

Homophobic Criticism and Its Disguises: The Case of Stanley Kauffmann

Doug Arrell

Early in 1966, Stanley Kauffmann, having only recently acceded to one of the most powerful positions in the American theatre, that of the daily drama critic for the *New York Times*, wrote a column entitled "Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises." In it he argued that, because homosexual dramatists were unable to write openly about homosexual life, they were forced to portray it in a heterosexual disguise, with the result that their works presented "a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage, and society in general." He noted that the modern theatre dealt with other topics that were "equally neurotic, equally undesirable socially," and urged that the topic of homosexuality should be presented openly on the stage as well. This would put an end, not only to the distorted and vindictive portrayals of heterosexual institutions, but to "camp," which Kauffmann viewed as the exultation of "style, manner, surface" over content, and which he saw as the greatest danger emanating from the homosexual dramatist.¹ The article generated many letters in response, some praising Kauffman for taking a stand against "sick literature and theatre," others attacking him for denigrating the homosexual artist. Kauffman followed it up with another article, "On the Acceptability of the Homosexual," in which he answered his critics, stressing in particular that his main goal was to gain for the homosexual dramatist "the same freedom that the heterosexual has" to write about his own life.²

Both at the time and since, many gay commentators have viewed Kauffmann's articles as classic examples of critical homophobia, part of a virtual witch-hunt against gay playwrights that occurred among New York drama critics in the early Sixties.³ But Kauffmann himself clearly saw the matter differently. In 1992 he wrote a letter to the magazine *American Theatre* insisting that "the articles were attacks on a society that (at that time) forced a gay writer to masquerade and then criticized him for doing so" and he expressed the hope that they had played "some infinitesimal part" in the changes in social attitudes to homosexuality since then.⁴ In fact, we know that the positive-sounding headline of the second article so angered

Doug Arrell has a B.A. from the University of Toronto and a Ph.D. from the University of London. He is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Winnipeg. He has been Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association, and has published in a variety of areas, including Canadian theatre history, aesthetics and queer studies.

Iphigene Sulzberger, the mother of the publisher of the *Times*, that she sent an indignant letter to her son complaining about Kauffmann; this letter may have played a part in Kauffmann's being fired from his position a few months later.⁵ We thus have two contrasting views of Kauffman: was he a hero, even a martyr, in the cause of fighting anti-gay prejudice, or was he a contributor to that prejudice?

This question is not easy to answer. Writers seeking to change society's attitudes may be forced to adopt the prejudicial language and assumptions of the society around them to some degree just to be understood or to be permitted to deal with the topic. A poem that Lord Byron wrote in 1809 about Samuel Beckford, the eccentric author who was forced to flee England because of a homosexual scandal, sounds on the surface intensely homophobic, with its references to Beckford's "deed accurst" and "unhallowed thirst/Of nameless crime." But Louis Crompton argues convincingly that this poem was really a tribute to Beckford, with whom Byron identified as fellow exile from British homophobia; as Compton notes, in 1809 "violently condemnatory language was the coin demanded of anyone who had the temerity to mention homosexuality in print."⁶ In the same way, we can see works like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* or James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* as having played a key role in fighting prejudice against gays and lesbians when they were first published, even though they seem very homophobic to many modern readers. On the other hand, we are also all familiar with the people who present themselves as liberals sympathetic to an oppressed minority, and who carefully present their views in positive-seeming terms, but who in fact give disguised support for the prevailing prejudice. Sociologists use the term "symbolic racism" to describe this phenomenon among certain North American whites, who carefully veil their racism to avoid being labeled red-necks.⁷ Because this kind of crypto-prejudice is insidious and has the effect of making prejudice respectable, it often seems more harmful than more direct expressions of the same attitudes.

No one would deny that there are homophobic elements in Kauffman's articles. And so the question is, was Kauffman using these elements as camouflage in order to fight anti-gay discrimination, or was he adopting the liberal stance of sympathy towards the gay playwright in order to legitimize his support for society's prejudice?

This dilemma parallels a much more famous case in which the issue of prejudice in a critic was raised. In 1987, three years after the death of Paul de Man, Yale professor and renowned critic of the deconstructionist school, it was revealed that from 1940-42 in German-occupied Belgium de Man had written a total of 170 articles for the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir*, which had been taken over by the Nazis and was part of their propaganda effort. One article in particular, "The Jews in Contemporary Literature," which appeared in an issue of the paper devoted to anti-Jewish polemic, seemed to many particularly outrageous. In this article De Man argues that, contrary to the views of "vulgar antisemitism" and, he

