

HOMOSEXUALITY AND ARTIFICE IN *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*

Associated in the popular imagination with the image of *la folle*, homosexuality would seem to represent the triumph of artifice, a calculated madness in which even gender is dissimulated. The realm of disguise *par excellence*, it also evokes the necessity of self-concealment, even self-deception, the need to deny the love that dare not speak its name. It was Guy Burgess, perhaps, who most clearly demonstrated the metonymic equivalence of the homosexual and the spy, those men who are not what they seem to be, yet his case represents the rule rather than the exception. It is not surprising, then, that Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, an anatomy of the evasions and self-deceptions to which man is susceptible, should focus on Brick's difficulties in facing the possibility of homosexual desire in his friend Skipper and, perhaps, in himself. In fact, the issue seems finally to provoke a certain evasiveness in Williams as well. If homosexuality is the social problem on which the play is based, it is not a topic which Williams squarely confronts, as contemporary theatre critic noted (1). Just as the characters talk around the subject, Williams' attitude toward the issue is itself unclear, an apparent equivocation between acceptance and condemnation. Yet Brick's evasions prove heuristic, suggesting to Big Daddy the root of his son's problems, and the play's own incoherent presentation of homosexuality indicates the covert values at the heart of the work. By examining Williams' confused surface discussion of the subject, we can arrive, finally, at an understanding of the latent ideology which animates the play.

At first glance, Brick's relationship with Skipper would seem to be morally ambiguous; it can, it appears, "be named clean or named dirty". Maggie finds it noble, "one of those beautiful ideal things", and Brick argues that it is a "true thing" between two people, a friendship "too rare to be normal". This friendship simultaneously provokes a different reading, however, and Brick reacts with disgust to the implication that he and Skipper were "dirty old men", a pair of "ducking sissies". It would seem that Williams is presenting a familiar paradox: the platonic relationship of two men is a heroic ideal while the same relation, eroticized, is seen as repellent. This traditional perspective is complicated, however, by the suggestion that homoerotic sexuality is not intrinsically immoral; rather, the problem lies in its rejection by a repressive conventional morality. Skipper's love for Brick, says Maggie, is a truth inadmissible to the world in which they were born and raised. As such, Skipper dies to "keep face", "to disavow his desire; he is, in effect, sacrificed to maintain the morals of his society. Brick is equally but more subtly a victim of social values. His rejection of the sexual possibility presented by Skipper reflects "the profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel" (2). His introjection of his society's morality has produced his paralyzing inner conflict, the clash of affection and moral repression. The play would seem to portray the destructive effects of an overly-rigid society and to support Big Daddy's argument that the issue must be approached with tolerance.

Yet the work's presentation of homosexuality does not come to rest in an argument for a revision of the conventional distinctions between sexual and non-sexual male friendship. Big Daddy may argue for tolerance, but he reacts violently to Brick's suggestion that Jack Straw and Peter Ochello were lovers, telling Brick not to go "throwing rocks" at the pair. Tolerance, apparently, has its limits. In his theoretical acceptance of male sexual relations and his rejection of their practice, Big Daddy simply reinscribes the traditional division of clean and dirty male friendships on another level.

Like Big Daddy, the play is ostensibly tolerant, reserving its criticism for the repressiveness of conventional mores, yet Williams finally comes to echo those mores by expelling homosexuality from the realm of acceptable options for the characters. Williams suggests that a discussion of the issue is the means by which Brick might experience regeneration since Brick's spiritual lassitude, his disgust with mendacity, seems to stem from his refusal to acknowledge Skipper's desire for him and his own more ambiguous love for Skipper. The play is in fact centered around such a discussion, the conversation between Brick and Big Daddy which dominates the second act; yet, even during this talk, homosexuality is kept firmly within the realm of the theoretical. Skipper's homoerotic desire is never definitively proven, and Brick's possible reciprocation of his feelings must finally be inferred from his fervent denials. The assertion is never made directly. Moreover, Skipper's death not only "keeps face" in his society but in Williams' moral scheme as well: it eliminates the possibility of a homosexual praxis for Brick. For Williams, too, homosexuality would appear to be an "inadmissible thing". Available as a topic for discussion, it is attributed most definitively to characters such as Straw and Ochello who are dead. As such, it circulates within a linguistic economy removed from the world of action. Exorcized by talk, homosexuality becomes finally only a topic for more or less tolerant discussion. It is not presented as a valid option for Brick.

