

O'Neill's Queer Interlude: Epicene Excess and Camp Pleasures

Robert F. Gross

I

JUDITH: I think I shall revive "Love's Whirlwind."

SOREL: (*collapsing on to the sofa*): Oh, Mother! (*She gurgles with laughter.*)

[. . .]

JUDITH: You mustn't say too much against it, Sorel. I'm willing to laugh at it a little myself, but, after all, it *was* one of my greatest successes.

SOREL: Oh, it's appalling—but I love it. It makes me laugh.

JUDITH: The public love it too, and it doesn't make them laugh—much.¹

Over the decades, *Strange Interlude* has become the scandal of the O'Neill canon. The 1963 Actors Studio revival left critic Robert Brustein "shaking with suppressed rage, four days after the event," at what "may be the worst play ever written by a major dramatist."² Richard Gilman heaped scorn upon its "quarter-baked Strindberg, tenth-rate Freud"³ and denounced it as:

the most atrociously ill-written and ill-conceived play of our time, the falsest 'masterpiece' in the theatre, as very likely the worst play that has ever been written by a dramatist with a reputation.⁴

Such extreme vituperation is not common, but there is more than enough of it to make one wonder how *Strange Interlude* has come to draw such ire, when other plays by O'Neill which are at least as weak in intellectual argument, dramatic structure and style—*The Fountain*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Marco Millions* or *Dynamo*, to name only a few—have failed to draw similar rage from critics. What most

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distinguishes *Strange Interlude* from these other plays, however, is its enormous stage success both in the United States and abroad. Unlike these other O'Neill dramas, which are seen as deserving their box office failures, *Strange Interlude* is seen as a play that somehow violated the justice of the cosmos by not deserving its success and must be punished. Unlike his other "experimental plays" of the '20s and early '30s, which have gracefully vanished, leaving O'Neill largely remembered as the author of such classics of American realism as *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Strange Interlude* is a stubborn reminder of O'Neill's non-realistic excesses. Frederic Carpenter is the only critic who has noted the clear discrepancy between the play's repeated public success and the scorn it has met with from critics.⁵

The tone with which critics and scholars have treated the stage success of *Strange Interlude*, ranging from the righteous indignation of Brustein and Gilman, to the quiet perplexity of Travis Bogard⁶ may well reflect the discomfort they feel with an anomalous, queer presence in the predominantly male heterosexual (not to mention sexist and heterosexist) ethos of the O'Neill canon. Carpenter is right in diagnosing the critical response to the play as a sign of cultural elitism, but ignores the gender component of this phenomenon.⁷ The critical discomfort stems from the very unseemliness of *Strange Interlude*'s plot, with its "low" soap opera-like complications, its exclamation point-ridden invitations to melodramatic acting, and the indecorous shifts from melodrama to comedy (often by way of bathos), and back again. For example, Brustein's attack on the play denigrates it by equating it with elements of popular culture associated with women, "soap opera," *True Romance* and pulp fiction,⁸ and Michael Manheim is bothered by an element of "soap opera" in the proceedings.⁹ Those who consume this popular culture pretender to high art are dismissed by Brustein as constituting "the perfect middle-brow tableau"¹⁰ and are described by Gilman as "children."¹¹ The success of *Strange Interlude* has also been dismissed as the triumph of a wayward bourgeois public who prefer chic to profundity, who eagerly accept stylish trivializations of James Joyce's techniques, and who encourage a great playwright to market clichés for them.¹² In other words, the pleasures that *Strange Interlude* offers are debased ones. "America's Foremost Tragic Dramatist"¹³ should not pander to such tastes, and audiences are to be reprimanded for flocking to it. The critical responses of Gilman and Brustein are clear examples of what Eve Sedgwick has named "kitsch attribution," in which the critic asks "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?"¹⁴

Brustein's attack on the relationship of the play to an effeminate popular culture echoes two of the most famous gibes made about *Strange Interlude* at the time of its Broadway premiere—Alfred Lunt's description of it as "a six-day

bisexual race”¹⁵ and Alexander Woollcott’s similar “a play in nine scenes and an epicene.”¹⁶ Both jokes suggest that the play is ridiculous both by virtue of its excessive length, and its divergence from normative male heterosexuality.¹⁷ Thus, for both the angry Brustein and the waspish Woollcott, *Strange Interlude* transgresses cultural modes of masculinity required for good drama.