says, of the Jews themselves, Jewish influence has had “extraordinarily little importance” in contemporary literature; in fact Jewish writers have “always remained in the second rank,” and “despite Semitic interference in all aspects of European life, our civilization has shown that its fundamental nature is healthy.” Indeed, he concludes that “a solution to the Jewish problem that would lead to the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not have, for the literary life of the West, regrettable consequences.”⁸ For most readers in 1987, this article was blatant evidence of antisemitism, and for some de Man’s authorship of it and subsequent concealment of the fact were even signs of the dangerous moral implications of deconstruction. But de Man had his defenders, including most notably Jacques Derrida; Derrida argued in effect that de Man’s slighting reference to “vulgar antisemitism” was really an attack on Nazi antisemitism, as exemplified by the other articles in the same issue of the paper in which his column appeared. In defending contemporary literature and denying Jewish influence on it, he was going against the Nazi policy of viewing modernism as a product of Jewish decadence. Of course, writing in this context required apparent conformity to Nazi policies, but Derrida compares de Man to a “smuggler” whose careful equivocations and subtle non-conformity illustrate “a classic technique of contraband.”⁹ In other words, while not denying the antisemitic elements in the article, Derrida argues that de Man was not biased against the Jews; on the contrary, beneath the apparent antisemitism was a covert attack on the antisemitic position.

In order to resolve the dilemma with respect to both Kauffmann and De Man, one must look very closely both at the context in which they were writing, and at the dynamics of the prejudice of which they may or may not be guilty. In his valuable survey, *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*, John Duckitt emphasizes the difficulties of defining “prejudice”; indeed, most social scientists seem to have been reduced to calling any negative attitude toward a group “prejudice,” since otherwise, it appears, one has to go into the question of whether or not the negative attitude is justified or not, and this leads to endless difficulties. But Duckitt makes clear that the processes by which one group (the “ingroup”) develops a negative attitude towards another group (the “outgroup”) have been well studied, and in some cases it is evident that they are the result of emotional dynamics that have nothing to do with accurate observation of the group who are the object of the prejudice. It seems to me that we should only call “prejudice” the negative attitudes which arise from these emotional dynamics. Whether the negative image of the group is “true” or not is in fact irrelevant; if the image has been arrived at through illegitimate means, through an irrational psychological need of the ingroup rather than dispassionate observation of the outgroup, then it is prejudice. To identify prejudice, then, we must look at the process by which the negative attitude was formed, rather than at the attitude itself.

Duckitt cites three main social dynamics that tend to create prejudice. The

first is intergroup competition. When we are at war with another group, we feel a strong emotional need to characterize the members of the other group negatively; when peace is restored, or when—through the fortunes of war we find ourselves allies with this group against some new enemy, these negative characterizations can vanish with remarkable rapidity. The second social dynamic creating prejudice is intergroup domination; when we are in a dominant position over another group, we feel a need to characterize that group as inferior, presumably in order to justify to ourselves our privileged position. The third dynamic is intergroup scapegoating; when an ingroup is in trouble it often experiences the need to blame its problems on an outgroup rather than on its own leaders or practices. The best known example of scapegoating is antisemitism in many of its manifestations, such as when some Germans in the 1920s blamed their financial problems on a wealthy international Jewish conspiracy. All three of the social dynamics giving rise to prejudice have been demonstrated experimentally by social psychologists. Boys at summer camp have been divided into different teams and subjected to various kinds of pressures simulating these dynamics; apparently, the formation of prejudice in these situations is highly predictable and replicable.¹⁰

Prejudices need to be rationalized; that is, we need to justify to ourselves in apparently rational terms the negative attitude that really has an emotional basis. I call this rationale the “prejudicial myth.” These myths arise naturally in war-time, and usually center around the unique barbarity and subhuman behavior of the enemy. In situations of dominance, the myths center on the supposed behavior or attitudes of the subjugated group which prove their inferiority. The most complex myths are concocted in the scapegoating situation, since there is a need to explain both the evil nature of the outgroup and the subversive and/or conspiratorial process by which they are undermining the ingroup. In his book *Warrant for Genocide* Norman Cohn describes the elaborate myths that underpin European antisemitism, which found embodiment in forged texts such as the so-called “Rabbi’s Speech” and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹¹

Prejudice makes a powerful appeal to one’s emotions, and hence it is almost impossible to be neutral when one is involved a prejudicial situation. Prejudice is a strong current running through society; one must either go with the flow, or make an effort to resist it. Confronted with the prejudicial myth, one must either support it or make an effort to oppose it. One may choose, however, to disguise one’s support or opposition, to avoid being associated with bigotry or to evade some of the consequences of opposing it. It is our tendency to adopt such disguises that make it difficult to determine where writers such as Kauffmann and de Man stand. The situation is complicated by the fact that writers may disguise their real position from themselves; in particular, their self-image may demand opposition to prejudice, while their gut feelings may support it. Texts dealing with topics influenced by prejudice are thus frequently highly complex and (because readers

too are subject to the prejudicial current) often simplistically read. One approach to disentangling these complexities is to identify the salient prejudicial myth governing the situation the text is referring to, and then to determine the text's relationship to that myth. If the text is opposing prejudice, if the homophobic or racist elements are merely camouflage, one would expect to find that the gist of the argument would be an attack on the myth, since it is the essential underpinning of the prejudice; on the other hand, if the work is a disguised support or apology for prejudice, one would expect to find that, however "liberal" the writer attempts to sound, at the heart of the work will be support for the prejudicial myth. In practice this technique is not as easy as it might sound; works may contain contradictory support and opposition to the myth, which itself may be (indeed usually is) full of contradictions. Nonetheless, attempting to apply this approach at least has the effect of taking one beneath the surface of the prejudicial text.