It is curious, then, that the play should focus so heavily on the issue. Why did Williams center the work on an examination of a marginal sexuality which he would finally reject? Why attack conventional mores only to recapitulate them? The play's confused discussion of homosexuality is finally the surface trace of a deeper structure in the work. In order to answer the problems in the play's surface content, the spectres of lying and dying, Williams founds the work on a conventional ideal, the sacralization of virility and the cultural worship of the male. It is this covert ideology which dictates not only Williams' rejection of homosexuality but his initial decision to treat the subject. As we shall see, the refusal of homosexuality serves finally as an artifice which conceals this latent ideal.

To understand this ideology at the play's core, we must first briefly examine the problems it is presented to solve. At the end of the play's second act, Big Daddy curses "all lying, dying liars", and in so doing he summarizes the difficult conditions of human existence: the inevitable triumph of death and the equally inevitable mendacity of the living. If death is the unavoidable outcome of life, lying also takes on the status of a virtual biological necessity. "Christ damn all lying sons of lying bitches", says Big Daddy, transmuting a familiar epithet into the suggestion that duplicity is transmitted from generation to generation, engendered in the sons by

the mothers, inescapable. Nonetheless, Williams argues, lying and dying must be countered by a struggle, an attempt to face the truth and a fight to survive. Big Daddy must learn that he has cancer and refuse "to go gentle into that good night". Brick must confront the truth of his friendship with Skipper, whatever that truth may be, and overcome, ideally, the disengagement which has made him "half alive". Yet such struggles seem finally ineffectual. Nothing can outrun time, as Big Mama notes, and the pervasiveness of mendacity, that "system we live in", raises the possibility that The Truth does not exist at all. Putting the term in quotation marks in the stage directions, Williams implies that there may only be "truths", that Brick is right to assert that Skipper's truth is not his truth. In the continual circulation of falsehoods and self-deceptions, the possibility of transcendental meaning evaporates; the search for truth may itself be a lie.

Such problems seem unresolvable, yet the play finally hints at a cultural ideal which can overcome these dilemmas. It is Big Mama who suggests an answer during a speech in which, typically, she says more than she knows: "Oh, Brick, son of Big Daddy! Big Daddy does so love you! Y'know what would be his fondest dream come true? If before he passed on, if Big Daddy has to pass on, you gave him a child of yours, a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy" (117). It is a familiar desire, but Big Mama's speech seems to uncover a more primitive wish at the core of this longing for a grandchild. What Big Daddy wants is not simply generational continuity but something more--the reproduction of the self. The emphasis here falls on likeness, on the genetic duplication of the grandfather in the father and of the father in the son, a continual recreation. And what is finally recreated here is not simply the individual but an essence: male virility. The resemblance of Brick and Big Daddy, Williams notes in a stage direction, is that Big Daddy once had Brick's "virile beauty", or, rather, that Brick reproduces Big Daddy's charismatic, masculinity. In the mythic substructure of *Cat*, biological continuity is the symbolic reiteration of virility itself.

It is in this context that one can understand Big Mama's later reference to Brick as Big Daddy's "only son". Gooper's immediate response is to ask what that makes him, and the answer, though unspoken, is obvious. Symbolically, Gooper is a bastard since he does not replicate Big Daddy's virility. Mae's impulse is to insist on Gooper's masculinity; her reply to his question is that he is "a sober responsible man with five precious children!--six!" (106). Yet it is precisely these children who reveal Gooper's metaphoric illegitimacy for they are not genetic copies of Big Daddy. The point is not simply that Gooper has produced daughters, in contrast to the son which Brick would inevitably engender, but that all of Gooper's children are "no-neck monsters", unnatural because they are outside the line of duplication of Big Daddy's identity. It is of Gooper that Big Daddy is thinking when he asks why he should leave the plantation to "not my kind".

The ideal of the transmission of the self and of masculinity from male to male is rendered concrete by a recurrent image in the play: the football pass. Like the football passed between Brick and Skipper, the sacred qualities of the male are passed from father to son. The football pass is finally uncertain, however, an "aerial

attack" that can be intercepted by other men and that is always intercepted, as Brick says, by time. Yet the transmission of virility is a mythic ideal; unlike the pass, it is impregnable to disruption. Not merely immune to time, it overcomes time. The threats of aging and death are surmounted by the continual reincarnation of the (grand)father in the (grand)son. The eternal renewal of virility answers the threat of mortality which haunts the play.