The defensive response of most O’Neill scholarship has been either to ignore the play (as in Moorton’s centennial volume), or to gentrify it by moving away from the experience of the play itself to discussions that put it in unimpeachably serious company—whether Freud (Feldman), Schopenhauer (Alexander, Robinson) or Henry James (Maufort).¹⁸ The biographical approach is another way of minimizing the dangerous excesses of the text, since it allows the play to be recuperated into the life of a canonical dramatist. Thus, Doris Alexander tries to tame the deviance of *Strange Interlude* by arguing that the play arises from O’Neill’s infatuation with Carlotta Monterey. During that period, Alexander tells us, without the least humorous inflection, O’Neill was “living *Strange Interlude*.”¹⁹ Throughout traditional scholarship, there is a general denial that there is anything in *Strange Interlude* that could be seen as excessive or potentially humorous. Indeed, Bogard goes so far as to say that it “is not obviously ‘theatrical,’”²⁰ a statement that perusal of the plot, or any attempt to read the dialogue aloud, quickly renders ridiculous. While the angry and humorous responses to *Strange Interlude* at least exhibit a degree of interaction with the peculiarities of O’Neill’s nine-act drama as it unfolds on the stage, the O’Neill scholars seem never to have experienced it theatrically. The epicene excess of the play has not yet been engaged in O’Neill criticism.

The most useful critical approaches to the play come far afield from O’Neill studies, from film criticism that deals with the oft-decried pleasures offered by the so-called “women’s films” of the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s, such as Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*, Max Ophuls’s *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* and Rouben Mamoulian’s *Queen Christina*. In this area of film criticism, the “women’s film” provides a realm for spectator identifications different from the male heterosexual domination of classical Hollywood film. With its female protagonist, domestic setting, and use of melodramatic conventions, *Strange Interlude* can easily be approached as a theatrical equivalent to that cinematic genre. Peter Matthews’s description of Greta Garbo could equally apply to Nina Leeds:

Garbo indeed disrupts the classical visual field by ejecting masculinity from it. The lovers-sons whose needs she tends and whom she frequently dies for are on the whole a procession of

feeble and trivial young men who have very little to recommend them as masculine ego-ideals.²¹

Similarly, Nowell-Smith has commented on the tendency of masculinity in such melodramas to suffer from “impairment,”²² a phenomenon that can accurately be applied to every male in *Strange Interlude*, from Professor Leeds’s depressed passivity to young Gordon’s energetic obtuseness.²³

For Matthews, the appeal of Garbo to women and gay men in *Camille*, *Anna Karenina* and *Queen Christina* is that of Garbo as phallic mother, the omnipotent maternal figure of the Imaginary, who exists prior to the child’s discovery of sexual difference.²⁴ The transition in Garbo’s career from silent screen temptress to phallic mother of the talkies led to films that interpellated the male spectator as less powerful, a change that may well have led to Garbo’s decreasing popularity with most male moviegoers in the ’30s, while cementing her popularity among women and gays.²⁵ Interestingly, *Strange Interlude* demands a similar interpellation from the male viewer, who is offered the opportunities to make identifications with a powerful female protagonist or a cluster of narratively subordinate, weak males. Bogard is correct when he observes that O’Neill has deprived the men in this play “of any particle of the theatrical glamour that had surrounded so many of his past heroes,”²⁶ though he does not consider how that deprivation functions to Nina’s theatrical advantage.