With respect to the De Man article, for example, Cohn's book makes clear that while European antisemitism is a complex phenomenon with many internal contradictions, the main prejudicial myth that influenced Nazi thinking was the idea of a secret Jewish conspiracy to undermine western culture and achieve world domination. According to Cohn, the myth governed Nazi policy at the highest levels, and was the real motivation for Hitler's decision to seek total extermination of the Jews. There is no doubt that the other articles in the issue of *Le Soir* that de Man's work appeared in supported this prejudicial myth, that they emphasized the frighteningly powerful and pervasive evil influence of the Jews as the source of all that was wrong in modern culture. By arguing that Jewish writers were second rate and had little influence on contemporary literature, and indeed by affirming that modern civilization was "fundamentally healthy," de Man was clearly attacking that myth, and the antisemitic elements in the article serve as camouflage for this highly subversive view. While it is true that some of de Man's statements evoke other aspects of the antisemitic myth—that the Jews are inferior beings, for example—these are in effect used to disguise a critique of the dominant and most powerful myth. It seems to me, therefore, that Derrida could well be right in viewing the article as a veiled effort to resist the Nazis, an interpretation that confirms the impressions of de Man's friends that he was not antisemitic.¹²

Of course, this is not to say that de Man's action in writing the article is to be condoned. The youthful de Man gained a powerful position in the Belgian literary world by his willingness to write for the Nazis, while others of his generation risked their lives in the Resistance. His coded attack on Nazi policies may have salvaged his conscience but may not have outweighed the evil of his apparent collaboration with the enemy. In any case, a much more careful contextual study of all of de Man's *Le Soir* articles would be needed to pronounce definitively on his degree of guilt. My point here is simply that the matter is at the very least more complex than some of de Man's attackers have assumed. In one article at least,

faced with the choice of going with the strong flow of Nazi prejudice or resisting it, de Man clearly chose the latter course, although he cautiously cloaked his resistance in antisemitic rhetoric.

According to Cohn, for the antisemite the Jew is “the symbol of modernity, or rather of everything that is felt as frightening in the modern world.”¹³ Homosexuals have often been, and still are, similarly scapegoated. This was particularly true in the late fifties and early sixties, when the increasing openness of homosexuals in the arts, and their apparent predominance in such avant-garde fields as Pop Art, Beat poetry, and underground cinema, caused many commentators to blame them for the decadence they saw occurring in American culture. Suggestions of this sort began among Broadway critics in the mid-Fifties, when it came to be realized that two of the three leading playwrights, Tennessee Williams and William Inge, were homosexual; it accelerated in the early Sixties when Edward Albee emerged as the most prominent playwright of the next generation. A number of critics hinted that Broadway was run by a network of homosexuals, who supported each other and forced heterosexuals to ape their ways and conform to their perverted values.¹⁴ According to the prevalent version of the Freudian theory, homosexual men had failed to pass through the Oedipal phase, and so remained perpetual infants lacking a conscience (or “superego”); as such, they were a profoundly uncivilizing force. Excluded from mainstream society, they sought to destroy it; as *Time* magazine said in a highly influential article in 1966, “Homosexual ethics and esthetics are staging a vengeful, derisive counterattack on what deviates call the ‘straight’ world.”¹⁵ Homosexual influence was blamed for the “nihilism” of much contemporary drama; homosexual playwrights were “imposing their own sick views on the public,” said one commentator, and the result was “the slow corrosion of the only beliefs that might give meaning to an existence that these writers contend is meaningless.”¹⁶ Homosexuals were blamed for the increasing emphasis on sex in American life; “the homosexual cultural takeover is turning a society that was sexually sick to begin with into a pathological horror,” said one particularly extreme commentator, who singled out *Playboy* magazine as “the ultimate homosexual force in our society.”¹⁷ Many commentators used images of poisoning, disease, and decadence, as in much antisemitic propaganda.¹⁸ Often, the theatre was seen as the nexus of the infection: “In the theatre, especially the dance, homosexuality has been rampant for years, but as some are beginning to realize, it has spread to certain Madison Avenue galleries and a few of the publishing houses,” said a letter to the *New York Times* in 1961.¹⁹ All these accusations must be read against a background of the popular belief that homosexuals were “subversives” whose infiltration of American society was comparable to that of the Communists.²⁰ My research has included only more intellectual sector of the American media; according to a commentator at the time, Benjamin DeMott, who was one of the few to oppose the anti-homosexual trend openly, the accusation that homosexuals dominated

American cultural institutions was “more or less standard throughout the contemporary muckraking press.”²¹ This then was the prejudicial myth that underlay much of the homophobia of the period.

