a husband looking that way. Those peculiar clothes, that God-awful hair" (155). . . . Really, Mags, you've got to bear down. You're not getting any younger" (156).

Fanny shows little interest in Mag's career, though she traces the talent to her own mother, who was excluded by gender from the art hierarchy: "Her miniature of Henry James is still one of the main attractions at the Atheneum. Of course no woman of breeding could be a professional artist in her day" (140). Her outrageous behavior having

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made a mockery of her daughter’s first group show, Fanny ignores Mag’s announcement of her first solo show and only weakly denies not taking the art seriously: "Oh, darling, your portraits aren’t ridiculous! They may not be all that one hopes for, but they’re certainly not—" (150, emphasis original). Mags therefore aligns herself with her father, still revering him and resisting her mother’s laughing account of his artistic impotence ("He’s writing criticism!" [141]) and physical incontinence ("My poet laureate can’t hold it in!" [174]). Daughter of a famous father herself, Howe depicts Mags as dwarfed by both parents, feeling "Awkward . . . plain" (157) and reduced to compulsive eating—saltines, Sara Lee cake, tapioca—upon each return home. She also sublimates her hunger for affirmation in her art since assuming the artist’s gaze yields the illusion of a fixed subject position: "The great thing about being a portrait painter, you see, is it’s the other guy that’s exposed; you’re safely hidden behind the canvas and easel" (158, emphasis original); hence, her determination to "do you" (139) reflects a desire to reduce to Other those who have so reduced her.

Yet the parents resist her attempts at such construction. Protesting Mag’s hanging of a tablecloth backdrop, Fanny yells "MARGARET, THIS IS NOT A CONSTRUCTION SITE" (146). The home, however, is exactly such a site as evidenced in the parents’ mockery of their daughter’s efforts to make them pose. Seeking solace in drink after a recitation of dead or diseased friends, Fanny and Gardner
mimic iconic representations: Grant Wood’s "American Gothic" (symbolic Family), followed by Michelangelo’s "Pieta" (symbolic motherhood) and "The Creation" (symbolic fatherhood). To counteract their mockery with her eye/I, Mags snaps flash Polaroid shots unannounced. Their reactions—the father feeling shot, the mother blinded, both eventually seeing lace—reflect their disempowerment before the gaze of the artist/child, who has fixated them in a freeze-frame at the church altar. The desperate determination of the daughter to objectify her parents and order the chaos of the household stems, of course, from the desire for that stable self which she feels they have denied her. Her recollection of her "first masterpiece" (159) conflates art and food with female sexuality and gender acquisition. At dinner with parents who were "awfully strict about table manners" (160), nine-year-old Mags became unable to swallow, so afraid was she of "losing control" and "making a mess" (160). Squirting out the food in "neat little curlicues" (160), the pre-pubescent girl was banished from the family table for six months. In her room, Mags flushed her food down the toilet while melting crayons on the radiator, the first a red, "into these beautiful shimmering globs, like spilled jello, trembling and pulsing" (161).

The female sexuality imaged in this menstrual/placental creation connects it to the Eve’s fruit of Gardner’s recitation, which overlaps Mag’s remembrance:

"'When you were Eve, its acrid juice was sweet,/ Untasted
in its heavenly, orchard air. . . ’"(161, ellipsis original). Thus, upon discovery of this "COLOSSAL FRUITCAKE, FIVE FEET TALL" (161), "Daddy exited as usual; left the premises. He fainted" (162). Mummy, in horror, mistook it for "A MOUNTAIN OF ROTTING GARBAGE . . . ALIVE WITH VERMIN" (162) and destroyed it. Significantly, Mag’s memory of her mother is of a monster with a blowtorch: "I just have this very strong image of you standing over my bed, your hair streaming around your face, aiming this . . . flamethrower at my confection" (162, ellipsis original). Haunted by this image, the adult Mags still repels her mother as a monstrous Other that inscribes and circumscribes the daughter sexually and socially: "Of course in a sense you were right. It was a monument of my castoff dinners, only I hadn’t built it with food. . . . I found my own materials. I was languishing with hunger, but oh, dear Mother. . . I FOUND MY OWN MATERIALS. . . !" (162, emphasis and ellipses original).

Both women having revolved in "daddy’s orbit" (Friedman 7), Mags has been unaware of her mother’s own gendered circumscription. She nostalgically recalls swimming in a phosphorous-filled sea with her father, grabbing his leg and wishing "that we could just be fixed there" but "Even as I was reaching for you, you were gone" (181). Confronted with her absence in this memory, Fanny comments, "Damned dishes . . . why didn’t I see any of this?!" (180). Relegated to the domestic sphere by her gender and her husband’s public persona, Fanny now must
care for him in that private sphere to which he has
dretreated, her only outlet decorating lamps with perforated
shades and herself with outlandish hats. When Mags attacks
her for making a game of packing Gardner’s books and
treating him "Like A CHILD or . . . AN AMUSEMENT" (176),
Fanny finally and resignedly, as Gardner plays with a paper
slide, confronts Mag’s misperceptions and notions of order:

And to you who see him once a year, if that . . .
what is he to you? . . . Paint us?! . . . What
about opening your eyes and really seeing us? . .
. It’s all over for Daddy and me. This is it!
"Finita la commedia!" . . . All I’m trying to do
is exit with a little flourish . . . I’d put a
bullet through my head in a minute, but then
who’d look after him? . . . What do you think
we’re moving to the cottage for? . . . Do you
think that’s anything to look forward to? . . .
Being Daddy’s nursemaid out in the middle of
nowhere? (176-77, emphasis original)

In the face of financial and physical disintegration,
the mother’s "little flourish"—her outlandish appearance
and outrageous mockery of her husband, herself, and their
lives—reveals her as a woman who mimics the Family as she
upholds it and performs gender as she is stifled by it. As
the designated patriarch, awash in language, becomes
increasingly incoherent and illogical, the wife is thrust
into his position of control, a role she recognizes as
performative like that of the (M)other has been. A sexual
object reduced now to a self-described snoring crone who
has ground her teeth to stubs, Fanny wants to dress up for
Mag’s portrait so as to pretend they are not old crones.
Her masquerade and her mockery subvert encodings of gender
and illusions of family stability, which Mags has demanded
that the Churches uphold. Abnegating such fixity and emerging as performance artist, Fanny offers to her artist daughter a consciousness about consciousness, an awareness of the "unreality" of an observer-influenced reality and of familially constructed roles. Though resistant to her own gendering into marriage and family, Mags has nonetheless regarded her mother as monstrous in her ambivalence about a gendered order. 

Finally abandoning the fixation of the photos, Mags releases the parents from her "reality" in the portrait, which depicts not the opposition perceived by the child but the differences perceived by the artist. Having suffered all night the artist’s hellish "descent into her work" ("Tina Howe" 229), signified by the portrait’s backdrop making Fanny "glow like a pomegranate" (146), Mags has transformed the mother into an image with purple skin and orange hair, a celebration of monstrous excess which Fanny initially despises (as she has her daughter’s red hair). But the mother transforms the painting itself into another: "The wispy brush strokes make us look like a couple in a French Impressionist painting" (183). Entering this vision, Fanny and Gardner imitate a Renoir as they dance, the strains of a Chopin waltz affirming their reality. Poised between different spatial and temporal planes, Mags "finally gives in to their stolen moment" (184) by ignoring the honking horn of their imminent exit from both this room and this life. The light at the Churches blurs the boundary not only between particle and wave but also
between life and death, time and timelessness, soul and body, male and female: "The lights become dreamy and dappled as Fanny and Gardner dance around the room. Mags watches them, moved to tears as slowly the curtain falls" (184).

Mags does not attain nor the audience find assurance in the transcendent, integrated-through-the-past identity of the quest myth. Recognizing the moment of reconciliation as fleeting, if not fantastical, Howe remarks: "What moves the audience is that split second when the three of them are finally reconciled. It lasts for one heartbeat, and then it's gone. We all know it's a purely theatrical moment, which is why it's so precious" ("Tina Howe" 232). Familial reconciliation, then, signals not fixated identity and systemic stability but multiple subjectivity and systemic flux. A drama of transformation rather than recognition, Painting Churches is a representation which represents a representation which represents another. These layers of perception reflecting a multi-layered reality, the play stages a liminal realm. At a bifurcation point, the sanctified Family as Church implodes with its boundaries into chaos; yet as daughter follows monstrous (M)other to the threshold of instability, energy flows as does the light, and a higher order emerges. In the "piling excess on top of excess" (Preface n.p.) that Howe so adores, her painting of the family pushes realism and the family itself to a point of tension and feminist transformation.
The decade of the '80s saw in American theatre the recognition not only of women playwrights but also of the most significant contemporary black playwright, by some accounts the most significant of any today--August Wilson. Having grown up in the ghetto area of Pittsburgh known as the Hill, quit school in the ninth grade in anger over a plagiarism accusation, and struggled for years to become a poet, Wilson has won two Pulitzers for his plays--*Fences* (1987) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990). These form part of an intended ten-play cycle, one for each decade of the black experience in twentieth century America, a project which recalls O'Neill's nine-play plan but promises completion. Comparison with O'Neill arises also in the domestic realism of both Pulitzer plays, though Wilson claims never to have read the classics of drama and to attend theatre only rarely. Nor does he align himself with the angry and didactic black playwrights of the '60s, though he does pay tribute to their ground-breaking and attributes his playwriting to a desire "to politicize the community and raise consciousness" (qtd. in DeVries 24). Acknowledging that the primary theatrical experience for many blacks is the church ("August Wilson" DiGaetani 279) and that poetry infuses his drama, Wilson echoes Brustein in his insistence that metaphor should always carry a play ("August Wilson," Savran 292-303). Despite his avowed political/historical focus, Wilson repeatedly asserts that
it is blues music, a specifically black art form introduced to him by female singers, which most imbues his plays. Within these rhythms, in need of reclaiming by blacks, resonates the "blood's memory" (qtd. in Chip Brown 122) of ancestral voices that must be heeded: "Without knowing your past, you don't know your present—and you certainly can't plot your future... You go out and discover it for yourself. It's being responsible for your own presence in the world and for your own salvation" (qtd. in DeVries 25). Wilson insists on the blues as a philosophical stance, containing both an African world view that "man is a part of the world" and "information about your life within that world view" ("August Wilson," DiGaetani 279-80).