It counters, too, the problem of mendacity. The possible evaporation of any transcendent meaning is finally a prospect with which Williams is not entirely comfortable, as his use of revelation as the dramatic climax of each of the play's three acts reveals. In effect, he is caught between the desire to believe in a universal truth and the possibility that the Truth does not exist, a possibility recognized in the duplicity of his characters. The dilemma is related to a traditional problem of patriarchal societies. Founded on the principle of the father as truth, as the figure who establishes the child's identity, patriarchal cultures are continually liable to the collapse of this symbolic foundation due to the real possibility that paternity can be misattributed. The threat of illegitimacy undermines the doctrine of the father's truth and, by extension, Truth itself. Williams' notion of the transmission of paternal virility overcomes such difficulties. The son is so like the father, the grandson so like the son, that paternity is immediately apparent; it cannot be misattributed. Unlike the football pass, the transfer of masculine potency from father to son through the woman cannot be intercepted by other men. And this truth of paternity, because it cannot be falsified, affirms the existence of Truth. In William's mythic perspective, virility stands as a transcendental signified, the guarantee of universal meaning.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, then, presents the eternal duplication of the male and virility as an answer to the problems of dying and lying. This is presumably an unconscious ideal for Williams, a reflection of the inherent ideology of patriarchal culture, for the play's surface content seems at odds with this latent belief. For one thing, Big Daddy's wish is precisely that, a dream rather than a reality, and the play is based on a transformation of the traditional anxiety surrounding paternity. The question here is not "who is the father of the child?" but "will Brick father the child?" Moreover, although the ideal stresses the male, the play's surface would seem to emphasize for female. "I guess it's bad", says Maggie to Brick, "but now I'm stronger than you" (122), and the realization of Big Daddy's dream seems to depend on Maggie's efforts. Disengaged from life, Brick seems too weak to enact his designated role and fulfill his father's wish. This clash between the play's surface content and its mythic substructure is more apparent than real, however. Brick's masculine potency may be disguised, but it is not lost, just as his physical "virile beauty" has not been seriously affected by his alcoholism. Significantly, Maggie's triumph at the end of the play, her announcement that she is pregnant, depends finally on Brick for its success. It is up to him to "make the lie come true", engendering the child who will mark the triumph over falsehood and death. Presented as the conversion of Maggie's false statement into reality, the exercise of Brick's virility would enact the truth of the male, affirming the notion of the male as truth.

By the same token, Maggie's strength and autonomy are finally superficial. A closer look at Maggie's role in the play will, in fact, clarify the larger implications of the work's latent ideology for Maggie serves ultimately as an example of the status

of women in cultures founded on the sacralization of the male. This role has been succinctly summarized by Luce Irigaray, who notes that such cultures are based on exchanges between men: "Les échanges qui organisent les sociétés patriarcales ont lieu, exclusivement, entre hommes. Femmes, signes, marchandises, monnaie, passent toujours d'un homme à un autre homme, sous peine--affirme-t-on--de retomber dans des liens ancestraux et exclusivement endogamiques, qui paralyseraient tout commerce. ...Ce qui signifie que la *possibilité même du socio-culturel exigerait l'homosexualité*. Telle serait la loi qui l'ordonne. L'hétérosexualité revenant à une assignation de rôles dans l'économie : sujets producteurs et échangeurs les uns, terre productrice et marchandises les autres. ...*S'ensuit l'empire du semblant, qui méconnaît encore ses endogamies*" (3). Irigaray's argument is political, intended to shock; nonetheless, she is correct in stressing the symbolic homosexuality of patriarchal culture, in which significant relations take place only between men. The role of women is to be simply a means of mediation "entre l'homme et son semblable, voire entre l'homme et lui-même" (190).

While it does not focus directly on the exchange of women, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* does emphasize woman's function as mediator. The play's ideal of the reproduction of the father in the son would seem to present women as a mere conduit. The insistence on the likeness of son and father implies that, at least symbolically, women make no genetic contribution during procreation. In this mythic perspective, reproduction is entirely a relation involving men; it is inconceivable that Brick's child could be a girl. The transmission of virility is an affair which takes place between man and his likeness. The role of women is merely to mediate the transfer.