Among theatre critics, the most common charge was that homosexual playwrights’ “dishonest” portrayal of their homosexual experience in a heterosexual disguise was producing a distorted picture of women and heterosexual relations and as a result was undermining marriage and the family. This was suggested in the 1961 article that initiated open discussion of homosexuality in the theatre, written by Kauffmann’s predecessor at the *Times*, Howard Taubman; he complained that in plays by homosexual playwrights, “the unpleasant female of the species is exaggerated into a fantastically consuming monster or an incredibly pathetic drab,” and he declared these authors’ habit of stating “a homosexual theme in heterosexual situations” to be “unhealthy”: “the audience sense rot at the drama’s core.”²² In a later article, purporting to be a “modern primer” on recognizing disguised homosexual themes in recent plays, Taubman dwelt on this topic, warning his readers to look out for “the baneful female who is a libel on womanhood,” “the hideous wife who makes a horror of the marriage relationship, “the compulsive slut. . . who represent[s] total disenchantment with the possibility of a fulfilled relationship between man and woman,” and “scabrous innuendo about the normal male-female sexual relationship.”²³ William Goldman, who discussed homosexual influence in the theatre extensively in his 1969 book *The Season*, explained the source of the vindictiveness; the “terribly difficult lives” lived by homosexuals, he said,

might make a playwright, if he is a homosexual and forced to write about heterosexuals (otherwise someone might suspect), become a bit nasty, since the heterosexuals are the ones who loathe him, harass him, who won’t let him be. So he treats heterosexuals viciously. The married couples hate each other; the woman, with whom the homosexual tends to identify, is either a gentle dreamer or a destroyer herself. And the man is either a stupid stud, hot for a quick roll in the hay, or a weak, contemptible failure.²⁴

One can find echoes of these views in the writings of virtually all the leading drama critics of the period.²⁵

Scapegoating occurs when there are problems in the ingroup, problems for which it seeks to avoid responsibility by blaming an outgroup. The problems for which homosexual playwrights were increasingly being blamed centered on the breakdown of a key feature of the post-war heterosexual self-image: the ideal of the perfect middle-class marriage, the husband as faithful breadwinner, the wife as

devoted mother and help-mate, inhabiting a new, impeccably-clean home in the suburbs. This image was attacked in Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. Behind the sunny, Ozzie-and-Harriet facade, she revealed, was a desperately unhappy woman and a dysfunctional relationship. Friedan portrays the woman who is the victim of the feminine mystique as a kind of monster, who ultimately must "'castrate' the husband and sons who can never give her enough satisfaction to make up for the lack of a self."²⁶ The inequalities of the Fifties-style marriage have created shrewish, nagging, sexually-voracious wives and "the growing aversion and hostility men have for the feminine millstones hanging around their necks."²⁷ The great popularity of Friedan's book, and the subsequent burgeoning of feminism among white middle-class women, indicate that many shared her perception. But those whose self-image was strongly bound up with the pre-feminist paradigm of gender relations must have felt very threatened by this development, and it is not surprising that they should be on the look-out for a scapegoat. By calling the portrayals of women and marriage in the works of successful gay playwrights misogynist and vindictive, and by viewing them as a product of their author's neurosis, the (mostly male) critics were able to quell their rising doubts about the validity of the ideals to which they were committed.

The scapegoating process can be seen most clearly with respect to what is perhaps the key work of the period, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This biting portrayal of the vicious games of one-upmanship and mutual humiliation between an older married couple, George and Martha, and their interactions with a younger one, Nick and Honey, became by far the most successful non-musical play of the year when it opened in October of 1962. Although critics and audiences were mesmerized by the play, they were also clearly very disturbed by its negative portrayal of marriage in contemporary America. A few weeks after the opening of the play, a rumor developed that eventually found public expression in a letter to Taubman published in the *New York Times* in December:

I was at a party the other night where a gentleman gleefully clapped his hands and said "Isn't it marvelous? All the married couples seeing 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' will go home and act the same way and pretty soon men and women will be living like homosexual pairs." And there, it suddenly struck me, is the key to the play: it is not about men and women; it is about male homosexuals. The author has extrapolated the vicious, waspish, gratuitous destructiveness of people living in special circumstances to all people. His gifts have allowed him to get away with it, but the play is deeply flawed at its heart and, I think, invalidated. I don't suppose this can be discussed in print, but what a pity, as you once wrote, that the homosexual influence

is so pervasive—and distorting—in our theatre.²⁸

Soon it became an accepted fact among many critics that the play was really about male homosexuals and hence that it was not an accurate account of heterosexual marriage; many implied what this letter said more or less explicitly: that the play was a deliberate gay attempt to undermine heterosexual relations, and that the popularity of the play was a warning sign that the plot was succeeding. Here the scapegoating seems transparent; the disturbing implications of the play were neutralized by seeing it as the product of a vindictive enemy and as really not about heterosexual marriage. One can feel the letter-writer's relief that the play has been "invalidated."

