

The Politics of Stage Space: Women and Male Identity in Sam Shepard's Family Plays

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Shepard's focus on male crises of identity has tended to relegate his female characters and their concerns to the sidelines of his plays. Until *Fool for Love* (1983), he claimed to be uninterested in women's stories, preferring instead the "mystery" between men.¹ This tendency to push his female characters off stage, denying them presence or voice in his plays, has prompted many critics to detect misogyny in his treatment of women. Lynda Hart, for example, argues that Shepard's vision is ultimately "pornographic" in its objectification of the female, while Florence Falk suggests that Shepard's masculinized landscape victimizes women.² His male characters' explorations of subjectivity are always given center stage; however, in relegating his women to the margins, Shepard at the same time connects them with the "marginal" activity of survival. Denied stage space, Shepard's women, particularly in his family plays, also tend to refuse participation in the violent and deadly games of the men. It seems at times that Shepard relegates his women to the sidelines *because* they refuse to validate the stories of his male characters. Yet, ironically, it is only in the women's spaces of Shepard's plays, off-stage or in the margins, that any hope for survival is offered.

Shepard's primary focus throughout his work is on questions of male identity. His male protagonists struggle to prove themselves to be men, but are limited, even entrapped, by the images of masculine identity passed on to them by their actual or cultural fathers. This issue of patriarchal legacy perhaps explains why Shepard has turned to exploration of the son in the American family as the chief way to explore issues of male identity and individuation that have obsessed him since early plays such as *Cowboys #2* and *Rock Garden*. In his plays, ideas of men are limited to stereotypical images of the western hero who lives by a code of violence. The Cowboy is a recurrent image which he connects mythologically to such twentieth-century images of masculinity as the gangster and the rock star.³ Based primarily on this western hero mythos, his men have as a key to their identity a view of maleness as violence. This view of

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masculinity has also been voiced by Shepard himself. He has said, in regard to American violence, which he genders as male:

there's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something 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.⁴

This statement makes clear that the patterns of masculinity for Shepard—and for his characters—are intricately linked with a violence perceived to stem from a need to prove one's self a man—to "act out some idea of manhood" instilled in sons by their fathers. Shepard himself recalls how his own father projected upon him a "macho image" of masculinity: "I know what this thing is about because I was a victim of it; it was part of my life, my old man tried to force on me a notion of what it was to be a 'man.'"⁵ Male identity is set up as a precarious thing which must be violently enacted (highlighting its performance quality) and violently protected if it is to exist at all. We see the sons in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind* inheriting a violent image of male identity from their fathers, who are usually drunkards wallowing in their self-destruction.

This instilled need for violence as well as the fear of inferiority is further linked, in the male psyche of these plays, to the feminine as the thing perceived to threaten male identity. Shepard's men labor under the notion of themselves as beset by challenges to their manhood. In this focus, Shepard's work falls in line with that of many canonical American writers, recalling Nina Baym's comment that much American literature by men has presented "melodramas of beset manhood."⁶ The male characters in Shepard's plays believe in the need to discredit, wipe-out, or erase the feminine whether within or outside of themselves in order to assert a "macho" identity which their frontier (cowboy) mythos privileges as being truly manly, and (in Shepard's thinking) truly American. When Eddie returns to May in *Fool for Love*, she tells him "you're going to erase me,"⁷ a comment that has led Lynda Hart to note its "immediate, literal reality" in light of "the erasure of women from history and the gynocide that is routinely practiced in American society."⁸

The man of Shepard's plays often looks to Shepard's "West," to the masculinized frontier, in order to find the macho image he seeks, yet he is also drawn forward in his quest by his image of woman, which he perceives as an

extension or embodiment of that frontier to be conquered. Shepard's landscape is often presented in the gendered terms that Annette Kolodny describes in which the "virgin" land of the frontier is metaphorically presented as a woman that must be possessed or tamed and which in turn will give the possessor his manhood.⁹ Frank Rich makes clear this connection between the male's idea of the West and of the feminine when he describes Jake's vision of a suddenly healthy and nude Beth at the close of *A Lie of the Mind's* act 1. Rich refers to this vision as the call of the road to the male wanderer evoked by a woman: "a woman whose nude back beckons with the mesmerizing lure of a distant, flickering neon sign along a desolate Western highway."¹⁰ At the same time that the female body in such plays as *Fool for Love* and *Lie of the Mind* comes to represent the Western frontier that needs to be possessed, the women also supposedly offer the reflection of self which these men need to affirm and validate their existence. Rosemarie Bank and Florence Falk in different ways approach this issue of self-reflection or of self and other commonly practiced by the characters in Shepard's plays.¹¹ It seems that at their most desperate moments, Shepard's men look to their women to shore up images of themselves. In *Tooth of Crime* it is Becky to whom Hoss reveals his fears and doubts as to how he will face the threat of the gypsy killer, and she counsils "it's back down to survival, Hoss."¹² At his moment of greatest self-doubt as to his ability to write a real western, Lee of *True West* decides that he "needs" a woman—just to hear a woman's voice. Both Eddie of *Fool* and Jake of *Lie* alternately desert and return to the women in their lives, acting out their conflicted desire for independence and their absolute need for contact with a woman to consolidate their self-images.