As the music is perspective, so too is that past which must be known. Claiming that he needs no more than the blues, Wilson echews historical research because facts can "'straitjacket'" creativity (qtd. in Staples 111). His history, then, foregrounds itself as a perspective, as a counterpoint to "'the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks and the way blacks look at themselves'" (qtd. in DeVries 24). Promoting "cultural nationalism" (Chip Brown 122) as an alternative to black assimilation, Wilson's plays stage history not as fact but as narrative, an authority over which they now assert: "'Put them all together and you have a history'" (qtd. in DeVries 23, emphasis mine). As Fleche points out, Wilson ironicizes the past as "part of a consciousness of 'the
past' instead of something he's 'mastered'. . . . If we ever really exorcise the ghost of that past, history, like the drama, might be exorcised with it" (13, emphasis original). Inevitably, the black playwright must forge his narratives from, as well as against, the master narrative of white history. Wilson's plays are often haunted by literal ghosts as they encourage this consciousness about consciousness and awareness of a perspectival reality. With history nonlinear and the future non-predictable, blacks can make their contribution as Africans in America not assimilated and circumscribed by white narratives.

No more linear than the history which they stage is the form of the plays. Though criticized for his traditional realism, Wilson, like those white literary ancestors he disclaims, subverts both its form and ideology. The well-made play surface is continually disrupted by Wilson's "'African story-telling mode'" (qtd. in DeVries 24) and by theatrical elements often aligned with African ritual that impart to the plays the quality of jazz improvisation. As Nadel notes, interaction supersedes Aristotelian "plot": "Because these plays all resemble structurally a jazz set as much as they do a Euro-American play, we are confronted not with protagonists and antagonists but rather with the tension of interpretive energy, as a community of players play off another's solos" (Introduction 5). This tension and energy reaffirms the dynamic of liminal realism and suggests once again the possibility of a dissipative rather than unified structure.
arising as a future from a polarized and entropic present. Wilson's hope is indeed for a future in which blacks assert their culture as neither American nor African but both; only in displacing boundaries will they overcome their historical absence and become "responsible for [their] own presence in the world and for [their] own salvation."

Notwithstanding the obvious racial focus of the plays, Wilson's emphasis on perspective inevitably raises issues of gender. The dramaturgy is primarily male-centered like those of his male predecessors, the two family plays each containing only one significant woman character. Interestingly, however, a disproportionate amount of critical attention is accorded to Wilson's female roles, if only to conclude that, despite tentative forays into subjectivity, the characters ultimately confirm the ideology of patriarchy and realism. Yet Wilson, son of a white father who was only a "sporadic presence" (qtd. in Chip Brown 120) in his life, claims that his women characters are based on his mother, a powerful woman whose own mother walked to Pittsburgh from North Carolina. This heritage, in a man so obsessed with heritage, encourages my conviction that the female characters, at least those in the two family plays, are once again the harbingers of transformation from the hierarchical polarization of both the family system and the national system.

Doubly marginalized, the black women consciously perform both their gender and their racial roles, their narratives subversions of the black male subversions of
dominant white male "history." These women, moreover, are aligned in the plays with the darkly feminized Otherness of African ritual or mysticism, an element which perturbs not only the white but also the masculinist order and complicates reality. It is this Otherness which signals the possibility of a dissipative rather than implosive energy to the black males, who are Othered and made entropic by a white order that they ironically and reflexively replicate in the family. In examining the nature of familial and racial heritage, Wilson insists on breaking destructive cycles through personal responsibility in the company of the past's ghosts: "First of all, we're all like our parents. . . . Now you can take that legacy and do with it anything you want to do" ("August Wilson," Savran 299). Wilson thus echoes Prigogine's conviction that personal action within a complex system can convert chaos to a positive in perturbing that system to a bifurcation point, where a future can be "plotted."

The most convincing test-case for a transformative, hence, feminist, impulse in Wilson's realistic drama is 1987's Fences, which the playwright himself terms the "odd one, more conventional in structure with its large character" ("August Wilson," Savran 298). The play depicts the social and familial struggles of Troy Maxson, a middle-aged black man haunted by the past and feared and revered by his family, which he threatens to destroy by his domination and adultery. The play is thus often regarded as a black Death of a Salesman despite Wilson's insistence.
that he is "not familiar" ("August Wilson," Savran 292) with Miller’s play and that Troy is a character "who is responsible and likes the idea of family" (qtd. in DeVries 25), the originating image of the play having been a man in his yard with a baby. Savran distinguishes Wilson’s well-made plays from Ibsen’s and Miller’s in the transformation of the problematic protagonist into "both victim and victimizer . . . whose ambiguous moral status" (289) leads to a questioning of oppositional systems like the patriarchy in Fences. Yet it is in this destabilizing vein that Wilson most clearly emerges as a contributor to, if not product of, the legacy of American drama, even in this most conservative of his plays, whose very title targets these boundaries, which Miller and the others also have blurred.

Here, the fences take on the added significance of racial boundaries. The central metaphor of the play, Troy’s fence, concretizes an attempt, first at his wife’s urging and then on his own volition, to protect the nuclear home, "an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood" (7). When the play opens in 1957, the dirt front yard, which functions as the sole setting, is only "partially fenced"; initially resistant to its purpose but inflicting its construction upon his son, Troy completes the fence only after death has claimed in childbirth the woman whom he has refused to relinquish to salvage his marriage. An attempt to erect a barrier between life and death and order and chaos, Troy’s
fence also reflects a barrier against the white world, which precluded a career playing major-league baseball and prescribed one "hauling white folks' garbage" (77).

A towering and talented athlete, Troy feels constrained in his strivings to "fill out" his size: "Together with his blackness, his largeness informs his sensibilities and the choices he has made in his life" (7). Nadel finds in Troy's name an allusion to the fence of race, which divides blacks from humans with property rights: "Maxson" signifies a "personalized version" ("Boundaries" 89) of the Mason-Dixon line—a universal, metaphoric fence—and "Troy," an internal, defensive resistance to that line, which constructs blacks as literally property and thus only figuratively human. Nadel sees Troy's fence as an effort to construct a site in which he is human, an identity requiring an inversion of the literal/figurative hierarchy. Outside history, Troy fights it; unable to change 1957's normative white discourse of progress and assimilation, Troy attempts to revise his own personal history by becoming both a literal and a figurative father ("Boundaries" 86-95). Barred from other American myths, he fixates on the one left to him—the haven of gender-divided, nuclear Family in the private sphere.

Though Nadel stops short of such a conclusion, Fences concerns not only the fence of race but the "fences" of race and class and gender, all of which construct Otherness. Troy's initial subjection was at the hands

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(literally) of his Southern share-cropper father, who "was the devil himself" (51). Having already frightened away Troy’s mother, who never fulfilled her promise to the eight-year-old to return, Troy’s father beat his fourteen-year-old son in competition over a girl, prompting a flight North. As it was patriarchy, not racism, which first exiled the young Troy, so it was north of the Mason-Dixon line that his position as Other was confirmed: "I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves" (53). Reduced to a thievery which escalated when he fathered a child, Troy eventually killed one of his victims and spent fifteen years in jail. Learning to play baseball but losing his family, Troy emerged to play in the Negro leagues and marry Rose for whom he is determined to "measure up" (60).

Yet Troy’s quest to construct a masculine identity and secure a place for his family in a white world replicates the patriarchal power structure of that world and of his father, thus underscoring Wilson’s recognition of the multiple mediators of consciousness, the differences rather than difference which inscribe identity. Though victim of his father’s "evil" (50), Troy transmits intergenerationally that responsible yet abusive pattern, telling his first son that he cut the world down to size only "when I got to the place where I could feel [my father] kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years" (52). Thus he gives birth to his
own father in reproducing a process of economic support but physical and emotional oppression of his wife and sons. Though he turns over his paycheck to Rose, he silences her parental voice and betrays with his adultery her willing sexual objectification to counter the threat to his manhood in the public sphere: "I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever" (41).

Despite admitting his past mistakes to his first son, Lyons, Troy ritualistically humiliates the thirty-four-year-old when lending him money and refuses to show an interest in his music. Although he has fulfilled his "responsibility" toward his son with Rose, Troy stubbornly thwarts Cory's opportunity for a college football scholarship out of jealousy or protectiveness or both; he also withholds all emotional connection, maintaining a father-son hierarchy: "Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me. . . . I gave you your life. . . . And liking your black ass wasn’t part of the bargain" (39-40). And though he professes shame at having used the veteran's compensation of his war-wounded brother for a mortgage down-payment, Troy eventually commits Gabriel to the asylum and receives more of his income. Thus Troy erects subject/object, public/private fences to protect against a white/black, life/death world; however, his downfall within the private sphere begins at the very time that he rises in the public one by breaking the race barrier with a promotion to driver. Recognizing blackness as a disruption to whiteness
and death as a disruption to life, a threat with which he has wrestled like "a fastball on the outside corner" (15), Troy nonetheless replicates the binary boundaries of the public realm in the "private" one so that his maleness can refuel on those whom he feminizes as he has been.

The most obvious of these, of course, is the wife-mother, whose devotion to her husband echoes that of Linda Loman as does its conscious nature: "her devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibility of life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, . . . the Church, or aloneness" (11). As a black woman of the '50s whose gender and class constraints are compounded by race, Rose evinces a materialist awareness, an even more self-conscious performance than Linda and her other theatrical predecessors. Though she is positioned in the private sphere, repeatedly emerging from the kitchen to announce a meal, Rose contradicts Troy's male narrative of causality, claiming that it was not racism but age which precluded a baseball career and objecting to the thwarting of Cory's future with Troy's past: "The world's changing around you and you can't even see it" (41). When Troy confesses that he has impregnated another woman, who gives him a "different understanding about myself" (66), and that, after eighteen years of standing on first in marriage, he wanted to "steal second," Rose explodes with a female version of history, which foregrounds the consciously performative element in her gendered ghostliness:
I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom, and it didn’t take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn’t never gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy, I held you tighter. You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give you. And upstairs in that room . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn’t the finest man in the world. . . . Cause that’s the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don’t have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don’t even know nobody’s giving! (67-68, ellipses original)

Countering his baseball metaphors of competition with her sexual imagery of union, Rose, whose regenerative potential is underscored by Gabriel’s flower-bearing, recognizes that Troy has constructed her as a privatized, dependent, passive Other; despite her obvious sexuality and his use thereof, he ultimately forces her to personify only one aspect of the madonna/whore duality. Having attempted with him to displace that binarism within her own fenced-in nuclear family ("And you know I ain’t never wanted no half nothing in my family" [65]), Rose now opens her family but fences out Troy, who follows his ethic of responsibility in bringing home his illegitimate daughter in a scene which dramatizes Wilson’s original image for the play. Agreeing to rear this child, the woman relegated to the madonna role will now perform it with a vengeance: "From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (75). From this point, the perfect wife consciously constructs a "different understanding" of herself; the revised perception, in turn, revises her narrative so that she passes back and forth through Troy’s now-completed fence to direct her energies outward toward the Church as well as
toward her decided-upon daughter. Though the stage
directions initially posit the Church as a negative option
and Wilson expresses his own ambivalence toward religion,
his assertion that the black Church has been "our saving
grace" ("August Wilson," Savran 301) and the primary
theatrical experience for blacks suggests that Rose has
found a more viable site for her performance than gender-
divided marriage. 