Like most prejudicial myths, this theory about the play was more often subtly hinted at in print than stated openly. An extensive critical vocabulary developed around Albee's work to refer indirectly to the fact that when he was apparently writing about heterosexuals he was really writing about homosexuals. When Robert Brustein alluded to Albee's fondness for "impersonation," or John Simon mentioned his "transposing," or Richard Schechner referred to his work as a "lie," their readers recognized the allusion to the *Virginia Woolf* theory.²⁹ Some less high-brow critics were willing to be more forthright. Martin Gottfried of the *Women's Wear Daily* considered the play "an excuse for its playwright to indulge his hatred for women" and stated: "The reason that George and Martha cannot have children is because they are really men—homosexuals. How female, after all is Martha, even if one does accept the play's direction that she is a woman. . . . Is the running battle between George and Martha—and the kind of battle it is—a domestic conflict inherent in heterosexual or homosexual relationship? And isn't the quadruple sexual braiding of George, Martha, Nick and Honey more male-male than male-female in nature?"³⁰ Similarly overt is Tom Driver, who notes: "I do not deny that heterosexual couples engage in some of the same behavior and show some of the same psychology. They do. But a play built around such an orgy invites us to ask what part of life it most aptly refers to. The answer is not to marriages but to homosexual liaisons."³¹ Psychiatrically-orientated critics of course had a field day: "This is a savage play about a homosexual "marriage" in which all the characters are "doubles" so often chosen as the narcissistic object choices of such "marriages," playing out the cruel sadomasochistic games of wit and invective and loss and betrayal that homosexuals are wont to play among themselves."³² By 1965 Leslie Fiedler could mention that "in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* Albee [portrayed] the relationship of two homosexuals (one in drag) as the model of contemporary marriage" as if this were a recognized fact.³³

The vogue for this reading of Albee's play was, however, short-lived. By the end of the Sixties it was being queried from all sides. Gore Vidal attacked it in an interview with Mike Wallace on CBS television in 1967.³⁴ Roselyn Regelson

pointed out in 1968 that there was a contradiction in critics' viewing Martha as both a misogynist portrait of a woman and as "really" a gay man.³⁵ A leading scholar of contemporary drama, Gerald Weales, writing in 1969, rejected both the theory that the play represented a homosexual couple and that it was "a kind of homosexual denigration of conventional marriage," citing the fact that "the castrating female and the dominated male are such commonplace psychological stereotypes—on and off the stage—that their appearance need not be taken as an indication of a perverse attempt to do in all the Darbys and Joans who provide America's divorce statistics." Besides, he added, Martha and George do not really fit these stereotypes; George may seem weak, but he is in fact very much Martha's equal.³⁶ Many other later critics dealt the theory a devastating blow by simply ignoring it. Its sudden disappearance may reflect its prejudicial origin, and the fact that the conditions that made it a satisfying reading had changed. By the end of the sixties, most people had become inured to the new cultural climate created by feminism and other movements for social change and so felt less threatened by the play's challenge to the idealized image of Fifties-style marriage.

Ironically, among the strongest advocates of the cross-dressing theory of the play were some gay commentators, and it is largely they who continue to keep it alive today.³⁷ In the pre-Stonewall era, many gay men internalized the prevalent homophobia and were quite prepared to believe that long-term gay relationships—"pathetic pseudomarrriages," *Time* magazine called them—were like that of George and Martha. In their state of relative powerlessness, they even felt flattered to be portrayed as dangerous subversive enemies of society. The supposed homosexual subtext probably had a significant role in the play's early success; as in the case of *The Boys in the Band* six years later, homosexual men, who were a significant component of the Broadway audience, came to the play to see themselves, and heterosexuals came to see a theatrical display that was reassuringly *not* about themselves.

In more recent times, gay critics have often been preoccupied with finding homosexual meanings in texts by pre-Stonewall homosexual authors. While such readings are sometimes valid, the example of *Virginia Woolf* demonstrates that this interpretative tactic has its dangers. It is one thing to say that Albee or Tennessee Williams used their experience as homosexual men to create female characters like Martha or Blanche Dubois; it is another to say that these female characters are "really" gay men. In the first case we are talking about creating the image of a woman from a non-heterosexual viewpoint, one that while hardly feminist nonetheless avoids some of the stereotypes and idealizations that pre-feminist heterosexual men and women shared; in the latter case, we are invalidating these portrayals as not being of women at all. Understandably, both Albee and Williams were furious at this rejection of their intentions, as have been many of the actresses who played these roles. The truth is that the so-called "Albertine strategy," whereby

a gay male character is given a female name to avoid scandal, is extremely rare; much more common is the portrayal of a woman or a heterosexual relationship from a gay perspective, a perspective which may reveal much about women and heterosexuality. Homophobic critics of the Sixties feared this revelation, while some contemporary gay ones seem willing to sacrifice it in their quest for homosexual content in pre-Stonewall texts.