As gender issues have drawn more and more critical attention to Shepard's work, few critics who discuss Shepard's treatment of women distinguish between the position in which Shepard places his female characters in his masculine-biased plays and the actual strength often voiced by some of these women in the face of such treatment.¹³ Time and again his women concern themselves mainly with survival, not simply as an act of capitulation to male commands, but often as a way of following their own, very different, agenda that turns them away from the male crisis. Until the family plays that begin with *Curse of the Starving Class* in 1977, women were largely absent from Shepard's plays and often tended to be caricatures when present, but in dealing with the family, Shepard cannot avoid presenting women's roles even if he might prefer not to do so. In the family plays, we begin to see more clearly the politics at stake in Shepard's presentation of male/female relationships, how the men struggle to control their women as a way to maintain an image of themselves as powerful men, and how the women suffer from this treatment by their men, but also ultimately elude their control.

Unlike his men, who uncritically accept as inevitable their violent images of male/female relations, Shepard's women are able to imagine new versions of history, reality, and self. Imagination is important to survival in many, if not most, of Shepard's plays. We see characters struggling to survive by using their imagination in such plays as *Cowboys #2*, *Tooth of Crime*, *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, and *True West*. When, as usually happens, the characters of these plays are no longer able to sustain original thought or to imagine new roles or performances for themselves, their identity or existence is threatened or confused. In addition to possessing limited imaginations, Shepard's men are also limited in understanding the implications of their actions or of the actions of others around them. Wesley of *Curse of the Starving Class* is mystified by his own actions as he puts on his father's clothes, unable to imagine any clear explanation for his behavior. Eddie, speaking to May in *Fool for Love*, thinks he understands his actions as he declares proudly that he never repeats himself, but the much more perceptive May exclaims "You do nothing but repeat yourself. That's all you do. You just go in a big circle" (67). May's description of Eddie's mindless repetition of behavior that he does not understand is appropriate for Shepard's men in general.

In contrast to the limiting and repetitive visions that so obsess and immobilize these men stand, albeit obliquely, the women in Shepard's family plays. The contrast between his men and women is heightened by the position in which Shepard places his female characters as opposed to his male characters in regard not only to stage space, but also to their own actions. Sheila Rabillard, in discussing the premiere performance of *A Lie of the Mind* which Shepard directed, notes that he encouraged his women to approach their roles with a different attitude from that of the men. The women, she writes, were directed to be more "self-regarding" than the men, to be more aware of the irony and the humor of their actions, while "the men, in contrast, played their roles with no trace of self-mockery."¹⁴ This difference in the actor's relationship to the character highlights a general difference in attitude toward the self between Shepard's men and women in his family plays. The women come to an awareness of the problems that surround them, and in a twist of traditional positioning, tend to take action to avoid or escape the destruction that is overwhelming the men. Ironically, although the male characters and their stories dominate the stage space of Shepard's theater, it is their stories that fracture, fail, and fragment, even as the men cling to them for meaning and identity. Only in the stories of the women is there any hope for survival or enlightenment.

Enlightenment is hardly shared by all of Shepard's women in the family plays. The mother of *True West* certainly does not fall into this category, but neither does she fall into the traditional role of the mother who cleans up after

her sons' messes in order to ease their way, as Lorraine seeks to do at the beginning of *A Lie of the Mind*. Doris Auerbach writes of the ineffectual mothers in Shepard's plays,¹⁵ and certainly his women are no better parents, usually, than are his men. But are these women so much ineffectual in and of themselves as they are rendered so by the position in which they are placed by Shepard? Halie remains a disembodied voice for most of *Buried Child*, and the mothers of *Fool for Love* are present only in the stories told by their husband and children. The mother of *True West*, in her brief appearance in the closing moments of the play, fits Auerbach's definition best, yet her withdrawal, like that of the other mothers of the family plays, can also be read as a decision not to endow the male struggle for identity with special meaning. In response to Auerbach's article, I suggest that as Shepard's mothers absent themselves from the conflicts that so consume the men, they are embracing a different set of values that conflict with the male crisis at the center of Shepard's plays. The mother's "withdrawal" is a refusal to collude in the male stories and their concomitant destruction. She chooses to leave because life on stage in Shepard's plays is usually a scene of destruction, violence, and death. Furthermore, unlike most of the men in the family plays, the women are often the only ones *able* to leave the destruction that engulfs Shepard's stage.

Although ultimately presenting its women as complications for Wesley, the son who is trying to preserve the family home, *Curse of the Starving Class* offers two powerful and intriguing female characters, Emma and Ella. The adolescent Emma has been touted as one of the strongest female characters that Shepard has ever created.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, she is also one of Shepard's youngest characters, embodying the voice of the tomboy not yet limited by sexual stereotyping, who is just now receiving the female "curse" of menstruation that supposedly will shape her destiny. But currently she is vibrant and vociferous, determined to get away from the family and to create her own life, first as an auto mechanic in Baja and later as a criminal. She speaks her mind to her brother, telling him of her latest choice of careers: "It's the perfect self-employment. Crime. No credentials. No diplomas. No overhead. No upkeep. Just straight profit. Right off the top."¹⁷ Her exploration of possible lifestyles and her seeming ability to choose her path stand in contrast to her brother Wesley who finds himself trapped into repeating his father's role, accepting his "poison" and metamorphosing into his father to such a point that his mother even refers to him by his father's name, Weston. Emma is the wild card in this play, her actions not anticipated or expected by the other characters as she runs away, rides through and shoots up a bar, escapes from jail, and finally tries to leave in her father's car. She even attempts to distract Wesley from wallowing in self-pity over his inability to shake off his father's influence as she tells him, "Well don't

eat your heart out about it. You did the best you could" (196). Certainly Emma is not to be ignored as a vibrant voice in this play, but ultimately her story reflects the cowboy mythos that is common among Shepard's men. Her behavior links her more clearly to her father than to her mother, until she is at last killed (or so we are lead to believe) by a car bomb intended for her father. She is literally destroyed by her father's legacy, which she failed to abandon soon enough to save herself.