By 1965 when Death comes through Troy's fence as he
swings his bat against it, all of his family seem to be
fenced in: Rose by the Church, Lyons by jail, Cory by the
Marines, and Gabriel by the hospital. Yet Troy's funeral
secures for each a temporary release which holds the
promise of lasting transformation; Rose brings coherence to
her consciously constructed rather than "naturally" nuclear
family by expanding Troy's masculinist code of economic
responsibility to Wilson's ethic of responsibility. She is
in the house with her stepson Lyons, who seems to have
evolved to a point of "trying to make some sense" (87) out
of life through his music, when Cory arrives. Exiled by
his father to "the other side of that fence" (83) for
taking an Oedipal stand against his parents six years ago,
Cory attempts to prove his autonomy by refusing to attend
Troy's funeral. Rose, however, disabuses him of such
notions, which systemically reproduce Troy's own negative
mimesis: "Disrespecting your Daddy ain't going to make you
a man, Cory" (89). In another of the long and pivotal
speeches that Wilson gives to this ostensibly marginal

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character, Rose urges Cory toward acceptance of a mediated and decided, rather than fixated and discovered, identity: "You either got to grow into [Troy’s shadow] or cut it down to fit you. But’s that’s all you got to make life with" (90).

She also accepts responsibility for her own ghosting, resisting ressentiment and victimhood:

When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up . . . I didn’t know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn’t hardly tell which was which anymore. It was my choice. It was my life and I didn’t have to live it like that. But that’s what life offered me in the way of being a woman and I took it. (90)

Having haunted her own house, Rose does not disclaim Troy’s heritage of the past but sees it as opening the present and the future; conceiving of Time as irreversible, she, unlike Troy, can conceptualize the promise rather than the prison of the past. She tells Cory that Raynell is her blessing, a resurrection:11 "I’m gonna do her just like your Daddy did you . . . I’m gonna give her the best of what’s in me" (91, ellipsis original). Rose’s bequest is a disruption of the systemic order, a perturbation of the gendered, nuclear Family so that fences are permeated by a dissipative energy flow that rises from entropy to engage outside and inside, white and black, male and female, self and Other, life and death in a reciprocal dynamic.

When Cory, who decides to attend the funeral, and Raynell join in singing their father’s song from their
grandfather of the dog Blue now "treeing possums in the Promised Land" (92), Rose's children sing the possibility of transforming the future by redeeming rather than retrieving the past. It is Gabriel, however, who most dramatically sounds Rose and Wilson's call to transgress boundaries by assuming responsibility for one's own salvation. With a metal plate in his head from serving a country which racially marginalized him, Gabriel "believes with every fiber of his being that he is the Archangel Gabriel" (27). Though relegated even further to society's borders as a madman who chases hellhounds and waits for Judgement Day, Gabriel nonetheless assumes responsibility for himself, selling reject produce for quarters and moving out of Troy's house. Wilson, in fact, cites Gabriel as his "favorite character because he still wants to contribute and work" ("August Wilson," Savran 302). Gabriel's insider/outsider status undergirds the lives of all the family; though Troy attempted to fence in and fixate his masculine identity and his piece of America, the seed money for his dream came from a feminized (Br)other.

This fundamental instability is celebrated as Gabriel appears to help Troy at the threshold of earth and heaven by telling St. Peter to open the gates. When his old trumpet will not sound, the resolute Gabriel "( . . . begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual. . . . HE begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech."
HE finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God’s closet.) That’s the way that go!” (93). As the stage blackens on Gabriel’s performance from the “dark Continent” and textual pronouncement of an elsewhere, we are prodded to dwell there as well. Christianity’s trumpet having faltered, a wellspring of African ritual arises to complement it as wave to particle; thus does the parasite Other emerge as the complement rather than the opposition to the self. Wilson foresees, then, an evolution of person, of family, and of nation, wherein fences signify not boundaries but thresholds between irreducible but complementary realms: African and American, black and white, female and male, child and adult, past and present, earth and heaven, performance and text. Fences’s liminal reality and realism urge us to forego our fictions of a stable stance and to straddle with Rose and Gabriel the fences.

Fences transmogrify into an "old upright piano" dominating the setting of 1990’s The Piano Lesson. The title having come from a Romare Bearden painting, Wilson’s initial question for the play was “Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one’s past?” (“August Wilson,” Savran 293-94). With his implicit answer a "No," Wilson intended for a "woman character as large as Troy" to embody his idea; ultimately, the central issue evolved into "How do you use your legacy?" and the woman character into one "not as large as I intended" (“August Wilson,” Savran 294). Given the defensible tendency to focus on same-sex
characters, Berniece emerges as the most crucial, if not the "largest," character in The Piano Lesson in terms of that transformative ethic essential for both blacks and women which impelled Wilson to the theatre in the first place. It is Berniece who embodies the entropy of the American black family divided between South and North, past and present, and female and male as her house in a 1936 Northern city, presumably Pittsburgh, conveys a "lack of warmth and vigor" (n.p.). A thirty-five year old mother and maid, Berniece is "still in mourning" (3) for her husband, Crawley, killed by white law enforcement officials three years ago in the South; she shares with her Uncle Doaker, a railroad cook, not only the house but a quality of being "retired from the world" (1).

Into this family-at-equilibrium enters Boy Willie, Berniece's younger brother, who is determined to wake up, literally and figuratively, his sister (upstairs off-stage like so many of her theatrical foremothers) with what she disparages as his "noise" (4). From the South, Boy Willie brings the news that James Sutter, owner of the land on which the Charles family was enslaved, was found dead in his well. He has also brought, with his friend Lymon, a truckload of watermelons to sell, the profits, combined with his savings, to go toward the $2000 purchase price of Sutter's last one hundred acres. The remainder Boy Willie intends to accrue from his half of the sale price on the family piano, which Berniece never even plays, though she does have her eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha, taking
lessons. The value of the piano comes from the fact that, on its legs, "carved in the manner of African sculpture are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art" (n.p.).

Insisting that Berniece will never sell the piano because "She say it got blood on it" (10), Doaker relates its history to Lymon. As a birthday present for his wife, Robert Sutter bought the piano for the price of one-and-a-half slaves—the great-grandmother of Berniece, her namesake, and Boy Willie, plus her son. When the white woman sank into lethargy over her missing "niggers" (43), Sutter ordered the great-grandfather, Boy Willie, to carve their images. In an excess which infuriated the slave owner, Boy Willie carved the entire family history into the piano; grandson Doaker recalls that, even after Abolition, his brother Boy Charles was obsessed with the piano, claiming that "as long as Sutter had it... he had us. Say we was still in slavery" (45, ellipsis original). On Independence Day in 1911, Boy Charles, who was the present-day Berniece and Boy Willie’s father, along with his brothers, took the piano from Sutter’s house. While his brothers transported the piano to family in the next county, Boy Charles tried to escape on the Yazoo Delta (Yellow Dog) train, which was set afire. According to Boy Willie, his father and the hobos who died with him return
for revenge as the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, pushing Sutter and his cohorts into wells.

Despite his insistence to a disbelieving Berniece on these avenging spirits, Boy Willie assumes a rational stance to argue for selling the piano: "I ain’t talking about selling my soul. I’m talking about trading that piece of wood for some land. Get something under your feet. Land the only thing God ain’t making no more of" (50). Seeing the piano as a material inheritance to be parlayed into greater material worth, Boy Willie, like Troy Maxson, fixates in on economic status as an equalizer: "Ain’t no mystery to life. You just got to go out and meet it square on. If you got a piece of land you’ll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man" (92). He chastises Berniece for wishing her daughter were a boy, withholding the piano’s history, and teaching that "colored folks is living at the bottom of life" (93). In resistance to this inscribed absence in a white world, Boy Willie refuses to lay low with His "nigger’s heart beating" (94) and exalts the power of perspective over reality: "If you believe that’s where you at then you gonna act that way. If you act that way then that’s where you gonna be" (92).

This empowering awareness of an observer-influenced reality reveals the argument over the piano to be an epistemological clash of gendered perspectives. Though Boy Willie rightfully asserts presence for blacks, he stubbornly perceives history as linear and Time as
reversible, the past simply a materialist basis for a determinable future in which he can fixate his identity. Though Berniece performs absence, she perceives history as nonlinear and irreversible, the past a series of bifurcations inexorably recycled and rendering time seemingly timeless but the future unpredictable. Berniece thus reflects the sensitivity of a system "near crystallized 'memories' of past bifurcations" (Briggs and Peat 145), here materialized in the piano. Irrationally blaming Boy Willie for her husband’s death over a piece of stolen wood and for Sutter’s murder, Berniece refuses to validate the piano as the means to retrieve the past and asserts the female version of its history in which the entropy barrier has proved time irreversible:

Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years... Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. "Play something for me, Berniece."... You always talking about your daddy but you ain’t never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years’ worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you’re all the same... All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. (52)

Rather than numbering among the "romantic idealists" (Shannon, "Good Christian’s" 139) who nostalgically embrace the past, Berniece emerges as an embryonic feminist, who bitterly reads in the piano historical male violence and female passivity. Remembering her widowed mother as a ghost whose "life went into that piano" (70) and who talked to pictures from the past, Berniece has consciously
resisted the mother’s legacy, forswearing the piano and the past: "I don’t play that piano cause I don’t want to wake them spirits" (70). A single mother in the present, however, Berniece is positioned as ghost or absence not only in the white world, where she invisibly cleans houses, but also in the black world, where the men appropriate her sexuality. As Boy Willie competes with Lymon to perpetuate the objectification of women ("My granddaddy used to take women on the backs of horses" [73]), Uncle Doaker comments that Berniece "need to go out here and let one of these fellows grab a whole handful of whatever she got. She act like it done got precious" (29). This commodification of female sexuality is echoed by Avery, the capitalist preacher and suitor, who needs "a woman that fits in my hand" and warns Berniece against "closing up" (66). Paralyzed by the past and marginalized by the present, Berniece finally explodes over the representation of womanhood as lack or supplement:

> You trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. . . . But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. "How Berniece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?" Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can’t be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me, Avery—you know—how much woman am I? (67)

In a consciously defensive stance against white economic control and black sexual control, Berniece has muted herself as she has muted the piano; rejecting the
gendered construction of her mother's life, she has nonetheless replicated its entropy in, as Avery says, "carrying Crawley's ghost" (67) while barring the ancestral spirits. Yet Berniece advises Lymon to emulate her and "get yourself ready to meet" (78) the right person. After Lymon counsels Berniece to be a "preacher's wife" (79) and not work, he kisses her, a kiss she returns before she "breaks the embrace" (80). Though critics perceive here a capitulation, Berniece actually controls this encounter with the naive Lymon, rejecting her construction as both a preacher's wife and one of "them women out there" (78). Neither Madonna nor whore, Berniece insists on a place between, an insistence which reflects her perception of a liminal realm. Though she ridicules Boy Willie's avenging Yellow Dog Ghosts, it is Berniece who asserts the presence of James Sutter's ghost in the house, which Doaker admits to encountering at the piano three weeks before. Boy Willie repeatedly claims, "Ain't no ghost in this house" (96), but his rejection of Berniece's reality is undercut by the actual "sound of SUTTER'S GHOST" (50).