Strange Interlude is the most extravagant vehicle O’Neill ever created for a female performer. This lengthy play is the story of her adult life. All of the other characters are defined in relationship to her, and there are no onstage subplots to detract from her story. She is afforded a wide range of highly emotional roles to play—from defiant daughter to possessive mother, from dominating mistress to motherly wife. To attend a performance of *Strange Interlude* is to attend an evening of virtuoso acting by a star performer who needs to have variety, emotional depth, a sense of theatricality, and stamina. The success of *Strange Interlude* onstage cannot be detached from the star performers who have played Nina Leeds—Lynn Fontanne, Judith Anderson, Pauline Lord, Elisabeth Bergner, Geraldine Page, Glenda Jackson. Although O’Neill was known to boast that his plays “made” stars, rather than required them,²⁷ his work has repeatedly profited, not only financially but aesthetically, from the appearances of stars, from Pauline Lord to Jason Robards.²⁸

The dramatic structure that concentrates attention on Nina Leeds reverberates within the larger structure of the theatrical event, in which the audience’s attention is concentrated on the actor playing Nina. The character of Nina as phallic mother and the “leading lady” as phallic mother become mutually reinforcing entities, who serve to elicit and focus the various desires about them:

she has strange devious intuitions that tap the hidden currents of life . . . dark intermingling currents that become the one stream of desire . . . I feel, with regard to Nina, my life queerly identified with Sam's and Darrell's.²⁹

As the men merge through the figure of Nina, so too do the individual spectators merge into an audience through concentration on the performance of the "leading lady." Like most successful Broadway plays of the 1920s, *Strange Interlude* is structured around its audience's desire to view a star in a role that intensifies his or her attraction.³⁰ In a dramatic world in which the "leading man," Gordon Shaw, dies before the play begins, Nina has no competition in her domination of the evening's entertainment. There is never any question that Nina *leads*.³¹ Kurt Eisen astutely observes that "Nina embodies the force of theater in *Strange Interlude*."³²

This predominance of the phallic mother accounts for some of the uneasiness that we have observed in the critical response to the play. As we have seen, the play has been excoriated for its resemblances to women's literature, explained partly as the result of O'Neill falling under the influence of Carlotta Monterey, and hooted at for its lack of expected O'Neillian virility. The feminine is constructed to explain what is *wrong* with *Strange Interlude*, and William Leuchtenburg's dubbing its heroine as "the destructive Nina Leeds"³³ reinscribes on the level of plot the scapegoating of the feminine that we have observed in evaluations of the play. Similarly, Edwin A. Engel's sexist pronouncement:

Nina's 'romantic imagination' is the 'romantic imagination' of the typical woman, and it is as pernicious and inescapable as the pathological obsession which effected the catastrophe of *Ile*, of *Diff'rent*, or *Welded*³⁴

construes Nina as a realistic example of a dangerous sex. In *Strange Interlude* criticism, misogyny is a constant threat, as critics are tempted to blame elements of plot, character and artistic value on a failure of masculinity.

Perhaps the anxiety of male critics is not surprising, since *Strange Interlude* is a play structured around the loss of heroic masculinity. The death of Gordon Shaw, which leaves Nina Leeds a virgin, does not cause a lack of libidinal energy in the protagonist as one might expect from a reading of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*. Rather, it sets off an explosion of libido, enough to carry Nina through the twenty years and nine acts of the play. The characters are caught up in an unusual variant of mourning—instead of lamenting the passing of Gordon, and coming to terms with his death, they become involved (to various

degrees of awareness) in the production of a *new* Gordon. The death of Gordon creates a massive void, which takes more than two decades to fill and opens the space of the interior monologue, in which the expression of emotion is indulged far beyond the usual middle-class decorum of a domestic realistic drama. Jacques Lacan's description of the work of mourning in *Hamlet* describes the vast dramatic mausoleum that is *Strange Interlude* even more accurately than it elucidates Shakespeare's play:

The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which it impeaches by the least instance of mourning.³⁵

The effect of loss in *Strange Interlude* is an unsuccessful attempt to fill a void through a host of substitutes. The wounded veterans with whom Nina has sex as substitutes for Gordon are only a cipher, regardless of how many of them there might have been:

four or five or six or seven men, Charlie. I forget—and it doesn't matter. They were all the same. Count them all as one, and that one a ghost of nothing. (672)

The dominant psychic dynamic of the play, as well as its major aesthetic strategy, is excess.