Ella, the mother in *Curse*, also shows a streak of defiance and independence in trying to organize a life apart from her husband, Weston, who evidently is rarely home anyway. Auerbach argues that Ella's actions in the play constitute withdrawal rather than confrontation, her efforts minimal in the face of her husband's personality. This negative portrait depends in part on one's assumptions concerning Ella's proper role in the play. Is she first and foremost to be judged as a mother, as a wife, or as a woman? Her attempt to take care of herself leads her to try to sell the avocado ranch which her alcoholic husband is never home to run and which her son cannot run by himself. Deciding to cut her losses from a bad marriage, Ella works out a deal with a "lawyer friend" to sell the land for development. No longer a woman to cling to an abusive relationship with her husband, Ella is at least attempting to break one cycle of dysfunction. Ironically, considering the negative way that they have usually been viewed by critics, it is often the mothers and "older women" in Shepard's plays who are willing to break their ties to dysfunctional relationships and to start a new life, just as Ella of this play tries to do and, as we will examine in greater detail later, Lorraine of *A Lie of the Mind* succeeds in doing.

Similar to Ella, Halie of *Buried Child* may not be the loving and loyal wife, but given her family, can we assume that she bears sole blame for this fact? The focus of *Buried Child*, which allows Dodge to tell "the" story of Halie's betrayal of him, does not allow for her version of events. Given Dodge's personality—given even his name—can we really assume that his story is accurate and not a method of dodging responsibility for the family's ruin? Can we accurately judge Halie's responsibility or lack of it given the way the play refuses her space on stage? She remains a disembodied voice during much of the first act of the play, and Dodge remains constant throughout the play in trying to discredit or ignore her, or to distract the audience from everything that she says. Dodge's version of events clearly sets up Halie to take the guilt for the family's curse, for the child that is perhaps the result of her incestuous liaison with her son Tilden, or maybe Ansel. The half-stories we are told of the family's past are made to blame Halie for the current decline, but it is hard to determine if Dodge's version of the story of Halie's betrayal is the full version. We never discover who really

is the father of the child (something only Halie would know for sure), nor do we ever hear Halie's version of events, her motives for action.

Ironically enough, the off-stage space to which Halie is relegated in this play is also a space made preferable to that of the house on stage. Characters who venture off-stage find a vitality and freshness not possible in the house which is full of death and "the stench of sin."¹⁸ Tilden's corn and carrots, as well as Halie's roses come from outside of the house. Center stage is actually the least vital, most deadly place to be. Dodge maintains center stage not because of his strength as a character, but because of his physical weakness, which renders him unable to leave the house and its curses. It is weakness or failure, such as Bradley's loss of a leg and Tilden's loss of his wits, that traps characters in the house throughout the play. The house also claims Shelley until she asserts her independence by exclaiming to the returned Halie, "I don't like being ignored. I don't like being treated like I'm not here" (119-120). Like Halie, she is able to leave the house after taking a stand to assert her independence, but Vince's "stand" ineffectually returns him to the place he was trying to escape. For all his youthful virility, Vince is as unable as Dodge to leave this house and is helplessly drawn back to it to take on Dodge's role. In taking center stage to claim ownership of the house, Vince also claims his own destruction.

Although Halie's story in *Buried Child* is limited, the mother's story in *True West* is written off the stage even more completely. She appears only briefly as something of a cartoon version of the mother who tells her two grown sons, who are killing each other before her eyes, not to play rough in the house. Distant, unemotional, and out of touch, she serves mainly as background for the battle of identity in which Lee and Austin are engaged, leaving them to fight it out as she goes looking for a place she can recognize as home. However, in refusing to take the brothers' fight seriously, her reaction offers a different, less self-important view of the play's central conflict. No matter how much importance Lee and Austin have placed on their showdown, to her, their obsession with control and dominance is of no greater importance than a boyhood squabble. Ella, Halie, and even the mother of *True West*, in leaving the stage space, simply ignore the seeming importance of the male crisis of identity, choosing instead to pursue a better life, a better love, a better home. In contrast to these women, their husbands and sons cannot envision new lives for themselves once their current ones have failed. Instead of creating new stories, new adventures, new tactics, the men cling to the past methods of behavior, repeating themselves in an endless cycle of self-destruction.