Unable to budge the piano because of its weight, Boy Willie is no longer able to maintain his oppositional male perspective as Sutter's ghost engages him upstairs in "a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror" (106). Male violence is no more effective than Avery's Christian appeal to the "Father" in exorcising the force of the white power of the past from the family. It is Berniece who must release the family's ghosts and
redeem, not retrieve, the past to exorcise Sutter and transform the future:

( . . . It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents.) (106)

As Berniece performs her way into that liminal space between past and present, black and white, female and male, physical and spiritual, she accesses her female ancestors and her father to ask their help against a system of white male hegemony. They apparently arrive by train to vanquish Sutter: "The sound of a train approaching is heard. The noise upstairs subsides" (107). And as Doaker has noted, "The train don't never stop. It'll come back to get you" (19).

It is this train that Boy Willie exits to catch, leaving the piano with a warning for Berniece and her daughter to keep playing as "me and Sutter both liable to be back" (108). Like an irreversible yet recapitulant Time, which, as Berniece says, "just keep on. . . with or without you" (76), the train between South and North, past and present moves forward inexorably yet traverses continually the boundaries between these "two continents." Ghosts, affirming that butterfly effect linearity and causality, can be confronted only by entrance into their realm of uncertainty. Embraced by Maretha, Boy Willie receives from Berniece the same "Thank you" that she
accords to their ancestral spirits; thus does the family emerge as the site of conflicting but not oppositional discourses, a site where chaos complements order, indeed engenders it. Berniece’s playing on the piano performs into existence a liminal reality, its lesson dialogic rather than dialectic; as Wilson notes, "A European instrument is a perfect symbol for the combination of African and American cultures... It has black and white keys. And you need both keys to make music" ("August Wilson," Digaetani 284).

Both Berniece and Gabriel’s music, then, resonates not with the harmony of synthesis and assimilation but with the richness of differences and complementarity. In subverting American classical realism with African ritual, Wilson’s drama returns to theatre’s original communal function. As Rose and Berniece’s families rise from entropy to a new order, so Wilson’s American can rise from the current stasis of polarization to the energy flow of multiplicity. In a land which embraces conflicting histories and no longer requires all to melt into a white male pot, fences can be broken so that pianos will be played.

DONNY’S CRYPT IN THE CRYPTOGRAM

As if to validate my view of the American dramatic legacy as an inevitable but defensible domestic realism and thus to provide a "dramatic" note on which to conclude, David Mamet in 1995 turned from his usual format to family drama with The Cryptogram. This shift, like Shepard’s
nearly two decades earlier, underscores the magnetic force of the form since the increasing touting of Mamet as the most significant of contemporary American playwrights has stemmed precisely from his resistance to the American canonical drama's "(over)reliance on the primal family unit usually embittered and embattled within the living room" (Roudane 6). Mamet ventured beyond this putative "narrowness of play space" (Roudane 7) to urban settings, such as the junkshop of American Buffalo (1975) or the real-estate office of Glengarry Glen Ross (1984). Having come to prominence in his native Chicago, Mamet represents to Bigsby "the most impressive" (Beyond Broadway 251) of the regional playwrights who signalled the 1970s' movement away from a centralized theatre.

Bigsby regards Mamet as successor to the dethroned Albee and thus a "poet of loss" (252) whose subject is the dissolution of the American Dream. Though Albee, a product of the Kennedy years, more obviously conveys a "persistence of values" (253) at least in his early works, Mamet, a product of the post-Watergate '70s, also conveys an ethical conviction, a fact which Bigsby is not the only critic to recognize. And now that Mamet, too, has valorized the tradition of American domestic drama, the subversive strain which constitutes its true legacy becomes still more compelling. Applying to the family his dramaturgical pattern of entropic conditions perturbed to the point of engendering a new order, Mamet enriches the American theatre's chaos dynamic (despite disparate connotations of
equilibrium): "All plays are about decay. They are about the ends of a situation which has achieved itself fully, and the inevitable disorder which ensues until equilibrium is again established. . . . That is why theatre has always been essential to human psychic equilibrium" (Writing 111).

Also essential to this psychic equilibrium is the construct of family and Mamet’s shift from workplace to living room is neither so surprising nor disappointing as critics find it; it implies a recognition of the mythologized Family as a business—a hierarchical system which actually precedes and provides a prototype for capitalist structures. Mamet sees the economic system as an "outgrowth of the intrinsic soul of a culture" ("David Mamet" 141) and hence not readily transformed. Since business is "what America is about" ("David Mamet" 137) and the subtext of business is always power, Mamet predicts an ever-worsening polarization in a country which has always constituted his subject. In his attempt to expose the "national unconscious" (qtd. in Bigsby, Beyond Broadway 274), Mamet dramatizes our sanctified separation of the personal and the professional, which permits the exoneration of criminality or even violence in the name of business. In this corrosive, "hierarchical business system," it is legitimate for "those in power . . . to act unethically" ("An Interview," Roudane 74). Cherished All-American values of individualism, self-reliance, and persistence are summoned to the service of success, "That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing" ("An
Interview," Roudane 74), which comes only at the expense of another (or created Other). Mamet declares his main project to be the demystification of the American dream, a dead end of "basically raping and pillage" (qtd. in Savran 133); this implicit recognition of the gendered nature of power permeates his conversation and his plays: "American capitalism comes down to one thing. . . . The operative axiom is 'Hurrah for me and fuck you.' Anything else is a lie" (qtd. in Dean 190).42

In his focus on this "fucking," whose literal as well as figurative manifestation is encapsulated in the family, Mamet has thus always tacitly conflated the business and familial systems, the public and private realms, exposing a landscape of spiritual bankruptcy as the illusionary borders between the two dissolve. In the grip of a "terrorism" as much ontological as it is commercial (Savran 134), Mamet’s characters fight for a piece of a disintegrated dream, struggling hopelessly to define themselves by performing popularized American roles. "Entropic figures" (Bigsby, Beyond Broadway 253), they are confined by spaces emptied of meaning, an emptiness they attempt to fill with a diarrhetic language that only echoes and perpetuates the hollowness of the mediatized myths which have paralyzed them. Having internalized a "fuck you" ethic, Mamet’s characters unleash disjointed fragments, sound-bites which aim not to communicate but to dominate, "not to speak the desire but to speak that which is most likely to bring about the desire" ("David Mamet"
The desire is for place, for power, for an identity defined against a vanquished Other; ironically, the words of these competitors only circumscribe them, reflecting Mamet's perception of subjectivity as mediated by language: "'Our rhythms describe our actions--no, our rhythms prescribe our actions. I'm fascinated by the way, the way the language we use, its rhythms, actually determines the way we behave, rather than the other way around'" (qtd. in Wetzsteon 39, emphasis original).

In Mamet's drama, then, people are their language--banal, fragmented, contradictory, disjointed, emptied of communicative value in a world where value lies only in perceived power. The often-levelled charge that Mamet's plays are plotless misses the point that the plot is the very plotlessness of too many American lives that emulate the vacuity of a fast-paced but inconsequential sit-com. The "action" of a Mamet play reverberates in the tension beneath the words, which fail to connect the characters to each other and to their world: "What I write about is what I think is missing from our society. And that's communication on a basic level" (qtd. in Dean 33). Pushed to the fringes of society, Mamet's characters often channel their desperation into what becomes a litany of obscenities, the incantatory rhythms of which exceed an accurate rendering of urban speech patterns. Critics have focused attention on the language of "our foremost warrior-philologist" (Savran 132), but too few have perceived that "Mamet-speak" (Kroll 72) is a language attenuated to the
point of implosion as are its speakers as are their theatricalized worlds." Mamet insists that his dialogue is "not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language... The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic" ("An Interview," Roudane 76).

As with the language, so with the dramatic form as Mamet’s acclaimed realism cracks under its own excess. Admittedly, Mamet insists on theatre as "story-telling" ("An Interview," Roudane 77), dismissing his earlier "episodic glimpses" ("Interview," Harriott 78) as immature, and on the validity of the well-made play as the structure which imitates human perception’s ordering of experience into a beginning, middle, and end. It is, however, the illusory nature of perception itself, hence of causality and classical realism, which constitutes his subject. His concern ultimately more epistemological than social, Mamet examines not the reality but "the fiction which is America" (Bigsby, Beyond Broadway 275). The country and its Dream are thus revealed as purely perceptual, and the power struggles which characterize contemporary relationships emerge as performances to enthrone one version of reality. As Bigsby notes, Mamet’s characters "may seek to impose a simple realism on events, ... but it is not a realism which he is willing to endorse." (Beyond Broadway 288).

In Mamet’s "renovated realism" (Bigsby, Beyond Broadway 266), the mediation of subjectivity by language, the complication of causality by chaos, and the undermining
of surface clutter by subterranean emptiness creates always a tension. The playwright himself states that his "true metier lies somewhere in between" ("David Mamet" 133) the esoteric and the realistic drama and that neither form alone can release or enlighten ("Writing" 111). The more his characters push to define their place in an ordered, hierarchical universe, the more their realms are exposed as fictional and entropic; only in abandoning the quest for a fixated identity and reality can we evacuate the dry-rotted American dream and find solution, not resolution, in a realm that straddles conscious/unconscious boundaries:

The solution—which is to say solution which will enable us to function happily in the midst of rational uncertainty to a personal and seemingly unresolvable psychological problem—is the dream; the solution to a seemingly unresolvable social (ethic) problem is the drama (poem). For the sine qua non of both the dream and the drama is the suspension of rational restrictions in aid of happiness. (Writing 9)

The liminality of Mamet's realism extricates it from the causal logic of classical realism and signals a fissure in dominant ideology. Despite the seeming hopelessness in his drama, Mamet perceives possibilities for both the country and its theatre, assured that the "reawakening of the poetic drama... is our national wish to remember our dreams" (Writing 11) in order, a la Freud, to forget. On the dissolving border between order and chaos, at the point of "rational uncertainty" where binarism implodes, Mamet posits ethical possibility: "the theatre affords an opportunity uniquely suited for communicating and inspiring ethical behavior... In a morally bankrupt time we can
help to change the habit of coercive and frightened action
and substitute for it the habit of trust, self-reliance,
and cooperation" (Writing 26-27).