Maggie's capacity for independent, definitive action would seem to deny woman's insignificance in patriarchal ideology, but her actions serve generally to facilitate the relations of the play's men. Her success in obtaining the inheritance of the plantation depends on her ability to effect a rapprochement between Brick and Big Daddy, helping them overcome their inability to communicate. As Maggie soon realizes, this will require more than buying Brick's birthday present for Big Daddy to assure Big Daddy of Brick's affection. Ultimately, she must convince Brick to help her produce the son who will concretely demonstrate Brick's position as Big Daddy's symbolic, and hence material, heir. In fact, by persuading Brick to create a child, Maggie would mediate not one but two male-to-male relations for this process is also seen as the means of "handing Brick's life back to him", of overcoming his disengagement and self-disgust and reconciling him to himself and to life (with more or less cooperation on Brick's part depending on the different versions of Act III). Moreover, Brick's "return to life" would presumably consolidate his chances of inheritance, ending the "worthless behavior" which has made Big Daddy hesitate about leaving the plantation to Brick. Focused on the production of a child, Maggie's financial goal is thus dependent on her ability to facilitate the interaction of Big Daddy and Brick and to reconcile Brick to himself.

Mediating between men, Maggie helps, ironically, to solidify an emotional network from which women are excluded. One of the ways in which the son replicates the father in his inability to love his wife, the surface trace of the exclusively

male orientation of relationships. Thus Brick evinces a dislike for Maggie which recreates Big Daddy's distaste for Big Mama. Wiping off Maggie's kiss, Brick encapsulates not only his own marital relation but that of his parents. The duplication is emphasized by Brick's repetition of Big Daddy's words. "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true", Brick says when Maggie insists on her love for him in the play's original third act, repeating Big Daddy's expression of incredulity and indifference toward Big Mama's declarations of affection. In effect, women are excluded from the circulation of male affection in the play. Big Daddy does not really want a mistress, who he would "choke" or "smother" in diamonds or furs, but Brick's affection, just as Brick's emotional attention is absorbed by Skipper. In *Cat*, a man's love is love for another man. Tense with "sibling envy" of Big Daddy's partiality for Brick, Gooper's claim that he doesn't care whether Big Daddy likes him or not is the exception that proves the rule.

Beneath its surface heterosexuality, then, the play is grounded on an emotional homosexuality. Maggie's efforts to coerce Brick into bed to produce a child would seem to serve ultimately not to transfer Brick's affection from Skipper to her but to redirect it into his dual role as son and father. As such, the work is founded on an ideal endogamy. In its covert emphasis on the relations of father and son, it inverts in a complex way the law of the father, the prohibition of incest which requires exogamy. Traditionally, the father's "no", the threat of castration, obliges the son to renounce his desire for the mother and transfer his affection outside the family, but the latent ideology of *Cat* demands the contrary. Brick must turn his attention from Skipper to his duties as a son, his role as heir. The movement is not exogamous but endogamous, from outside the family to within the family. Moreover, since women are excluded from emotional consideration, the relations in question are doubly endogamous, limited to males alone. Brick's duty is not to renounce a desire for the mother but to discover his love for the father, seeking not the father's death but his rebirth in a grandson.

The ideal of masculine endogamy does not end here. It becomes clear how the creation of a grandson could reconcile Brick to himself for it would take place not under the threat of castration but through the revelation of Brick's latent phallic power. Rediscovering his virile potency, Brick would presumably overcome his self-hatred. This would be less the result of Brick's reincorporation into heterosexual sexuality, an escape from the threat of homoerotic desire, than the effect of the tacit acknowledgement of his love for Big Daddy implicit in his fulfillment of Big Daddy's wish. The notion of the son's duplication of the father implies that the son's discovery of his love for the father is finally the discovery of his love of his own image. The son's love for the father and the father's love for the son are at their cores only a love of the self, of the virility which one embodies. Williams' ideal is, in effect, a triumphant male narcissism, a zero degree of endogamy.

On the most abstract level, Williams' ideal is the eternal return of the same, and the point is clarified by the play's recurrent focus on monstrosity. In the work, monstrosity is defined not only as unnatural excess (in the sense that Mae is a "Monster" of fertility) but, more significantly, as the combination of things which should be kept separate, a Sphinx-like conjunction without relation. If Gooper's children

are monsters, this is because "their fat little heads are set on their fat little bodies without a bit of connection" (16). By the same token, Williams describes the radio/phonograph/tv set/liquor cabinet in Brick and Maggie's bedroom as a "monstrosity" because it joins these disparate functions "in one piece" and chromatically links the colors of the interior and the sky, inside and outside. Monstrosity in *Cat* is thus the fusion of the different, a violation of the play's ideology which stresses the conjunction of the same. The ultimate monstrosity, then, is heterosexual exogamy itself, which conjoins man and woman and which unites the family with what is outside it. Predicated on the narcissistic union of man and man, of man and himself, the play firmly rejects difference.