Shepard's focus on his male characters' behavior rather than on the women's concerns for improvement and/or change, seems to privilege the stagnation and destruction played out by his men. In refusing the woman's story

presence on stage, Shepard's plays seek to invalidate their concerns except as they relate to the male characters. His staging implies that a man may, and should, take as his first priority issues of his own identity, but a woman's first priority should be to her family and to her man. When the men desert or abuse their families (physically or emotionally) the audience is encouraged by both the men's stories and by the politics of the staging to view them sympathetically because the men, after all, are positioned as the plays' protagonists on whom the audience is supposed to focus its consideration. The stories the men give us often seek to rationalize their violent or abusive behavior, implying they are simply confused or are seeking something that they need and rightfully deserve (freedom, independence, control of their lives and of their family). However, the women who leave or who desire to leave the male space of the stage are usually treated by the men as selfish betrayers of the family and, particularly, of their husbands. Furthermore, this betrayal is established, according to the male story of events, as the cause of the violence, destruction, and death the men enact on stage. The men end up blaming "their" women as a way of eluding the responsibility they owe their family as "head" of the household. Such is the seeming intention of Shepard's staging, but a key question is left open in regard to Shepard's portrayal of masculinity: does this politics of staging actually absolve the men in these plays of guilt and blame for their destructive behavior?

The complications which the woman's story offers to the male mythologies in the family plays is enacted quite effectively in *Fool for Love*, which also happens to be Shepard's first attempt to create a fully realized female character.¹⁹ Although Shepard emphasizes male-male relationships in his writing, he became more interested in male-female relationships in the 1980's, about the same time he became involved with his current wife, the actress Jessica Lange. Both *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* explore how women are used and abused in the protagonist's quest for male identity, and they also offer us a look at the precariousness of that male identity in relation to women. Both of these plays are continuations of the family plays. However, unlike *Curse*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*, both *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* make the relationship of romantic (or at least sexual) attachment between a man and a woman—between the son of the family and his wife or girlfriend—at least as central as the father (or grandfather)/son relationship that is treated in these plays. More precisely, these two plays explore how a son's relationship with women is profoundly affected by his relationship with his father, from whom the son has derived a precarious and violent concept of identity. This precariousness of the male identity becomes most clear as the woman's story in these plays works to discredit that of the man's.

In his struggle to assert a masculine identity, the male character of Shepard's family plays must discredit the woman's story, imposing in its place his own version of her story, in order to maintain a central position within his own fantasy—to remain "a fantasist" as the Old Man calls Eddie in *Fool* (27). This task becomes increasingly difficult in the world of *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* as the female characters, unlike those of the earlier family plays, do not simply abandon the stage space to their men. In reading these plays, it is important to note the emphasis placed on fantasy, and on lies of the mind, which place the man always in the center of the story, always looking to and for what the Old Man refers to as "the male side a' this thing" (54). In this fantasy of centrality, the male character creates a split between physical and psychological reality. The Old Man of *Fool for Love* sums up this irreconcilable splitting in his often quoted comments on realism:

THE OLD MAN: Take a look at that picture on the wall over there. (*He points at wall stage right. There is no picture but Eddie stares at the wall.*) Ya' see that? Take a good look at that. Ya' see it? . . . Barbara Mandrell. That's who it is. Barbara Mandrell. You hear of her?

EDDIE: Sure.

THE OLD MAN: Well, would you believe me if I told ya' I was married to her?

EDDIE: (*pause*) No.

THE OLD MAN: Well, see, now that's the difference right there. That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind. (27)

According to the Old Man, the life of the mind and the lie of the mind are the same: an interior reality projected on the outside world. Yet, as the women in these plays demonstrate, the outside world refuses to operate according to this interior reality, and so Shepard's men erupt into violence in their attempts to control and to shape the physical world around them, especially as it is represented by women. Women, like May who leaves the trailer in Wyoming which Eddie had set her up in before he took off, refuse to stay in place, refuse, finally, to be faithful to the self-centered fantasies of their men, and so their men direct at them various degrees of anger and violence. The physical world of women, which is the recipient of this violence, is often presented as the cause of

this violence, is made to bear the blame for the male character's inability to confront reality and to take responsibility for his actions whether that is betrayal that leads to suicide (that of the Old Man), competition that leads to patricide (Jake and his father), or jealousy that leads to would-be murder (Jake towards Beth). The male characters want to view "their" women simply as plot motivation that allows the man to act out his inner pain and confusion. Given this behavior of the male characters, the question becomes for the audience of Shepard's plays, whom are we to believe and where are we to place our sympathies? The logic upon which these men operate, upon which Shepard seems to intend his audience to place its faith in order to sympathize with these men, is clearly skewed. Regardless of whether Shepard would like us to or not, do we merely accept that the Old Man of *Fool for Love* is really married to Barbara Mandrell simply because he believes it to be true? Or that Beth really did become the adulteress she was acting in a play, the belief which prompts Jake to beat her up? If Shepard intends for his texts to reinforce patriarchal biases, as certain critics have argued, these same texts often also elude his biases by showing the male "truths" to be lies and, thereby, exposing the instability of this masculine identity which is built on lies.