As a figure of the Hero, the first Gordon is not a unique individual, but a type, composed of "wonderful athlete's body" (635) and an unthinking dedication to "fairness and honor" (640), who dies two days before the end of World War I. He is not, however, the last sacrifice of the archaic figure of the Warrior, dying before the threshold of the Modern Age, but is a hero of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, one who re-emerges in the figure of another Gordon nine acts later, handsome, strong and stupid. Although the previous four acts have all shown characters repeatedly on the verge of revealing that Ned is young Gordon's biological father, this final act climaxes with the revelation set up in the best melodramatic style. After Gordon strikes Ned, Nina "*screams and flings herself on Gordon, holding his arms*" and cries "For God's sake, Gordon, what would your father say? You don't know what you're doing! You're hitting your father!" (812). The meaning of this outburst would be clear even to most juvenile leads in melodrama, who are not, as it goes, a brainy bunch, but it eludes young Gordon, who decides to take this, not as literal truth, but as a figure of speech.

Thus, the guilty secret of almost twenty years is revealed, but has absolutely no impact, reducing Nina to hysterical laughter, as melodrama is wasted on the Hero.

Although Brustein sneered at this scene as “a melodramatic climax to persuade you you’ve seen a play,”³⁶ he failed to note that O’Neill’s text itself undercuts the melodramatic gesture. The climactic revelation of secret paternity, a stock device of nineteenth-century melodrama, had been relegated to the world of comedy even before Noel Coward’s delightful spoof of the convention in his 1925 comedy, *Hay Fever*, in which Judith Bliss and her family launch into a scene from *Love’s Whirlwind*, an old warhorse whose second act curtain line provides the second act curtain of Coward’s comedy—“Don’t strike! He is your father!!”³⁷ In *Strange Interlude*, O’Neill takes the cliché and subjects it to bathos. The great melodramatic revelation comes at last, only to have absolutely no effect on the action, leaving the heroine, not in tears or shock, but in laughter.

The reproduction of Gordon Shaw is the result of a lengthy and torturous plot, one that is finally revealed not to have been worth the effort. Nina and her playwright have labored mightily, and only manage to bring forth “*a strength wholly material in quality*” (803). The Hero emerges on the other side of modernity, and the result is just another jock.³⁸ Moreover, the laborious production of young Gordon does not serve to complete the incomplete relationship between Nina and Gordon Shaw of decades before. For just as Gordon Shaw failed to physically consummate his relationship with Nina due to her father’s prohibition, explaining that sexual relations must be deferred “in justice to Nina” (640), Nina is prohibited from sexual intercourse with young Gordon by the incest tabu. In both of his manifestations, Gordon is The Man Who Got Away, a representative of masculinity who always leaves Nina behind, prohibited by the power of the Lacanian Symbolic Father who imposes the incest tabu. Both Gordons fly away in their airplanes, leaving Nina behind, her desire unconsummated. Nine acts for nothing.

Charles Marsden provides the clearest comic metatext on the happenings in *Strange Interlude*. He tells Nina:

You had best forget the whole affair of your association with the Gordons. After all, dear Nina, there was something unreal in all that has happened since you met Gordon Shaw, something extravagant and fantastic, the sort of thing that isn’t done, really, in our afternoons. (817)

“Unreal,” “extravagant,” and “fantastic” are all appropriate descriptions for this strange interlude—a lengthy playing between (*inter/ludus*) the death of the first

Gordon and the departure of the second. Its plot is splendidly and shamelessly contrived, its language is intense and highly emotional, and its interior monologues provide highly theatrical contrasts with more realistic conversations. Yet all this display has been much ado about nothing: “the Sons of the Father have all been failures” Nina finally admits (817). The length, intensity and theatrical fireworks of *Strange Interlude* are all noticeably out of proportion to their *arche* and *telos*. For all its length and theatricality, the action of the play is, as Nina points out, ultimately not illumination, but darkness—the moments between the lightning—“strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!” (817).