The most obvious redemptive channel is art as the
poetic rhythms of Mamet's language form an order out of
linguistic and spiritual chaos. There is also the plays' humor, which undercuts the characters' tragic perversion of values to their own solipsistic ends. But, beyond these formal signs, there emanates from Mamet's stage that subversive and transformative strain which defines the legacy of American liminal realism. While eschewing the naturalism associated with Stanislavsky, Mamet derives from him instead a theatrical purpose: "to bring to the stage the life of the human soul so that the community can participate therein" ("Celebrating" 91). This purpose even contemporary theatre can achieve if it will address directly, as did Tennessee Williams, "that which we desire most, which is love and a sense of belonging" (Writing 36). Mamet's emphasis on the communal yearnings of the soul and the communal function of theatre permeates his theatre's metadramatic aspects as his characters inhabit a stage where their attempt to perform themselves into being against an Other precludes rather than encourages community. This perversion of the theatrical impulse taints any system which resorts to hierarchy for its order: "In the family, as in the theater [sic], the urge to control only benefits the controller. Blind obedience saves him the onerous duty of examining his
preconceptions, his own wisdom, and, finally, his own worth" (Writing 32, emphasis original).

Mamet’s linking of the economic, theatrical, and familial systems explains the lure of domestic drama as an examination of the originary site of hierarchical binarism, a gendering which denies communal possibilities. To posit in Mamet a feminist impulse surpasses my previous heresies as his dramaturgy is even more male than Shepard’s. Women are not merely marginalized; they are excluded from most of his plays, including his major works. In American Buffalo, for example, the oft-mentioned Ruth and Grace remain "'ghosts’" (Zeifman 126), who, like those in Glengarry, "haunt the margins of the text but never break through to the stage. Their presence is evoked only metonymically, as terms of abuse, or else in the form of ‘spirits’ whose essence threatens male values" (Zeifman 132). What is on stage, according to Zeifman, is the "'Phallus in Wonderland’" (125), a homosocial realm of American business, where homophobia and misogyny collude. Exonerating Mamet from his characters’ ignorance, Zeifman nonetheless finds suspect the essentialism of Woman as positive value; Almansi more harshly claims that in Mamet’s dramaturgy:

The subject of [males’] complaints is often a woman, or that more forward, buxom, and aggressive woman, America, who has bestowed upon them a dream, the Great American Dream, only to prove a prick-teaser, or that other woman, more mammary, plump, and vigorous yet, Mother Nature, a female God, rancorous and vindictive, who fucks up every single thing and every single man. (193)
The plays invariably give rise to a conflation of Mamet with his characters, notably Lakeboat's Stan, who defines women as "Soft things with a hole in the middle" (59). Yet Mamet, who persistently rails against hierarchy, notes that a byproduct of the failed American dream is that "the people it has sustained--the white males--are going nuts" ("David Mamet" 134) and acknowledges rampant misogyny: "But if you look around the United States of America you will see that we do have a certain amount of misogynistic men. For example, all of them" ("Interview," Harriott 84). As with Shepard's drama, the exposure of the emptiness, impotence, and violence of the male realm does not suffice to counter charges of a re-inscription of the hegemony of that realm. But also as with Shepard, albeit even more ambivalently and imperceptibly, Mamet evinces a transgressive and transformative impulse. And again it is the "fucked," feminized Others at the margins of world and stage who signal that impulse.

The Cyptogram finally brings to center stage both the margins and the ghosts who inhabit them. In a parodic Oedipal triangle, the characters here are all feminized Others--a child, a mother, a gay man--in a "Waiting for Daddy" scenario. As Mamet again evokes a Beckettian focus on consciousness in an entropic, hermetic landscape, he belies the "narrowness" of the domestic play space, exposing the Family as a system producing and reproducing the hierarchical polarization of the economic system. The play strikes at the rotten core of the American Dream and

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its epistemological roots in a teleology of self-definition against a (M)other. The stage set, "Donny's living room in 1959," centers the wife-mother, who at this time would indeed have been confined to the private realm; in fact, recalling Linda Loman and her like, Donny is off-stage when the play opens and perceived initially as a disembodied voice. The on-stage position is occupied by Del, the "seeming paterfamilias" (Simon 76), who is not only not the father but presumably not ever to be one since he is later revealed to be gay.

Though in 1959 the homosexual was as closeted as the housewife-mother was privatized, Del assumes with Donny's son, who descends from upstairs in his pajamas, a patriarchal stance in dealing with the child's insomnia—those "Issues of sleep" (3). Ten-year-old John is the only character to use the stairs, which in production "dominate the static, neutral set" (McCue 21) and suggest a tension, not only in the family between the child's world upstairs and the adult world downstairs but also in consciousness between the flux above and the stasis below. The set and the characters' initial positioning immediately signal a family system approaching a bifurcation point, being forced to abandon the illusion of stability so calcified in the 1950s' apogee of Family as a simple, static, and closed system. The opening line of the play, John's "I couldn't find 'em" (1), refers literally to his slippers but figuratively to those referents which will give meaning to his world and fixity to his familial
identity. His repeated descents to seek explanation from the adults serve only to reveal that they, too, suffer the anxiety of an uncertain reality since their answers are relentlessly cryptic and contradictory.

As the three characters provide a parodic representation of Family, the hierarchized myth itself emerges as a coded representation designed to engender and gender identity. For these, the requisite Others in such a system, identity as well as reality remains a "cryptogram"—"something written in code or cipher." The latter term, referring to "the mathematical symbol (0) denoting absence of quantity" or "a person or thing without influence or value," describes precisely the three characters on Mamet’s stage. As the father, Robert, is an absent presence who dominates this space, his wife, his son, and his friend are present absences who seek definition through him. Their cryptic language is a code, as packed as John’s slippers, of which Del says, "I wondered that you’d take them with" (2). Desiring above all full presence, the three engage in a three-act conversation which belies the adult pretense of communication and truth in its pauses, ellipses, fragments, arbitrary emphases, and non-sequiturs. The physical absence of the father in a phallogocentric culture reveals each of these parasites as psychic absences, a fact which the child persistently underscores.

Expecting "to go in the Woods...?" (4, ellipses and emphasis original) the next day with his father, John undercuts Del’s rationale that excitement is the "natural"
cause of his insomnia and insistently questions: "Why isn't he home?" (5). Ignoring Del's "We don't know" (5), John resists his belatedly appearing mother's demand that he sleep and asks again his father's whereabouts. Donny's perfunctory and contradictory "I don't know. Yes, I do, yes. He's at the Office. And he'll be home soon" (11) apparently repeats a nightly ritual, the mystically capitalized Office in the male public realm failing to squelch the child's yearning.

John's fixation on objects (to the point that Simon terms the play's form "dramatic fetishism" [79]) signals a desperation for referents of a stable, objective reality in which presence can be secured. Sent by Donny to "close up the attic" (12), to "Neaten" it after her "'rummaging'" (13) as a cure for his insomnia, John descends again to inquire about the proper coat and the green fishing line for the camping trip. Having agreed to open the Tackle box "Because that's how we'll know" (21), John descends a third time wrapped in a stadium blanket, which he is convinced that he tore in trying to open the box. Unpersuaded by Donny's advice to "absolve yourself" (30) since the blanket was torn long ago, John awaits the "Third Misfortune" dictated by the Wizard in a book. Listing the teapot his mother broke in the kitchen as the first, John stubbornly insists on the torn blanket as the second misfortune since "I thought I tore it now" (30, emphasis original). Though Del refutes this equation of perception with reality, it is he who instructs John in a game of observation to play with
his father on the trip. John points out they should not choose the pond to test their observation "Because it's changing" (36), but his attempt to fixate reality is as feeble as the mother's assurances about the father's coming home: "He'll be here when he gets here, I think" (38). When John awakens tormented from a brief nap, he persists in his questions about father and blanket but subverts his own insistence on an objective reality by confessing to listening, on the border of waking and sleeping, to imaginary voices.

Practicing "The Game" of observing some new surprising object, John picks up from the mantelpiece as he ascends the stairs a letter that confirms an observer-influenced reality and his prescience of third misfortunes. A note to Donny that "My husband's leaving me" (51), this object verifies the tear in the fabric of the family that has so terrified the hypersensitive child. By the next night, the sleepless John has lost hope for certainty, opening Act II with a tormented reflection to his mother that underscores the epistemological focus of the play:

We don't know what's real. And all we do is say things. (Pause.) Where do we get them from? And, or that things, go on forever. (Pause.) Or that we're born. Or that dead people moan. Or that, or that there's hell. And maybe we are there. Maybe there are people who've been there. Or, or else why should we think it? That's what I don't know. And maybe everything is true. Maybe it's true that I'm sitting here. (54, emphasis original)

Feeling himself like an outsider who provokes suspicion by his "great longing to belong," Mamet shares John's torment: "But the world of the outsider . . . is based on
observation. The habit of constant acute awareness can be seen in animals with no recourse... It is the habit of the young child. Historically, it is the habit of the Jew" (Writing 73, emphasis original).

It is also, of course, the habit of the homosexual and the woman, also scripted in a masculinist hegemony as sexual and social outsiders. Del’s stance as logician, a detective of truth as in his assertion of a "'clue'" (39) to John’s problem, is as specious as his posture as the patriarch. Male logic and power are purely performative, belied by Del’s frustration over a pre-War photograph, which Donny has retrieved from the attic. Advising John on an object for the observation game, Del proceeds to undermine his own premise: "Something that doesn’t change. (Of photo.) Who, who, what is this?" (36, emphasis original). Unable to remember the occasion itself or the creation of its representation, Del puzzles over this lost history, himself in Robert’s shirt for reasons as obscure as the identity of the photographer. Though he finally fixates on the latter mystery as the reason for his loss of memory, there is perhaps another as Donny apologetically recalls making love with Robert under a blanket, oblivious to Del’s presence: "But I wondered. Did you hear us; and, if you did. If it upset you. (Pause.)" (42, emphasis original).

Pushed to the borders in a heterosexual realm, Del cannot locate himself in their history since his own narrative has been suppressed. The perennial family friend

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who undertakes a futile search for the missing father, Del returns to comfort Donny but stumbles in his toast to friendship, which he has hitherto proclaimed as one of life's constants. After offering such substitutes for the word "unified" as "be. be. be. be-nighted" or "be-trothed," Del concludes: "May the Spirit of Friendship . . . (Pause.) oh, the hell with it . . . . Bec, because I swear, because I think there's just too much" (61, emphasis original). Del's trouble with the "be's" of causality and being undermine his performance of an inscribed male epistemology: "Then many times the answer comes. In reaching out. Or, do you know what? In getting drunk. . . . Be. Because, you know? Then you forget. (Pause.) And I don't give a damn. (Pause.) In this shithole" (62, emphasis original).