Reading the criticisms of both these groups of critics in conjunction with the play, I am struck by how inaccurate are their references to Albee's work and how improbable their arguments. Little that George and Martha actually do confirms the interpretation that they are really gay men in disguise. The events that some critics characterize as a homosexual orgy really amount to a traditional heterosexual cuckolding. Martha humiliates George by having sex with Nick, and then humiliates Nick by taunting him for his impotence; these humiliations are essentially heterosexual, since they involve reversals of the male-female power dynamic. Similarly unconvincing is the suggestion that the revelation in the third act that George and Martha had invented an imaginary son "proves" they are really a gay couple. In fact, the compulsion to have children belongs very much to the Fifties-style heterosexual couple; Martha's fantasies in the third act of fulfillment as a mother correspond very well to Betty Friedan's portrayal of the role children play in their mother's identity and the pathological effects of the feminine mystique on parenting. Indeed, Friedan's book as a whole provides a fascinating commentary on Albee's play, and the parallel popularity and notoriety of these works suggests that they were equally successful in analyzing the dysfunctional aspects of contemporary heterosexual marriage.

In a remarkable article published in 1968 entitled "But He's a Homosexual . . ." Benjamin DeMott critiqued the rise of anti-gay prejudice among critics with great clearheadedness. Acknowledging that being homosexual might strongly influence an author's work, and that homosexual people might well experience hostility to heterosexual institutions, he stressed the fact that their outsiders' position in fact might also allow them to see things that those committed to those institutions could not:

A portrait of a man exacerbated by a woman need not be only a thrust at a generalized Enemy; in at least one American play such a portrait faced a mass audience with truths about the new world of sexual equality and universal self-absorption quite inexpressible either in Ibsen or Bernard Shaw. An image of egos dependent upon a fantasy child can be more than a faggish leer; in one American play such an image showed mean uses of the family and, in addition, the vapidities of the doctrine that procreation in itself equals fulfillment. And, by the same token,

artists with extensive experience of respectable marriage and child rearing may write with seeming authority about subjects the homosexual can “never know,” and yet be worthless—because they are blind to the truth that the acceptable life, the embrace of heterosexuality, can become a cliché, an automatized rather than freely created value.³⁸

The values one holds most dearly are those that one is unaware of holding, those that in fact are part of one’s identity. This fact explains why a gay playwright could write the most searing exposé of heterosexual marriage of his time, why many heterosexual critics and audience-members were so threatened by it, and why gay playwrights were scapegoated for being the subversive cause of the social changes of which they were merely the barometer.

The view, then, that gay playwrights were undermining heterosexual society by their “distorted” portrayals of women and marriage is a classic example of a prejudicial myth; the belief that George and Martha are really a gay couple is a more specific embodiment of that myth. In the light of these facts, consider the following 1965 comment on the play:

It has been said that the dialogue of the man and the woman in the play is really the dialogue of two catty homosexuals. Those who say this apparently think that it disposes of Mr. Albee and his play. But no: what amuses and interests us is that a married couple talk with the sick-slick cleverness of “fairies.” This is finally a comment, not on Albee, and not on “fairies,” but on married couples—there lies the social substance, and there too the fun.³⁹

In spite of “catty” and “fairies” and “sick-slick,” this criticism attacks the prejudicial myth; the play’s use of camp dialogue is an insightful comment on the emptiness of heterosexual marriage, not a sign that it is really about a gay relationship. Read in the context of its time, this comment is clearly seeking to counter the prevailing homophobic myth. The author was in fact Eric Bentley, one of America’s most distinguished critics, who was also a closeted gay man.

If one looks again at the Kauffmann articles that were the origins of this discussion, one is forced to come to the opposite conclusion. In them Kauffmann lends support to the full substance of the prejudicial myth: that gay playwrights present “distorted” pictures of women and heterosexual institutions, that they are driven by “vindictiveness,” and that they are causing social harm. Moreover, by stating that the homosexual playwright’s portrayals of “marital quarrels are usually homosexual quarrels with one of the pair in costume,” Kauffmann specifically

evokes what I have suggested is a touchstone of the scapegoating process; readers in 1966 would immediately recognize this as a reference to *Virginia Woolf* and as support for the theory that sought to deflect that play's critique of contemporary marriage. The fact that Kauffmann blames society for this situation, shows understanding for the plight of the homosexual, and advocates the open portrayal of homosexuality on the stage, merely gives a liberal veneer to the wholehearted acceptance of scapegoating dynamic. In fact, Kauffmann's emphasis on the wrongs done by heterosexual society to the homosexual render the myth more convincing: if you were treated this way, you'd seek to undermine the straight world too, he seems to tell his heterosexual audience. This parallels some sophisticated antisemitic propaganda that stresses the wrongs done by Christians to Jews in order to make more believable the myth that the Jews were seeking to destroy Christian civilization. According to this analysis, then, in spite of Kauffmann's protestations, his articles must be viewed as going with the flow of anti-homosexual feeling among critics, not as resisting it. There is much that could be said in Kauffmann's defense. He no doubt meant well, and was unconscious of the extent to which he was perpetuating the viewpoint he sought at least to moderate; certainly, he was no worse than most other critics of his time. It is always easy to judge harshly those who succumbed to a prejudice once the emotional dynamics that made it so appealing have lost their grip. But while one must be careful to be fair to Kauffmann, it is also important to vindicate the gay commentators of the period who saw through the liberal veneer to the real prejudicial thrust of the articles, and to celebrate non-gay commentators like DeMott who had the courage and self-knowledge to stand against the homophobic current.