This disproportion between effort and outcome throughout the drama is related to a crisis of masculinity. Producing a Gordon may only require one woman, but it needs three men. As Nina sits in the room with Marsden, Evans and Darrell, she rhapsodizes “My three men! . . . I feel their desires converge in me! . . . to form one beautiful male desire [. . .]” (756). Compared to the idealized form of the dead Gordon (who, in actuality, was not able to consummate his relationship to Nina, let alone sire a young Gordon), the reality of his young namesake is disappointingly mundane. The result of this effort is not a child who combines their qualities, but one who negates their joint work; “*He seems to have sprung from a line distinct from any of the people we have seen*” O’Neill tells us (758).

The men must work as a combination to produce a Gordon, just as they band together into a financial corporation to produce a fortune. The creation of a Gordon is paralleled in the creation of the corporation—a single, legal body composed of the bodies of several men. In the ’20s decade of financial booms, speculation and mergers, men can only be productive by combining their efforts.³⁹ Masculine energy functions as a scarce commodity, one that must be pooled, or it will be transferred from one man to another, with disastrous results for the loser. This is best illustrated in the story told about Gordon, who, while coxswain on a rowing team, felt one of the rowers losing energy. By talking to him, Gordon transferred his strength to the rower. The team won but it was Gordon, not the rower, who passed out at the end of the race (774). This scene is repeated when Evans’s intense vicarious participation in young Gordon’s racing triumph brings on his stroke. This pattern is mirrored in male relationships throughout the play. On the sexual level, it is seen in the relationship between Darrell and Evans. Evans gains self-confidence as Darrell flees Nina, and continues to grow in power as Darrell declines. Not until Act 8 is the balance reversed, and a physically and emotionally restored Darrell is contrasted with an apoplectic Evans. In the world of business, Evans’ hitherto shaky self-confidence burgeons with his success as a businessman, while his “silent partners” (Marsden and

Darrell) diminish by contrast. Their vocations—writing and scientific research—dwindle to the status of “hobbies” (761) in the shadow of Evans’s success. If one man gains, the others must lose, and all the men in *Strange Interlude* lose in comparison to Gordon Shaw.

In this regard, *Strange Interlude* displays a strange variation on the male homosocial dynamic made familiar to literary critics by Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men*.⁴⁰ Nina is not shared to stabilize homosocial bonds among men, but is a measure against whom all are found lacking. Heterosexual marriage, it seems, requires one woman, one absent ideal paramour and three living men. Even those three combined do nothing more than produce the failure of a Gordon, and a fortune that seems to do nothing important for them but produce the yacht and “pretentious villa” (803) that provide the play’s last two settings. The men may bond through Nina, as they bond within the corporation, but those bonds are vampiric, favoring the virility of one participant to the detriment of the others.

The presentation of masculinity in *Strange Interlude* exhibits what Siegfried Kracauer labeled “ideological fatigue,”⁴¹ in which ideological formations begin to disintegrate from severe and lengthy tension. In this play, the fatigue registers in the satiric presentation of the middle-class male roles of soldier, athlete, scientist, author, businessman, father and husband, and the ironic presentation of masculinity overall. The concept of mastery, which is closely bound to Western middle-class notions of masculinity, is presented as an illusion. Kaja Silverman’s statement “the normative male ego is necessarily fortified against any knowledge of the void upon which it rests,”⁴² precisely describes the creation of business tycoon Sam Evans. Carefully protected from the knowledge of the insanity running through his family, given a child that is not his but that he can believe is his own, the sense of mastery lent to him by others (most particularly by his wife and mother, and less intentionally by Ned), Evans comes to thrive on the illusion of his mastery, becoming yet another instance of that familiar stereotype of 1920s white male bourgeois complacency, the Babbitt. In *Strange Interlude*, masculinity is the most vulnerable fiction of all, one sustained by the vigilance of mothers:

EVANS: Don’t you want me to be happy, Nina?

NINA: Yes—yes I do, Sammy. (*thinking strangely*) Little boy! . . . little boy! . . . one gives birth to little boys! . . . one doesn’t drive them mad and kill them! (731)

The crisis of masculinity renders the Mother omnipotent—a Cybele who can confer either life or death, madness or the illusion of manhood.