In defining a lie, Eddie tells Martin (the man about to take May out on a date), "Lying's when you believe it's true. If you already know it's a lie, then it's not lying" (58). Shepard's characters, like his plays, elide truth and lies, reality and fiction, in ways that make them difficult to sort out. If what is real is whatever you believe in your mind, then the real is also a lie because "lying's when you believe it's true." What they give with one hand, Shepard's plays take away with the other. According to one version of truth—the masculine lie of the mind—the violence of Shepard's men is valid, but according to another—the female version of the men's stories within these plays—this violence is completely inexplicable and unjustified. Shepard thus offers a double-vision which both glorifies and nostalgically longs for certain versions of male identity and which simultaneously undercuts these versions as consuming and dangerous fantasies not simply for the women but for the men as well.

Fool for Love contrasts the "male side a' things" with the female side in its playing out of the battle of the sexes between May and Eddie. Their romantic conflict mirrors the male desire to control the story of woman. In placing the Old Man on-stage but in a separate playing space from that inhabited by Eddie and May, Shepard foregrounds the question of whose vision we are seeing. Are Eddie and May memories (fantasies) called up by the Old Man, or is the Old Man a memory or fantasy called up by Eddie or May? The plot of the play revolves around the slowly revealed, intermingled story(ies) of Eddie, May, the Old Man, and the absent mothers of Eddie and May. All three of the on-stage

characters tell contradictory stories of their mutual past, and each story reveals the splittings and mergings of identity within the adulterous and incestuous ties that bind them to one another. The Old Man's story is the most guarded and the most white-washed as he attempts to absolve himself of responsibility for his sexual betrayal of both Eddie's and May's mothers. He does so by explaining that his love for these two women "was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all," something which "can happen to the best of us" (63). When the two women end up in the same town, however, May and Eddie both describe how he simply surrenders his attempts to control events and disappears. In leaving, he abandons his credibility as a witness to the events that lead to the sexual relationship between Eddie and May and to the suicide of Eddie's mother.

Eddie begins this story as a method of warning May's would-be suitor, Martin, to leave her alone. Yet his story of his meeting with May is revised by May whose version, being the last offered and the one which Eddie confirms against the Old Man's wishes, seems to be the most accurate story. She tells of how her mother, obsessed with love for the Old Man, would follow him from town to town, finally tracking him down at dinner with Eddie and his mother. The Old Man then disappears, and May's mother mourns herself into a stupor while Eddie and May begin their romantic relationship. Upon learning of the Old Man's betrayals and of the incestuous relationship between her son and May, Eddie's mother kills herself—blows her brains out with the Old Man's shotgun. Both Eddie and May agree upon this story in defiance of the Old Man who crosses onto the main stage at this point in order to argue that this suicide did not happen because "nobody told me any a' that" (54). His argument implies that if he did not know of it, it could not have happened, once more highlighting the split between physical and psychological reality. But Eddie and May's reaction to this argument implies that the father's fantasies seem to have lost out here to the story of the mother. However, this moment of revelation does not lead to resolution. Eddie and May kiss, affirming their romantic ties, then Eddie leaves to see about the off-stage countess—another wild gun of female will whose story is told by others—while May begins packing to, also, leave Eddie again as well. The male story has been questioned, but we are left with ambivalent reaction on the part of May. She is leaving Eddie again, just as he left her. She is again refusing to stay in the space where the man leaves her, but her leaving is merely a repetition of behavior indicating that she too, like Eddie, does nothing but repeat herself. The one difference is that she seems aware of the repetition while Eddie remains unconscious of it and of its destruction.

After the short, compact *Fool for Love*, Shepard's next play takes on a larger canvas and offers a more detailed portrait of possibilities for a female space. *A Lie of the Mind* is, no doubt, the most disturbing of the family plays in

its treatment of women. Consistent with Shepard's focus on masculinity, the fracturings of the female body in this play are set up as reflections of the fractured psyche of his male characters. Beth's bruised body and injured brain are the direct result of her husband's interior fears and insecurities projected upon her. Jake epitomizes Shepard's comment about the Anglo-American male's deeply rooted feelings of inferiority. The play's initial focus is clearly on Jake's struggles rather than on those of his wife. As Lynda Hart points out, Beth's position in this play is as object, or, the stage directions tell us, as "simply [Jake's] vision."²⁰ The focus of the play, the implied sympathy, is, then, not upon Beth the beaten object but upon Jake, the suffering and "humiliated" subject. Thus Hart argues:

Beth is not a *real* character in the play; she is a culturally constructed fantasy—a "lie of the mind." . . . Shepard's masculine perception renders his female characters as powerfully repressed concepts that must be subdued or annihilated.²¹

We are encouraged to focus on Jake's suffering which is "rendered so intensely that Beth's pathetic efforts to recover are backgrounded."²² But even if Shepard's intended focus is on Jake's suffering, is it so easy to sympathize with a man who has beaten his wife, not for the first time, and left her for dead, not for the first time, and who refuses to listen to reason from anyone else in the play?

As far as Jake and Beth's relationship is concerned early in the play, Jake certainly seems to be the acting subject, the play's protagonist. But as the play progresses, this organization becomes more questionable. Beth's attachment to Jake's brother Frankie offers a different version of subject-object relations. When Frankie crosses the stage to travel to Beth's family home in Montana in order to see what his brother has actually done, he becomes a captive in Beth's house, partly due to his gunshot wound but also due to his personality as well. She imposes on Frankie a fantasy version of him as her new and better husband. After all, Beth is not, we are told by her mother Meg, "pure female" but has "male in her" (104), and thus in Shepard's world can take her turn at projecting her fantasies on others. Frankie, for his part, is not purely male but is "soft" and "[g]entle. Like a woman-man" (76), and so becomes the victim of Beth's fantasies.