Notes

1. Stanley Kauffmann, "Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises," *New York Times*, 23 January 1966, sec 2, p 1.
2. Kauffmann, "On the Acceptability of the Homosexual," *New York Times*, 6 February 1966, sec 2, p 1.
3. See, for example, Kaier Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*": *The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson, 1987) 324-31; John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 179-81.
4. Kauffman, "Drop the Masquerade," *American Theatre*, June 1992, 2.
5. See Edward Alwood, *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians, and the News Media* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 65-69. The question of whether or not Kauffmann was homophobic in his behaviour subsequent to writing these columns is in dispute. Jack Kroll, the theatre critic for *Newsweek*, accused Kauffmann of blocking applications from openly gay groups when they were both on the peer review committee of the National Endowment for the Arts, but Kauffmann strongly denied this. See Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: 1940-1996* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 165-66. Kaiser notes,

incidentally, that Mart Crowley read Kauffmann's articles, accepted his challenge to gay playwrights to write about their real lives, and wrote *The Boys in the Band* (1968), a milestone in the portrayal of homosexuality on the stage. (Kaiser 185-6)

6. Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 121.

7. John Duckitt, *The Social Psychology of Prejudice* (New York: Praeger, 1992) 18-23.

8. Paul de Man, "The Jews in Contemporary Literature," (*Le Soir*, March 4 1941), David Lehman, trans., in David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon, 1991) 269-71.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 625, 629.

10. Duckitt 96-104.

11. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

12. Lehmann 182-83.

13. Cohn 255.

14. Gene Marine states that "The point is that homosexual playwrights and homosexual directors and homosexual producers are having more and more to say about what can and what can't be done in an American theatre." He explains how even heterosexual artists become homosexualized: "You start with an in-groupy thing, and pretty soon you have a standard. Joe Straight comes up with a serious play and the producer—who either *is* or can see how it's going—says, "no, baby, you gotta make that broad bitchier." It becomes a circle. It's not that more and more playwrights are queer; it's that more and more playwrights write plays as though they were." Gene Marine, "Who's Afraid of Little Annie Fanny?" *Ramparts* 5 (February 1967): 28. Wilfrid Sheed, a much more respectable commentator, gives a somewhat similar description of the same process whereby a "theatre of homosexual sensibility" is created: "Everyone has known persons with effeminate mannerisms picked up who knows where: I am merely suggesting that the same thing can happen to a play or a playwright—or even a whole theatre. Let me put it algebraically: let a be a heterosexual who has imitated b, a homosexual who has been playing the part of c, a heterosexual etc.; playwright d then comes along and writes about a as if a was an original, a real husband or wife say, and the job is done. Homosexuality has been absorbed with barely a trace; certain homosexual mannerisms have become part of the reigning style . . ." Wilfrid Sheed, "The Stage," *Commonweal* 65 (21 May 1965): 289.

15. "The Homosexual in America," *Time*, 21 January 1966, 40. This notorious article is dated two days before Kauffmann's first column on homosexuality appeared and may have influenced him. It was clearly occasioned by Albee's play *Malcolm*, an adaptation of a novel by gay author James Purdy, which opened on January 11 and which was adversely reviewed in the same issue of *Time*. This play raised anti-homosexual feeling among critics to new heights.

16. Joseph Hayes, "Distorted Views," *New York Times*, 11 August 1963, sec 2, p 1.

17. Marine 29-30.

18. Replying to someone who insisted that Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* could not be ignored, the distinguished critic Richard Schechner replied: "That's right—there is no way in which we

can ignore danger or disease. But it is not right therefore to welcome the plague into our midst. We must not ignore what Albee represents or portends, either for our theatre or for our society. The lie of his work is the lie of our theatre and the lie of America. The lie of decadence must be fought." Richard Schechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" *Tulane Drama Review* 73 (Spring 1963): 10.

19. Chester R. Koons, "Rampant," *New York Times*, 26 November 1961, sec 2, p 3.

20. See, for example, Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976) 91-119.

21. Benjamin DeMott, "But He's a Homosexual . . ." in *Supergrow: Essays and Reports on Imagination in America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969) 18.