In this play masculinity is so precarious that the play's only seduction scene is instigated by Nina and climaxes in complete psychic dislocation for Ned Darrell. Here, the quick alternation between passion and detachment seems at first to be a bizarre variation of the Restoration *proviso* scene, with the characters negotiating in a strangely artificial third person singular, but it leads to a mad climax worthy of the Martins in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*:

NINA: She always thought Ned had a Superior mind.

DARRELL: (*thinking frightenedly*) Did she say Ned? . . . she thinks Ned . . . ? (*in same tone*) The man should like and admire her, he should be her good friend and want to help her, but he should not love her—although he might, without harm to anyone, desire her.

NINA: Ned does not love her—but he used to like her and, I think, desire her. Does he now, Doctor?

DARRELL: (*thinking*) Does he? . . . who is he? . . . he is Ned! Ned is I! . . . I desire her! . . . I desire happiness! (*tremblingly now—gently*) But, Madame, I must confess the Ned you are speaking of is I, and I am Ned. (712-713)

Nina parodies Ned's impersonal, scientific tone, laying bare the inner panic underlying his mask of professional poise. It is an audacious erotic and theatrical coup for Nina, one that delights the audience not only in its reversal of gender roles, but in its parodic excess.

II

Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much." *Titus Andronicus* and *Strange Interlude* are almost Camp, or could be played as Camp. The public manner and rhetoric of de Gaulle, often, are pure camp.⁴³

The delights that audiences derive from Nina's seduction of Ned are the delights of camp. It contains in abundance the four elements Jack Babuscio has identified with camp objects: irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humor.⁴⁴ It is ironic in its use of third-person, impersonal language to spark a seduction. It is aesthetic in its foregrounding of this technique at the expense of strong emotional identification with either character. It is theatrical not only in that the discrepancy

between the detached dialogue and the emotional interior monologue shows the characters to be playing games with each other, but also in that the rapid shifts between these emotional registers makes the audience keenly aware of the technique of the actors in accomplishing such shifts. Finally, these incongruities generate a detached, humorous attitude in the spectator.

Most importantly, however, the use of the interior monologue device here and throughout the play has the effect of exhuming subtextual 'depth' and transforming it into a highly theatricalized surface 'display.' Rather than creating an illusion of greater psychological depth, the ultimate effect of the interior monologue is to destroy the sense of depth. Jonathan Dollimore has analyzed this camp device in the works of Oscar Wilde and Jean Genet:

this kind of camp undermines the depth model of identity from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within, making depth recede into its surfaces. Rather than a direct repudiation of depth, there is a performance of it to excess: depth is undermined by being taken to and beyond its own limits.⁴⁵

Regardless of what O'Neill might have thought he was doing with the interior monologue, its ultimate effect is to provide a highly theatrical device which takes what realistic drama presents as depth, and renders it as surface. Spectators have been quick to apprehend the camp nature and comic potential of the device; Alexander Woollcott's review of the first production ended with a comic send-up,⁴⁶ though it took the manic brilliance of Groucho Marx in *Animal Crackers* to create interior monologues equal to O'Neill's own.

Critics who try to link the interior monologues of *Strange Interlude* to the fictional experiments of Henry James, James Joyce and the stream of consciousness novel⁴⁷ miss the histrionic energy with which O'Neill uses it, the scenery-chewing glory of it all as a *performance* device, rather than a controlled and careful manipulation of point of view:

These men make me sick! . . . I hate all three of them! . . .
they disgust me! (769)

Yes, if it hadn't been for Sam I would have been happy! . . .
I would have been the world's greatest neurologist! . . . my boy
would have loved me and I'd have loved him! (793)

Their honor! . . . what an obscene joke! . . . the honor of a harlot and a pimp! . . . I hate them! . . . if only God would strike them dead! . . . now! . . . and I could see them die!
(750)

These passages are far less the workings of unconscious processes than exhibitions of melodramatic acting. The histrionic excess of these exclamation point-ridden asides mark them with the artifice of camp.