This abnegation of even illusory control reflects Del's position as an excluded, disempowered Other, who apparently has shared Donny's desire for Robert. Having denied to Donny that he knew of Robert's plan to leave her though he must have planted the letter, Del is trapped in his lie by another of the play's objects, a German pilot's knife which Robert had supposedly given him on a camping trip and which he had offered to John to cut the twine on the tackle box. Although she has interpreted the "the Odd Gesture" (64) of the knife-giving as Robert's severing his ties since that is the specific "Meaning" (64) of a pilot/parachutist's knife, Donny belies this "Meaning" with the realization that she saw the knife in the attic while
putting away Robert's camping things. To her challenge of inconsistency, Del first feebly replies, "There must be two knives." (70) and then concedes, "It's a mystery to me" (71). When Donny directly accuses him of lying about going camping at all, Del flounders again on his favored shoals of logic and causality:

DEL: Be, because, be... what are you saying to me? Am, am I to be accused of this!
DONNY: Of what?
DEL: Well, that's my point. (72, emphasis original)

As to why he was given the knife, Del accuses Donny of wanting to "know... So you could say, 'Old Del, who we thought was so Loyal'... I know what you mean. Believe me" (73, emphasis original) This meaningless of meaning reveals the treachery of that objective reality which Del has postulated to John, as the knife exposes the treachery in Del’s bestowing the Wizard’s "blessings on your House" (14), a blessing which the mother has tellingly forgotten. Unable to grant to the child that stable place which he himself has never found, Del confronts Donny with not only his betrayal but also her family’s complicity in his exclusion: "What do you think? He’d trapse off in the wilds... with me...? To talk about life? Are you stupid? Are you blind? He wouldn’t spend a moment with me. Some poor geek... 'Here’s my Old Friend Del... ’" (74, emphasis, ellipses original). Having spent the week in his library "nook" in fishing clothes, Del confesses to Donny that he lent Robert his room to be with a woman, "the only bad thing I have ever done to you" (74).
Del's confession, however, does not constitute the moment of truth of Oedipal narrative nor does the play provide classical realism's assurance of that objective reality which its characters have sought in totemic objects and words. Del's attempts at expiation underscore this point as he brings for John the father's knife and for Donny a copy of the Wizard's book, which he had secretly kept for years. Donny, however, decimates the significance of his offerings as she informs Del that the precious knife can hardly be "a 'combat' trophy" (84) since Robert was a flier: "Could he get it in the Air? You 'fairy'? Could he capture the knife from the other man in the Air? You fool" (86). Convinced that Donny has told of the knife's purchase on a London street just to hurt him, Del is overcome by the betrayal even of objects: "Excuse me, that the souvenir that he gave me, as a War Memento, with 'associations,' that it had no meaning for him. And what would I know about the war? I live in a Hotel. (Pause.)" (87, emphasis original). The seeming non-sequitur here signals Del's position outside of history with its linear, closed narrative and outside of homes with their linear, closed nucleus. Rejecting Donny's disclaimer of intentional hurt, Del inveighs against his own failure, in keeping her book, to achieve the freedom of "truth"; she again devalues his object of propitiation in pointing out that the returned book is obviously his copy and his deception in this case only perceptual.
Mamet thus dramatizes his conviction that "to discover a truth is to have it come out of your own mind. It's not an objective reality. . . . It's a matter of perception" ("Two Gentlemen" 12). His focus on perception permeates all his dramas, since he sees "the theory of true action" ("Interview," Harriott 93) of both Aristotle and Stanislavsky as based on the theory of human perception, which will connect random elements placed in the same frame. The dramatic event to Mamet is this through-action, the quest of the protagonist for a single goal, but the protagonist may be split as in a dream and the goal be unrealizable. Once again in The Cryptogram, the quest is for the Truth posited by classical realism; in subverting the form, the play subverts the ideology as the protagonist, here split into three, finds only an encrypted reality and truth. And, finally, it is the mother among these Others, who most evokes a consciousness of the performative nature of the quest, the illusory nature of linearity and meaning, and the observer-influenced nature of reality. As Act I is arguable John's and Act II Del's, so Act III is arguably Donny's.

Coded as family center, Donny is obviously off-center as she is off-stage at play's beginning when she breaks a teapot and twice asserts "I'm alright . . ." (7). Hardly "alright," this server of tea is expected to fill the emptiness and bestow presence to the other two present absences, to make the males "alright," a term that becomes a leitmotif in the play uttered some fifty times. But just
as Donny had originally resisted her husband's theory of "'let the child cry'" (39) to cure John's insomnia, so she resists Del's logical explanations, insisting that "It's all such a mystery. . . . All our good intentions . . . ." (21, ellipsis original). Confronted with a child desperate for a stability that she cannot grant, this exhausted mother haunts the narrative of the first two acts with her perception that meaning is encrypted. Engaging in "A fantasy of rest" (24), Donny yearns to be a monk who sits and gazes "Because sometimes it seems the older I get, the less that I know" (23). Expecting the week-end to rest when John is camping with his father, she is nonetheless "consumed with guilt" (40), conflicted in that excruciating way which most mothers will recognize. Even when deserted and crying herself, Donny must comfort John, who has imagined phantom voices and a candle in his room and comes downstairs to write, "'I'm perfectly alone'" (76). In the face of this mantra intended for reassurance but terrifying in its implications for both of them, the mother "cradles" the child, although she cannot assure him that he "was right" (76).

As they prepare to move a month later in Act III, Donny again answers "I don't know" (78) to John's question as to whether she ever wishes to die and attempts to prepare her child for the uncertainty of existence: "John: Things occur. In our lives. And the meaning of them . . . the meaning of them . . . is not clear. . . . But we assume they have a meaning. We must. And we don't know
what it is" (79, emphasis original). Displaced physically and psychically by her husband’s always defining, now actual absence, this single mother, performing a role not even verified by this term in the ’50s, is left with a child yearning for both a father, who has yet to appear, and for the putative stability of the family, which she is coded to provide. Though longing to succor this son forced from the mythic innocence of childhood and dwelling on death, Donny cannot re-sanctify the Family with its stable hierarchies and identities:

What do you want me to do? John? I am no God. I don’t control the World. If you could think what it is I could do for you. . . . John, everyone has a story. Did you know that? In their lives. This is yours. . . . And finally . . . finally . . . you are going to have to learn how you will deal with it. You understand? I’m going to speak to you as an adult: At some point . . . At some point, we have to learn to face ourselves. . . . (80, some ellipses original)

Despite reviewers’ concurrence that John is "stonewalled" (Lahr 71) by his mother, I see Donny as preparing John to navigate the inevitability of chaos and to create his own narrative as a decentered subject.

Accordingly, Donny rejects Del’s narrative of happiness through the forgiveness of "Some poor Queen" (94). Refusing the sentimental equation of womanhood and sacrifice, this (M)other realizes that not only the dominant male but also this othered male have defined themselves against her and betrayed her: "No, look here: don’t tell me I’m going to make a sacrifice for you, and it’s for my own good. Do you see? Because every man I
ever met in this shithole . . . Don’t you dare come in my house and do that. You faggot" (94). Donny’s language signals her transgression of mythic mother/monster boundaries as her name signals that transgression of male/female boundaries necessitated by her mother/father position. Erased as object by not only husband but friend and son, Donny struggles for an identity through "Othering" the "faggot," who, himself straddling prescribed male/female boundaries, retaliates with the claim that the pattern of male betrayal is not "chance" or "mystery" but something "you provoke" (94). Into this (M)other-blaming scenario enters John, who has promised to stay upstairs if allowed to open the box containing the blanket. Exasperated at yet another betrayal, Donny eventually concedes that he may take a kitchen knife to cut the twine on the box.

But when an angry John refuses to say goodnight to Del, Donny finally insists that "No. It isn’t alright" (99). Having performed the "alrightness" of order and stability for the sake of her child, the depleted mother finally confronts the son, whose prescribed Oedipal scenario is to script her as Other: "What must I do that you treat me like an animal? . . . Don’t stand there so innocently. I’ve asked you a question. Do you want me to go mad? . . . Can’t you see that I need comfort? Are you blind?" (99). Though Lahr, I suspect, reflects the audience in disparaging Donny’s "aria of victimization" and perceiving her outburst as "emotional abuse" (73), I
attribute such a reaction not only to an inevitable sympathy for the child but also to the binary code of mother or monster. Devastated by seemingly arbitrary betrayals, the mother is nonetheless expected to signify the nurturance of Woman and to ensure presence by her absence. Deprived of the Oedipally requisite identification with the father but possessing a feminine Other as negative mimesis, John indeed is blind to his mother (recalling Donny's self-confessed blindness to the homosexual). It is a blindness which has driven many mothers to the threshold of madness and monsterhood. Experiencing the self becoming Other in a child, the mother is ultimately positioned in a binary logic as a castrated object-other by the very agent of her own transformation beyond this perceptual limit.

Donny, then, can only concur with John when he claims to hear voices calling to him, voices which he has previously associated with her calling from the dead. Her final "Yes I'm sure they are" (100) confirms her recognition that she is to her son, as to all the male world, the disembodied voice in the kitchen—an absence against which to assert presence, a death against which to assert life. Unprotesting when Del again assumes the patriarchal role, giving the boy the father's instrument of castration ("Take the knife and go" [101]), the mother abandons her previous "What would your father say?" (27) role. She leaves unanswered John and the play's final
appeal—an appeal, of course, to her: "They're calling my name. (Pause.) Mother. They're calling my name" (101).

The father's phony knife having castrated all of them into feminized Others, it now becomes a means of suicide for the fatherless, "unmanned" child with presumably no access to manhood. Though reviewers unanimously attach this closure to the play, the curtain falls with John poised on the stair landing, at the threshold between upstairs and down and life and death. Donny's silence, it seems to me, in a play in which silences speak, haunts the stage at the final moment, suggesting another narrative. Recognizing the death of John's childhood, which she was powerless to prevent, Donny removes herself as his defining Other, confirming her earlier lesson that "Finally, each of us... Is alone" (90, emphasis original). At the threshold of adolescence, John may use the knife on himself, finishing the job his father has begun, or on the box, retrieving the torn blanket and redeeming the past. Donny has instructed her child on dealing with his story, on constructing his narrative according to a meaning which can only be, but must be, assumed. Her refusal now to provide a voice to echo her child's internalized ones leaves him and the audience on the border between the hegemonic order that the hierarchical Family represents and the inevitable chaos that she perceives, between a stability desperately sought and an instability vainly denied.
Despite the bleakness of the play, this ending on the border represents an evolution from the negative entropy of the family living room, suggesting the possibility of a dissipative structure arising from the perturbation of the familial system. Forced out of the home, this family fluctuating in far-from-equilibrium conditions can evolve into a higher complexity than a gendered order. Oedipal narrative has been disrupted as the mother abdicates her object position within it, providing for her son instead the possibility of transformation through telling his own story. A feminist ethic, Donny's echoes Mamet's own: "It's not our job to change the world. It's our job to act according to precepts we perceive to be right" ("Two Gentlemen" 12) If these outsiders can break the chains of betrayal in ideology's perceptual prison and celebrate the performance of perception, they may perturb the order of masculinized hegemony with the chaos of feminized Otherness. As Mamet notes in his theatre-as-hierarchical-family metaphor, "in any situation of unhappy tyranny, the oppressed must free the oppressor" (Writing 33).