22. Howard Taubman, "Not What It Seems," *New York Times*, 5 November 1961, sec 2, p 1.

23. Taubman, "Modern Primer," *New York Times*, 28 April 1963, sec 2, p 1.

24. William Goldman, *The Season: A Candid Look at Broadway* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1969) 239.

25. The only New York critic who seems to have been completely free of this kind of thinking was Walter Kerr. It was not that he was less homophobic than the others, but he simply did not believe that the playwright's homosexuality determined his work as an artist or invalidated his social commentary. In an article written in 1976, but probably reflecting his attitude at the time that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened, he firmly rejects the "rumor that went the eternal rounds shortly after the piece became the talk of the town" that the play was really about a homosexual couple. But he also explains the misreading as understandable on the grounds that to heterosexual audiences, George and Martha's mutual accusations that the other sexually molested their imaginary boy was "a particular form of spite" that smacked of homosexuality rather than heterosexuality (Walter Kerr, "Virginia Woolf—Sparks Still Fly," *New York Times*, 11 April 1976, sec 2, pp. 1, 7). Here Kerr's participation in an anti gay attitude points to his prejudice, but his insistence that homophobic reading is incorrect points to the fact that he refused to allow his prejudice to dominate his criticism. This refusal is evident throughout his commentaries on homosexual playwrights.

26. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; rpt. New York: Dell, 1984) 325-26.

27. Friedan 273.

28. Letter from Jo Coudert, "In the Drama Mailbag," *New York Times*, 2 December 1962.

29. Robert Brustein, "Three Plays and a Protest," *New Republic*, 23 January 1965, 34; John Simon, *Hudson Review* 15 (1962-63): 572; Schechner 10.

30. Martin Gottfried, *A Theatre Divided: The Postwar American Stage* (Boston: Little, Brown: 1967) 266.

31. Tom F. Driver, "What's the Matter with Edward Albee?" *The Reporter*, 2 January 1964; rpt. *American Drama and Its Critics*, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965), 243.

32. Joseph T. Coltrera, "Introduction," in *Lives, Events and Other Players: Directions in Psychobiography*, Downstate Psychoanalytic Institute, 25th Anniversary Series, vol. 4 (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981) 42. This later comment, in an introduction to a collection of psychoanalytically-orientated essays dating back to the sixties, is very much in the spirit of those times.

33. Leslie Fiedler, "The New Mutants," 1965; rpt. *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (NY: Stein and Day, 1971), 2: 394.

34. Kaiser 167.

35. Rosalyn Regelson, "Up the Camp Staircase," *New York Times*, 3 March 1968, 15 D.

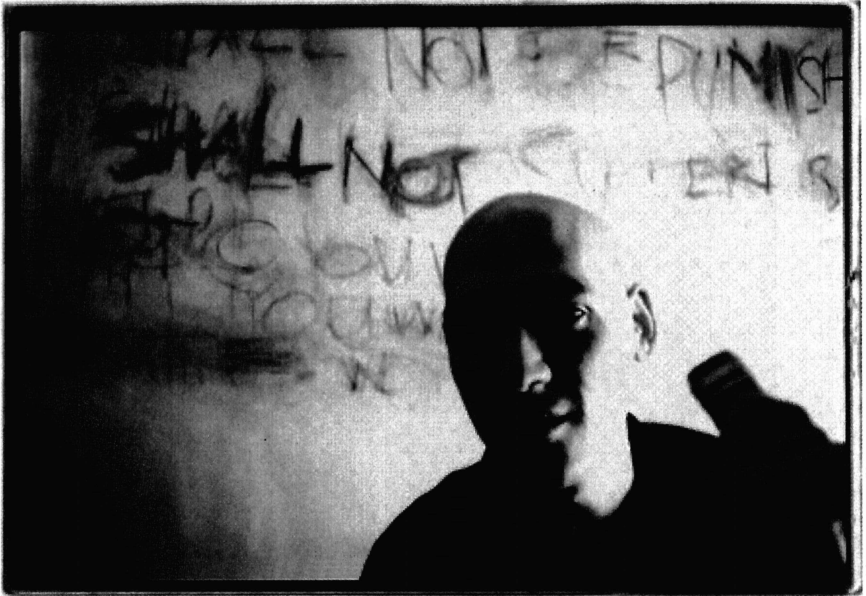
36. Gerald Weales, *The Jumping-Off Place: American Drama in the 1960's* (Np: Macmillan, 1969) 42-43.

37. See, for example, Sky Gilbert's article, "Closet Plays: An Exclusive Dramaturgy at Work," *Canadian Theatre Review* 59 (Summer 1989): 55-58.

38. DeMott 34-35.

39. Eric Bentley, "Comedy and the Comic Spirit in America," *What Is Theatre? Incorporating The Dramatic Event and Other Reviews 1944-1967* (NY: Atheneum 1968) 413. Bentley describes this essay as "the text of a talk commissioned by Alan Downer and the Voice of America during the winter of 1964-65."

PRAXIS



Hopeful Monsters' *The Bacchae*: *Torn to Pieces*.