This play's complexity of the male and female positions regarding self returns us to Sheila Rabillard's exploration of the male/female positions within this play as staged by Shepard in its premiere performance. Rabillard offers further support for establishing a marked difference in approach between the women and the men:

Under Shepard's direction, *A Lie of the Mind's* women characters have a stage presence different from the men's. Much of the play's humor comes from the women's lines, because they are self-regarding in a way that the men are not; they act as their own audiences, and see themselves as they are seen. . . . the men, in contrast, played their roles with no trace of self-mockery.²³

Following this discussion of the difference in self-perception between these actors and actresses, Rabillard turns to other plays by Shepard wherein the man tries to "[affirm] himself by performing and controlling" while the woman "perceives herself as others see her and defines herself in those terms."²⁴ It would seem that the men create the lies and the women must live according to them, according to a logic which they do not themselves create. Subsequently, the incident between Jake and Beth, which prompts the action of *Lie*, builds on this logic: "Beth plays a loose woman in a local theatrical performance . . . perceived as a tramp, she is one."²⁵ On this level of perception, Jake's motive for beating Beth seems no longer to be fantasy but fact; he is no longer "paranoid" that his wife is betraying him sexually, but he has a form of proof that she is: his internal visions.

Jake's assumption that Beth's performance is a reflection of her actual behavior evokes the metaphor of the theater and the role playing that takes place there which is a common aspect of many of Shepard's plays.²⁶ This metaphor of the theater is given a particularly vicious realization in Beth's acting career. The point which Rabillard's article highlights is the difference between male and female perceptions of this performance of self—the male characters lacking the self-awareness that is shared by the women. Beth learns what it is to be a man by pretending to be one as she costumes herself in her father's shirt.²⁷ Beth knows that she is pretending even when she decides that she prefers to pretend, but Jake cannot distinguish between the pretense and the reality either in Beth's life or in his own. In his confusion of Beth's acting career and her real life, the play returns to *Fool's* idea of realism: what you believe in your mind is real. Yet, *A Lie of the Mind* calls this reality a "lie" at the same time, just as Eddie stated that a lie is when you believe it is true. As in *Fool*, lies and truths are elided in the world of *Lie*, calling into question the reality of Jake's life of the mind at the same time that the fantasy-logic of the play seems to validate it. However much the male characters of *Lie* attempt to hold the other characters to their fantasy-logic, they are not able to do so fully in this play. The strict independent male-subject/dependent female-object dichotomy is not maintained in regard to all of the characters, making *Lie* Shepard's most complex examination of male identity within male-female relations. This power dynamic

between men and women is given a particularly ambiguous twist in the characters of Beth's parents, Baylor and Meg.

The relationship between Baylor and Meg is the most fully developed of any of Shepard's older couples. When they first appear in Beth's hospital room, Meg's vagueness and seeming ineffectuality is accompanied by Baylor's bluster and orneriness. Back in Montana, however, the power struggle within their marriage is less clearly weighted toward Baylor. He may attempt to rule his roost, but his dependence on his wife becomes as clear as is his resentment of her, making their relationship reminiscent of that between Dodge and Halie in *Buried Child*. Meg is much more aware of the dynamics of their relationship than Baylor allows himself to be. Her often-quoted lines sum up male and female differences according to traditional definitions. She tells Baylor, "the female one needs [. . .] the male one. [. . .] But the male one—doesn't really need the other. Not the same way." When Baylor presses her for further explanation, she responds as follows:

The Male one goes off by himself. Leaves. He needs something else. But he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't really know what he needs. So he ends up dead. By himself. (105)

Baylor, for all his bluster and brag, is stunned by this declaration that a man's lack of self-awareness and his flight from women results in his death. Meg, however, calmly asserts the folly of the logic upon which Baylor has structured his self-image. She gets him to admit that he blames the females in his life for his sense of entrapment, prompting from him what Frank Rich calls a "Huck-sounding" proclamation: "I could be up in the wild country huntin' antelope. [. . .] But no, I gotta play nursemaid to a bunch a' feeble-minded women down here in civilization who can't take care of themselves" (106). Such is Baylor's version of himself and of Meg, but Meg's version is quite different and, given the stage business that follows, seemingly more accurate. She tells him, "Why don't you just go off and live the way you want to live. We'll take care of ourselves. We always have" (106). Her declaration of self-sufficiency is further underscored by Baylor's helplessness. The man cannot even pick up his own socks or take off his own shoes. Immediately following this exchange, he orders Meg to pick up his socks, saying "I can't bend over." Meg does so, slowly, after a pause. While Baylor desperately, angrily, orders and pleads for his socks, the stage directions indicate that Meg "crosses slowly over to his socks, picks them up off the floor, holds them in the air. Pause. [. . .] Meg moves slowly to Baylor with the socks and drops them in his lap" (107). Meg's movement is strikingly similar to Halie's when she drops the single yellow rose between the legs of the helpless

Dodge, thereby placing an emblem of her own sexuality upon the site of his impotence. After Meg's exit, Baylor still cannot put the socks on his own feet, which fact only increases his anger and resentment toward his wife, who has thus shown Baylor his own dependence. Male fantasies of independence are sharply undercut by Baylor's obvious helplessness in this scene, providing an image of helpless, weak masculinity to stand in marked contrast to the violent masculinity earlier enacted by Jake.