In transgressing and thus dissolving boundaries engendered within the Family, these border dwellers, urged by the (M)other of Others, can negotiate, if not decipher, the cryptogram of reality and, in changing themselves, may indeed change the world. And in transgressing and thus dissolving boundaries drawn by classical dynamics and classical realism, Mamet sounds "the essential celebratory element of theatre. That what we celebrate with the
audience is the capacity for strife, the capacity for revelation, and the capacity for self-knowledge" ("Celebrating" 93). It is a note which has reverberated in the legacy of American drama—in the turbulence of its families and in the liminalities of its realism. It celebrates the the effect of the butterfly, the capacity of the ghost-monsters to speak their "private silence," to make entropy positive, and to translate coded feminization into transformative feminism.

NOTES

1 See Chapter One for a more detailed analysis of this shift.

2 See, for example, Harriet Kriegel’s Women in Drama, Honor Moore’s The New Women’s Theatre, Woodie King and Ron Milner’s Black Drama Anthology, and Ed Bullins’s New Plays for the Black Theatre.


4 Norman points out the set-up for attack that success can represent to all playwrights, speaking of a luncheon honoring Pulitzer Prize winners: "There were 23 of us on the platform, going back to Charles Gordone, who wrote No Place to Be Somebody. Not one person on that podium was currently working on a play. Not one" ("Interview" 154).

5 Linda Kintz offers an excellent materialist analysis of Thelma and Jessie as lower-middle-class women, whose lives revolve around housework and domesticity, "a relatively invisible group" (195) performing "invisible (present but absent) labor" (200) and often lost to feminism.

6 Reared herself in a working-class Kentucky household by a religious fundamentalist mother, Norman describes the extreme isolation of her childhood as a defining characteristic ("Marsha Norman," Savran 181).

7 According to Kintz, Jessie and her mother are too ugly, old, and uneducated to assert their subjectivity through the masquerade or mimicry of female imagery (208-09).
For detailed analyses of the process of gendering for the female and the function of the mother-daughter relationship within it, see Browder, Hart, Spencer, and Kintz.

The lure of the quest narrative is reflected even in feminist criticism. Sally Browder insists that the play is about "the elusiveness of autonomy" (110) and the "ominous possibility that the daughter may fail to develop a sense of self outside of relationships" (111); Lynda Hart, that Jessie, who rejects food, "hungers for freedom and autonomy" (75); and Jenny Spencer, that Jessie needs "to fix, to determine her identity" (368).

Kintz points out that "The brother's gaze is the eye of the son, the perspective from which judgements are made that mark the different paths sons and daughters take if Oedipus has his way" (223).

Keyssar insists that "off-stage suicide does not transform society. It denies it" (166); Hart sees the suicide as "a final choice that leaves no apparent legacy for change" (78); and Spencer concludes that the catharsis of this "profoundly naturalistic play" offers no social reference for the contradictory condition of women and thus only reintegrates "the spectator into her place within the dominant order, without challenging in a fundamental way the prevalent image of women in society" (374).

Reflecting the complexity of the issue of realism, Howe in 1986 introduced her mentor, Ionesco, as not an absurdist but "the ultimate realist" (qtd. in Lamont 27).

In considering the mainstream/avant garde dilemma of the woman playwright, Jan Stuart notes that Howe's "breezy, comparatively apolitical plays" (11) have captured a wide audience while Maria Irene Fornes's have not. Lamont's identification of Howe's "secret surrealism" reflects the necessity of going undercover, though I find that attribution to European sires undercuts the assertion of Howe's feminist subversiveness: "Back in the U.S., she carried these foetuses within her womb for a long while, like a female elephant, but when they saw the light they resembled their American mother in her fundamental optimism, antic self-derision, womanly warmth, playfulness" (35).

Insisting that her female characters are not anorexic, just neurotic, Howe acknowledges that food "is a neurosis of mine" ("Tina Howe" 231, emphasis original).

To Judith Barlow, Howe expresses a sense of betrayal of her mentors, Beckett and Ionesco: "I started out writing more daring plays, but I was so punished for it
that I’ve sort of backed off as a reflex" ("An Interview" 171).

16 In noting the "extravagance" of her settings, Howe describes this one as "a surreal Beacon Hill townhouse" (Preface n.p.).

17 Quincy Howe, himself son of a Pulitzer-Prize winning writer, was an eminent radio and television newscaster. Howe comments: "My family was highly intelligent, so I was the black sheep. All the Howe men went to Harvard. So I took the territory that was left—being ridiculous . . . . My biggest neurosis is insecurity" ("Tina Howe" 226).

18 Stallybrass and White’s analysis of post-Restoration bourgeois ideology serves to confirm the politicized undercurrent of Howe’s comedy: "Manners, regulations of the body, thus become the site of a profound interconnection of ideology and subjectivity, a zone of transcoding at once astonishingly trivial and microscopically important" (89). For a feminist analysis of Howe’s connection of food and subjectivity, see Nancy Backes.

19 Jessica Benjamin regards the "missing father" as key to split subjectivity and female idealization of male desires. This description fits all of the fathers of daughters in Howe’s plays as well as that of Jessie Cates in ‘night, Mother.

20 Mag’s vision reflects Howe’s own ambivalence toward her mother and women:

I’ve always perceived women as being phenomenally powerful creatures, much more powerful than men. I’ve always had that view, probably because my mother towered a good foot above my father in size and in volume, and the women in my family have been very strong. . . . I’ve always been somewhat frightened of women and frightened of the woman in myself. As much as women are creators and nurturers, I’ve also seen them as being destroyers. ("An Interview" 172)

21 Frank Rich’s enthusiastic review of the play notes that audience sympathy also shifts in Act II toward Fanny, who emerges as lonely and burdened beneath her domineering exterior.

22 Though Nadel describes Wilson as "the most lauded American playwright of the 1980s" (Introduction 1), Modern Drama’s March 1993 issue on contemporary drama includes no articles on Wilson’s plays.
Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh in 1968 but says that he lacked an ear for dialogue (Chip Brown 122).

Hearing Bessie Smith's "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Jelly Roll Like Mine" on a 78 record in the 1960s jolted Wilson into a new perspective of himself as a "conduit of antecedents" and of Black Americans as individuals with "a song" (qtd. in Staples 111). See Harrison for a relevant discussion of how "Wilson charts the social disruptions of the 'blues matrix' that lock his characters into a constant state of psychic and spiritual liminality as they struggle for existential definition" (299).

When Savran asked him directly about the connection between racial and sexual politics, Wilson elided the former to concentrate on America's image of the black male as irresponsible ("August Wilson" 298).

Harry Elam puts Wilson in the tradition of "male gaze" theatre: "He presents independent women who assert feminist positions, but who, either through their own volition or as the result of external social pressures, ultimately confirm to traditional gender roles and historical expectations" (165); they therefore "defy and yet comply with the orthodoxy of realism" (181). Sandra Shannon also concludes that Wilson's female portrayals devolve into "male-fantasized roles," their victories merely compromises, though she does concede that collectively they constitute "an array of powerful African American women" ("The Ground" 151).

Kubitschek emphasizes Wilson's "gender lesson," pointing out that the plays show "men and women who speak different languages to describe the same spiritual essence," and posits "hope for future generations to overcome current [male/female] estrangements caused or worsened by adherence to Euro-American models" (197).

John Simon stresses the class element, seeing the play as examining "a predicament in which . . . black color is no more defining than the blue collar" (92).

Kubitschek cites Troy's reproduction of this pattern to support her claim that black men and women have accepted the European notion of separate hierarchical spheres, resulting in disrupted relationships.

Elam claims that Rose's directing her spiritual independence toward the church and motherhood simply confirms gender limitations and leaves the patriarchal order intact (178-81). Though Shannon "applauds Rose's "own brand of female consciousness" ("The Ground" 153), she sees her choice between father and child as representing the dissolution of the African-American family (156).
Wilson notes that the "only free person is the
girl, Troy's daughter, the hope for the future" ("August
Wilson" Savran 301).

Kubitschek describes the argument as "a battle over
whose vision will define and control the family's actions"
(194); with both "gendered visions" (195) incomplete, the
male and female speak not just different but opposing
languages, which threaten the African-American family.

Similarly, Elam misconstrues Berniece as treasuring
the piano because of its sacred sentimental value and
valorizing her mother's sacrifice and suffering (176).

Shannon notes that the men want Berniece to remarry
to lessen her "threat to their domain" ("The Ground" 160).

Despite noting that Wilson changed an early draft
in which Berniece and Lymon go upstairs to bed, Elam
insists that, because the rationale for their embrace is
not articulated, Berniece appears as a vanquished sexual
object in need of a man (177-78).

Patricia Gantt aligns the ghostliness of Wilson's
plays with the South, pointing out that the characters
repeatedly "refer to the South as 'down there' (a euphemism
suggesting the forbidden locus of human sexuality as well
as the geographic home of the slave past)" (70).

Wilson claims that "the process of assimilation to
white American society was a big mistake" ("August Wilson"
Savran 299), which caused blacks to mark themselves as
victims.

Zoglin observes that "Mamet is venturing into
family drama here, but so indirectly that you would hardly
know it" (76). Actually, his little-known Reunion (1979)
is also a family drama, and Mamet insists that American
Buffalo "sneakily enough is really a tragedy about life in
the family--so that is really the play which is closest to
Death of a Salesman ("Celebrating" 93).

Tellingly, Baym et al's fourth edition of The
Norton Anthology of American Literature, volume 2, drops
Shepard's True West and adds Mamet's screenplay House of
Games, suggesting a genre as well as an authorial
displacement.

Schvey maintains that "Mamet sees his function as a
playwright as a moral one" ("Power Plays" 89); Skeele, that
Mamet is a "medieval moralist" (512, emphasis original),
who writes homiletic tragedies; and Roudane, that "As
theatrician of the ethical, Mamet interlinks within his
rather bleak topography a moral seriousness" (5).
As far back as 1976, Mamet paid tribute to the tradition which, at the time, he seemed to ignore: "I'd like to write a really good play sometime. Like O'Neill, Odets. . . . (Fraser L7)

See Almansi for a discussion of Mamet's sex/violence metaphor apparent in the "intensity of coition" (200) in buggering customers.

Citing, as he does often, Thorstein Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class, Mamet notes that "the more that jargon and technical language is [sic] involved in an endeavor, the more we may assume that the endeavor is essentially make-believe. . . . As in Law, Commerce, Warfare" (Writing 5).

Among those critics who do recognize the nonrealistic level of Mamet's language are Bigsby, who insists that this is not "transcribed speech nor is the attempt simply naturalistic"; (266); Dean, who applauds Mamet's "free verse" (22); and Schvey, who identifies the Pinteresque "obliquities" as "part of a game involving manipulation or power" (106).