At its heart, then, the ideology on which the play rests contains implications which threaten the collapse of the social structure: an ideal of virile narcissism which would paralyze all cultural exchange. Such implications must go unrecognized lest the social system shatter. Patriarchal culture must conceal its endogamies. As such, the play's covert ideology is repressed, unconsciously dissimulated both by the characters and by Williams. It is for this reason that the surface content of *Cat* ostensibly contradicts its latent ideals. In fact, the central dilemma of the play, the question of whether Brick will father a child and fulfill the patriarchal ideal, is precisely the problematization of an ideology of the transmission of virility. And, as we have seen, Williams' presentation of Maggie as strong and independent merely conceals a more traditional feminine role of mediation between men. In fact, Maggie's overall function in the work's structure is to occlude the play's stress on male relations. The majority of the first act would seem to present Maggie's relation to Brick as the central issue of the play. In effect, it obscures what becomes clear in the remaining two acts: that Williams' true interest lies in Brick's relation to other men, Skipper and Big Daddy, and, finally, in Brick's relation to himself. Maggie's apparent status as a major character is an artifice which conceals the work's deeper concern only with men.

The play's rejection of literal homosexuality serves a similar purpose. Based on the eroticization of virility, literal homosexuality is threatening because it renders concrete the worship of masculinity which is the basis of patriarchal culture and openly enacts the male-to-male relationships on which that culture is founded. Literal homosexuality makes clear, too, as Freud noted, the implicit narcissism at the heart of such masculine endogamies. As such, patriarchal culture invariably prohibits or expels such relations in order to conceal its own structure. Thus literal homosexuality is not only dismissed in the play as a possible option for the characters, but it is also reduced to the unspoken, an apt emblem of its status as that which is excluded from culture, as the Other of culture, written in the spaces and silences beyond culture. What Brick initially leaves out of his explanation to Big Daddy is Skipper's phone call, the "drunken confession" which caused Brick to hang up during their last conversation before Skipper's death. Skipper's confession, presumably an admission of his homosexual love for Brick, is multiply excluded from the discourse: omitted from Brick's explanation, the exact nature of Skipper's disclosure remains unstated. And this confession itself reduces Brick and Skipper to silence, ending the phone call and their communication. Homosexuality is indeed the love that dare not speak its name.

Yet, as Maggie says, "laws of silence" don't work. Excluded from discussion, rejected by patriarchal culture, literal homosexuality nonetheless returns from the repressed. Brick *does* finally discuss the issue with Big Daddy even if this conversation is laced with denials just as Williams presents the subject, however evasively, as a dominant concern of the play. As the dark mirror image of the ideals of patriarchal culture, homosexuality continually resurfaces. Within the play itself, the threat of literal homosexuality raised in Brick and Skipper's relationship merely recreates the questions raised by the suspect friendship of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, and it seems hardly accidental that the bed in Brick and Maggie's room is the one formerly shared by those "old sisters". The play is founded on the one hand on the ideal of the transmission of virility from father to son, symbolized by the inheritance of the plantation, that fertile "mother Earth" which must be worked by the virile male; yet there is another line of inheritance: the possibility that the land will eventually pass from a pair of homosexuals to another homosexual, Brick coming to lie in Straw and Ochello's bed. The other side of an ideology of virile inheritance, the threat of homosexuality must be continually renewed.

It is logical, then, that Williams, basing his play on the sacralization of virility and the male, should deal with homosexuality as a theme. And if he feels compelled, like Brick, to reject it in order to protect cultural ideals, the play itself suggests that the problem insistently recurs. Unable to reproduce, homosexuality is itself eternally reproduced, the shadowy Other of patriarchal ideology. Beneath the heterosexuality which allows the production of new generations (of men), the principles of culture insist inevitably on that symbolic masculine incest, the endogamy of male relations, of which literal homosexuality is only the shadow and dark symbol.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) See, for example, Walter Kerr, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", *New York Herald Tribune*, March 25, 1955.

(2) Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York : Signet, 1955), p. 89. All quotations from the play refer to page numbers in this edition.

(3) Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris : Minuit, 1977), p. 189.