In addition to Baylor, Beth's home also now contains Frankie, another far from powerful image of masculinity and perhaps the only truly sympathetic male character in the play. Frankie's gunshot wound and his gentle nature have left him helpless against Beth's determination to marry him. Outside, the two violent brothers, Jake and Mike, enact a more traditional fight. However, Mike's family refuses to acknowledge this battle, thereby replacing the importance of this macho version of the showdown (an image that was central to earlier plays such as *Tooth of Crime* and *True West*) with the male/female "showdown" being enacted inside—a showdown clearly being won by the women, disrupting the male belief system.

Much as the showdown between Jake and Mike is pushed aside by other action, male activities that are usually central to Shepard's plays tend to be decentralized in *A Lie of the Mind*. Important to the politics of staging in this play is the arrangement of the set. In dividing the set into several separate and discreet playing spaces, Shepard refuses to allow any of his characters to "take" center stage (as, for instance, Vince "took" center stage in *Buried Child*). By dividing the stage platforms to represent Jake's family home (stage right) and Beth's hospital and family home (stage left), and having the majority of the action take place in one or another of these sections of the stage, Shepard prevents any of these characters from taking a central position either literally or metaphorically. Shepard even refers to the gap between the stage right and stage left platforms as "neutral territory" (21), and uses it only briefly, preferring most of the time to black it out along with the rest of the stage as he lights his characters' actions either to the left or right of the center. Ultimately, in denying either Jake and his family or Beth and her family control of center stage, Shepard visually emphasizes the multiplicity of stories and positions among his characters.

Although the play begins as Jake's story, Jake grows less central by the end. He has found his lie of the mind by traveling across the stage to restore his fantasy of Beth, and he realizes that it is the fantasy which he desires. He tells her, "Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true. I know you now. You are true. I love you more than this life. You stay" (128-129). He kisses her on the forehead and then exits as the stage directions indicate "into darkness. He never looks back" (129). And why should he? He has the fantasy

of Beth which is all he ever really wanted of her—the image that stays with him even in the darkness. But, can we accept this revelation as his salvation? Jake, like his father who died a drunk in the middle of a road in Mexico, chooses to abandon the real (Beth's person), for a fantasy (the lie of his mind). He exits the stage, but does he exit in triumph, or even to survive? Given his behavior, which we know has been similar to that of his father, we can easily envision him dying, like his own father, some horrible and confused death—a death which Meg has predicted is inevitable for "the male one" who "doesn't really know what he needs" (105). Furthermore, although Jake's exit recalls that of the western hero who, at the end of the movie, rides off in the sunset without looking back, unlike the iconic western hero, Jake's exit is not given the end note of the play, which instead belongs to Meg and, visually, to Lorraine, and which indicates further the growing inability of the men in this play to maintain their hold not only on the stage space, but also on their identity. By the end, even Jake has lost his originally powerful position as central protagonist, and the stage space has been taken over by the women who ease into harmony with their men (Meg) and purge their lives of male control (Lorraine and Sally).

Previous to the above scenes, though supposedly happening simultaneously on the other side of the stage, Lorraine, Jake's mother, has finally given up not only on her husband and her favorite son but on all of her ties to America. She at last listens to her daughter, Sally, who tells of how Jake drove his father to his death by challenging him to a drinking/racing match. After initially choosing to support Jake's story of events instead of Sally's, Lorraine is at last determined to stop, as Sally says, "coverin' up for him" (96). She realizes that "[a]ll the junk in this house that they [Jake and his father] left behind for me to save. . . . They had no intention of ever comin' back here to pick it up. . . . They dreamed it all up just to keep me on the hook. Can't believe I fell for it all these years" (96). Deciding to give up the role which her husband and Jake had placed her in, Lorraine is planning to return to her maiden name and maiden family in her home country of Ireland, and to burn her present life behind her.²⁸ As further indication of her desertion of the male mythos, Lorraine plans to destroy, along with the entire house, the memories and souvenirs left by both her husband and Jake. Having handed over to Lorraine the responsibility for maintaining their history, these men must now bear the consequences of that action by being symbolically erased by Lorraine's decision to abandon them as they have abandoned her. Neither Lorraine nor her daughter Sally bothers to keep any fantasies of her past life, as Jake has, because neither plans to return or to repeat herself as have both Jake and his father. Instead of regressing into childish dependence, these women are obviously going to "take care of [them]selves" as Meg indicated women "always have" (106). The fire which they leave behind provokes Meg's closing

comment: "a fire in the snow. How could that be?" (131). The fire in the snow is the seeming impossibility, in Shepard's masculine landscape, of woman's sign. As powerfully and viciously as it began, the male voice in this play loses precedence by the final act. Having ranted away their brief moments on the stage, the violent men follow their fantasies into darkness while the women destroy those fantasies in order to light their own way.