Dean writes of Mamet's using "debased language as a positive vehicle for his poetry. . . ., a celebration of tenacity" (222), and Bigsby maintains that "The poetry of the work is the promise" (289).

Hudgins points out that "there is always a vision of needed change implied by Mamet's ironic humor" and that audience laughter "points toward the celebration of life at the core of all of Mamet's work" (225).

Mamet laments that "We don't know how to show our love. This inability was the subject of [Tennessee Williams's] plays, the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language" (Writing 102).

Mamet's ambivalence is underscored by the comparison of two essays in Some Freaks: "In the Company of Men," his paean to male community as sometimes "an experience of true grace" (90, emphasis original), and "Women," his paean to women as "better, stronger, more truthful than men" (24).

I am encouraged in my perception of this dynamic in Mamet's turn to domestic drama by two innovative analyses of 1987's Speed the Plow. Ann Hall insists that the enigmatic character of Karen, though vanquished, leaves a trace of that "disruptive excess," (139), which challenges the Madonna/whore male representation of women. Nelson also points out that Mamet creates female characters who and signify a "moment of suspension" (74), a "mistress
plot" (77), which disrupts the master narrative of causality, coherence, and closure.

50 John Lahr comments that the "uncluttered living room . . . becomes an unpenetrable landscape of denial" (71).

51 Though Simon cites this language as evidence that Mamet is "one of our most pretentiously vacuous playwrights" (76), Kroll discovers in the play the source of "Mamet-speak," which is "at bottom a child’s lingo, the trial-and-error, stop-and-start nonresponsive speech tactic of kids. It’s the sound of tainted innocence" (72).

52 Born in 1947, Mamet doubtlessly created John from the torments of his own childhood in a ‘50s family. Of a move to a Chicago suburb with his mother, stepfather, and sister, Mamet remembers that "we children, and I especially, felt ourselves less than full members of this new, cobbled-together family, and disliked being assigned to the beautification of a home that we found unbeautiful in all respects" (The Cabin 4). Within this literally "model house," the mythologized kitchen table came to be associated "with the notion of blood" (4) since the stepfather’s rages regularly resulted in the shattering of its glass top. His mother’s abuse by her father, who later lived with them, had been familiar family lore, but Mamet only gradually learned the extent of his sister’s physical and emotional abuse at the hands of their stepfather and with the collusion of their mother.

53 Bigsby describes the transformative possibility of story-telling in all of Mamet’s previous plays, thus suggesting its likelihood in The Cryptogram: "The process of his plays is one . . . which in its assumption of the minimum community constituted by the storyteller and the listener begins the urgent business of reconstruction" (David Mamet 136).

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CONCLUSION

AMERICAN DRAMA'S PLEASURES AND PROMISE:
THE LEGACY OF THE LEVIATHAN

"The whole process is a lie
unless
crowned by excess,
it break forcefully,
one way or another,
from its confinement--"

"The Ivy Crown"
William Carlos Williams

It is my hope that the foregoing "perturbation" of American drama's stepchild status will have the effect of a butterfly's amplified wingflap and create a bifurcation point at which criticism "breaks from its confinement." I certainly do not suggest that the "whole process" of scholarship has been a lie, but its indiscriminate denigration of American drama has ironically perpetuated the lie of the traditional Family and classical realism as immutable monoliths, which deny process to deliver closedness and closure. If family can break from the confinement of closedness and realism from the confinement of closure, then surely critics can break from the confinement of a classical epistemology and reconsider the American "leviathan" of domestic realism. Relegated to the deep for too many years, this monster has nonetheless lured America's most notable playwrights and broadest audiences to its "ghostly demarcations."
The power of such a lure can be dismissed only at the risk of critical calcification, for the leviathan’s legacy is first a prophecy and then an affirmation of a postmodern epistemology impossible to ignore and regenerative to embrace. Those who have confirmed an opacity rather than transparency in the monster’s realm concede, if not celebrate, a clouding of the Cartesian eye/I, which can no longer fix the hands on Newton’s clock. Far from reinscribing the classical concept of a Cogito self in a predictable, hierarchical universe, those plays which have brought to the surface the leviathan’s legacy throw the self into a rip tide.¹ No longer fixated in the family frame nor enthroned in the realistic form, this self must navigate cross-currents which will never abate into the placidity—and stagnancy—of a unified, universal Being in a stable, objective Reality.

Being gives way to becoming in a family revealed by recent theory as an open, political, nonlinear, and evolving system. As the traditional nuclear Family, which produces and reproduces a sex-gender system, is stripped of its naturalizing myths, the gendered and rational "I" loses its footing in a foundationalist order. With familial flux not aberration but inevitability, the system and the self resisting such flux can only devolve into the state of negative entropy so prevalent on the American cultural and theatrical stages. All too often, it is also a state of violence as the struggle to maintain the illusion of stability spawns an even more perverse engendering and
gendering of an Other. In the triumph over this created Other, however, the created "I" achieves not autonomy but an Oedipal automatism, following a trajectory which arrests all in an economy of self-sameness.

Critics notwithstanding, it is not this economy which the American theatrical tradition embodies. Instead, those plays which most constitute its legacy present process undermining trajectory and self-similarity undermining self-sameness. In this domestic economy, the entropy barrier inherent in an irreversible time precludes exact repetition of past patterns and suggests the possibility of a new rather than repeated order. Playwrights can stage an entropy revealed as positive in a system of cascading bifurcations, each proffering a "choice" of futures. Within ever-fluctuating, unpredictable familial systems, the Cartesian "I" is pushed to abdicate to a multiple self always in relation and irreducible from others in the system. Inevitably determined by interrelationality, this part can, in turn, affect the whole if its behavior becomes "dangerous." As so evident in the linchpin American plays, often this butterfly flapping wings is one Othered to the system's periphery, made ghostly or monstrous by gendered binarism. Derridian parasitical "hymens" or Prigoginian sleepwalking "hypnons," these (M)others—from O'Neill's Mary to Mamet's Donny—awake on stage to throw off-center those families which they have been scripted to center. In crowning by excess the familial process, they push it to break "from its confinement" within a masculinist ideology.
of negative mimesis and to evolve to the coherence of a
dissipative structure rather than to feign the unification
of a closed one.

Similarly, the most maligned mimesis of ideology's
negative mimesis is thrown off-center by these performers
of excess. As they force Being to yield to becoming in the
familial system, so they force Reality to yield to
perspective in the theatrical system of realism. Flux
threatening fixity in the form as in the family, the eye
can no longer pretend to fix an "I" through a gendered
gaze. In these most Oedipal of narratives, the
psychological causality, linguistic transparency, and
unified meaning which undergird classical realism falter
before a vengeance mimicked as excess by feminized Others
performing their own narratives. Thus the spectatorial eye
oscillates as the "I" flounders on stage, abandoning the
illusion of a stable gaze to follow Oedipus to the borders.
Encouraged by feminist film theory and chaos theory, the
drama spectator not only occupies but also exults in that
point of tension, which mirrors the bifurcation point
dramatized on stage as a leitmotif of the American dramatic
legacy. In foregoing closure to foreground the faultlines
of nonlinearity and chaos, the most "seminal" American
playwrights foreswear the predictability of the future and
the reinscription of dominant ideology. Their realism,
liminal rather than classical, assumes an eye on the wing
and begs feminist attention to the butterflies flapping
those wings at the wings of the American stage.
I risk incurring a traitor's branding in defending an American drama impugned by feminists because I am hopeful that to redeem this tradition from the wings of scholarship may be to redeem feminism from the wings of a conservative arena. No longer so naive as to believe that theoretical conviction easily or often translates into social praxis, I nonetheless have found that my immersion in this study has prompted another bifurcation point in my own family as I have of necessity abdicated still more gendered scripts; only partly in jest do I testify to the excess of the hysteric subverting order and prompting evolution. As my own public/private boundaries blur, there results a personal confirmation of my professional conviction that transformation of the family system is not only desirable but possible; moreover, it is we who must engender a systemic degendering for our daughters lest their "havens" become the hell-houses of so many women today. I urge this release equally for our sons, whose own imprisonment in mythic machoism, breeds a violence turned on themselves as well as on their victims.

Neither am I any longer so naive as to believe that theatre easily or often translates into social praxis. I nonetheless do believe that theatre still epitomizes in its originary communal function the very potentiality for community so urgent in America’s tragically polarized topography. Even if theatre today can provide only a "community of the question" (Blau 12), the existence of that community and of that question posits a conscious
impulse toward transformation. It is an impulse that feminism converts to imperative, an imperative which should forbid the categorical relinquishing of broad audiences. In guarding archaic boundaries between drama's mainstream and avant-garde or theatre's text and performance to define a feminist theatre, drama critics ironically bolster the "male gaze" dichotomization and confine themselves to, at best, only an inversion of negative mimesis. Such self-limitation reflects a reactive ressentiment and endorses powerlessness.

Feminist drama critics must, then, follow their counterparts in film in seeing promise in the pleasure of that mainstream family drama so embraced by American audiences. To do so is not to enter the confinement of Oedipus's house and accept inscription into that narrative. It is, instead, to descry the decimation of that house and the deconstruction of that narrative in those very plays which apotheosize American domestic realism. Erected (pun aggressively intended) not on firm ground but on shifting sands excavated from beneath a rip tide, these houses in American theatre reflect theatricalized houses in American culture, which can withstand no more than they the force of a tidal wave originating in a butterfly's flutter. Currents cross as metaphysics' presence meets absence, psychology's phallus meets lack, linguistics' subject meets object, and science's order meets chaos. Neither merging nor inverting in a feminist rip tide, these currents wash away the male/female paradigm of binary logic, which
inevitably hierarchizes its poles into positive and negative and thus is the nemesis of feminism.

In such a rip tide, the leviathan, too, can "break forcefully/. . . from its confinement" and transmogrify. No more monstrous monolith than the family it depicts or the form it deploys, domestic realism represents, in chaos terms, a "strange attractor" toward which American drama seems to settle as society does toward family. It is as futile to berate the power of the one as it is to deny the power of the other. Instead, "attention must be paid" to those who stress the strangeness of that attractor, perturbing the surface to release its monsters or transgressing its boundaries to release its ghosts. As American playwrights monstrous to feminist critics create women characters monstrous to their familial systems and realistic forms monstrous to classical realism, it is for feminists, monstrous themselves to a conservative polis, to perceive the ghostly monsters and the plays that they inhabit as taking wing beyond a binarism which constitutes the true monstrosity. As the leviathan flies, we find ourselves not so much in its belly as in its womb, whence the wholeness of multiplicity and the life-force of liminality can be born.

NOTES

1 Familiar to residents of Gulf Coast states, a "rip tide" or "rip current" is "a current of water disturbed by an opposing current, especially in tidal waters, or by passage over an irregular bottom" ("rip current").
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