This fire in the snow is but a brief moment devoted to woman's sign. The signal is seen only by one other character, and even then is acknowledged only in confusion. But it is precisely such brief moments of questioning, brief resistance to the dominance of male fantasies, that gives Shepard's last two family plays their complexity as the centralist fantasies of the men are called into question by the actions and positions of the women. Shepard's men who so fiercely fight for center stage are doomed—perhaps, he would like us to believe, gloriously doomed, but doomed all the same. In choosing to abandon the stage space to the destructive behavior of their men, Shepard's women also choose life over death, hope over despair, re-creation over destruction. If the patterns of behavior to which the men in Shepard's plays cling are what have brought his world—his vision of America—to death and destruction, it seems that an abandonment of such myths and an invention of new is the only hope for survival. Because the mythos has never held any advantages for women, the female characters of these plays are willing, and able, to look away from the violence and self-destruction that Shepard's men want to glorify. Given the activities that usually occupy Shepard's center stage, perhaps the wisest choice is that taken by many of his women characters, to exit into a different world.

Notes

1. Michiko Kakutani, "Myths, Dreams, Realities—Sam Shepard's America," *New York Times* 29 January 1984, sec. 2:26.

2. Lynda Hart, "Sam Shepard's Pomographic Visions," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 21.2 (1988) 69-82. Florence Falk, "Men Without Women: The Shepard Landscape," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981) 90-103. Shepard's mistreatment of his female characters and focus on male issues have been addressed by many other critics as well. Some particularly useful and insightful explorations have been offered by Felicia Hardison Londre in "Sam Shepard Works Out: The Masculinization of America," *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* 2(1987) 19-27; Ann Wilson in "Fool of Desire: The Spectator to the Plays of Sam Shepard," *Modern Drama* 30 (1987) 46-57; and Peter L. Podol in "Dimensions of Violence in the Theater of Sam Shepard: *True West* and *Fool for Love*," *Essays in Theatre* 7 (1989) 149-58. See also Rosemarie Bank and Doris Auerbach who appear later in this essay.

3. Interviews with Shepard focus again and again on his cowboy image—a particularly macho image—that carries over into his plays. Further examples of critical exploration of the cowboy image in Shepard's work include Ellen Oumano's *Sam Shepard: The Life and Work of an American Dreamer* (New York: St. Martin, 1986); several essays and interviews that appear in Bonnie

Marranca's edited collection *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981); Mark Siegal's "Holy Ghosts: The Mythic Cowboy in the Plays of Sam Shepard" (*Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 36 [1982]: 235-46); and Felicia Hardison Londre's article, already cited.

4. Kakutani 26. My emphasis.

5. Jonathan Cott, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Sam Shepard," *Rolling Stone* 18 December 1986: 172.

6. Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," rpt. in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 63-80.

7. Sam Shepard, *Fool for Love and Other Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) 19. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

8. Hart 74.

9. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 1975).

10. Frank Rich, "Stage: *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepard," *New York Times* 6 December 1985: sec. 2, 3.

11. Rosemarie Bank, "Self as Other: Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*," in *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama*, ed. June Schlueter (London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1989) 227-40. See previous citation regarding Falk.

12. Sam Shepard, *Tooth of Crime*, in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 217.

13. Charles Whiting in "Images of Women in Shepard's Theatre" (*Modern Drama* 33 [1990]: 494-506) argues that Shepard's family plays do offer strong women, but he focuses on the younger women and describes the older women as being dreamers like the older men. In examining the strength of Shepard's women Whiting argues that Shepard's younger women often demonstrate a more powerful "creative imagination" than is demonstrated by the "limited, reactive imagination" of his male characters (499). However, he also argues that Shepard does not think of his women as threats. In contrast to Whiting's portrait of Shepard's benign treatment of women, Florence Falk's examination of Shepard's oppressive men also notes that Shepard's women are often "hardier than their male oppressors, more skilled in survival strategies" because they have had to be (100).

14. Sheila Rabillard, "Sam Shepard: Theatrical Power and American Dreams," *Modern Drama* 30 (1987): 68.

15. Doris Auerbach, "Who Was Icarus's Mother? The Powerless Mother Figures in the Plays of Sam Shepard," in *Sam Shepard: A Casebook*, ed. Kimball King (New York: Garland, 1988) 53-64.

16. See for example, Bonnie Marranca, "Alphabetical Shepard: The Play of Words," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 1981) 31; and Charles G. Whiting, already cited.

17. Sam Shepard, *Curse of the Starving Class*, in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 197. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

18. Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*, in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 116. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

19. Kakutani 26.

20. Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind* (New York: Plume, 1987) 41. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

21. Hart 79-80.

22. 80.

23. Rabillard 68.

24. 68.

25. 68.

26. Perhaps the most obvious examples of the importance of role playing occur in *Cowboys #2* and *The Tooth of Crime*.

27. This costuming scene recalls Shepard's screenplay, *Paris, Texas*, in which Travis, rendered, like Beth, speechless for much of the movie by the traumas he has experienced, tries to become a father by mimicking a picture of one. His brother's maid helps him to put on the right clothes, to costume himself, and therefore transform himself into a father.

28. Ireland is an interesting choice of a homeland for Lorraine because the country is connected in legend to a woman—Kathleen ni Houlihan. The country therefore can be seen as a "motherland," in contrast to the overtly masculinized America of Shepard's plays.



Secret Love of the Peach Garden Spring. National Theatre, 1991. Photo: Performance Workshop