O'Neill himself was aware of this aspect of the play, and perhaps gave the best description of it. When he was told a local restaurant was serving "*Strange Interlude* sandwiches," he quipped, "I know what that is. It's a four-decker with nothing but ham!"⁴⁸ At the same time, O'Neill was definitely uneasy with some of the camp elements in his own text. The first director of *Strange Interlude* was Philip Moeller, noted throughout his career for his success with comedies, including Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman*, S. N. Behrman's *The Second Man* and Sidney Howard's *Ned McCobb's Daughter*. Moeller worked to give full weight to *Strange Interlude's* comic moments, often incurring O'Neill's displeasure as a result.⁴⁹ As is often the case in the theatre, the director had a clearer appreciation of what was on the page than did the playwright.

The camp aesthetic is, however, not limited to the interior monologues. Consider the following passage from the first act, in which Nina explains why it is necessary for her to work in the veteran's hospital and have sex with an unspecified number of patients there. Though it was first performed by Lynn Fontanne, it might have been written for Charles Ludlam:

I must pay! It's my plain duty! Gordon is dead! What use is my life to me or anyone? But I must make it of use—by giving it! (*fiercely*) I must learn to give myself, do you hear—give and give until I can make that gift myself without scruple, without fear, without joy except in his joy! When I've accomplished this I'll have found myself, I'll know how to start in living my own life again! (*appealing to them with a desperate impatience*) Don't you see? In the name of the commonest decency and honor, I owe it to Gordon! (647)

The emotional intensity of the speech, linking the language of sacrifice to sexual abandon, the obvious slippage from "give *of* myself" to "give myself," and the defense of this project of sexual excess under the aegis of "decency" and "honor," all contribute to the camp effect of the speech.

My treatment of *Strange Interlude* as camp may surprise some (though it was suggested in passing almost thirty years ago by Susan Sontag)⁵⁰ and offend both O'Neill scholars and gay critics in its attribution of camp classic status to the work of a celebrated heterosexual author. Some of the best recent writings have analyzed camp as a coded phenomenon between gay author and a receptive reader.⁵¹ Eve Sedgwick speaks of camp similarly when she postulates that the question behind camp is "What if whoever made this were gay too?"⁵² For these critics then, camp becomes predominantly, if not exclusively, a product of the closet, in which coded messages can be passed along more safely. If we were to follow this line of thinking narrowly, the most we could say of my relationship to *Strange Interlude* is that it was based on my misrecognition (as a gay reader and spectator) of *Strange Interlude* as the work of a gay playwright.

This judgment, however, would ignore the fact that certain works not crafted by gays are themselves particularly amenable to camp interpretation, due to the subject matter, style and structure of the work. Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Josef von Sternberg's *Scarlet Empress* are notable examples of this. Just as James Creech has rightly noted that "One does not have to be queer to read queer,"⁵³ it is also important to realize that one need not be queer to write queer. Sedgwick seems to be on the verge of a similar insight when she expands on her question about camp, "What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to the spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person . . . who created it?"⁵⁴ The investments of artist and audience are multiple, rather than limited exclusively by the singularity of sexual preference. Moreover, it does not rule out the possibility that the investments on either side may not be similar, but that the investments of the artist may open up spaces for imagination, fantasy and aesthetic pleasures that will stimulate the very different investments of audiences.

The camp appeal of *Strange Interlude* is not merely a function of tone and stylistic devices, but is rooted in the dominance of phallic mother and her wounded male cohorts. This configuration, which Peter Matthews has identified as central to the gay appeal of Garbo's melodramas,⁵⁵ is widely represented in the pantheon of camp. Mrs. Phelps in *The Silver Cord*, Violet Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Mama Rose in *Gypsy*, Joan Crawford in *Mommy Dearest*, or the current reigning Jocasta of camp, Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. It finds its real-life enactment in the gay followings and entourages of certain female stars—Maria Callas, Tallulah Bankhead, Joan Collins. Martha's boast in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—"I'm the Earth Mother and you are all flops!"⁵⁶ and her relegation of aspiring stud Nick to the position of "houseboy"⁵⁷—could serve respectively as the motto and defining gesture of the phallic mother ruling her gay

acolytes. In this configuration, the paternal Symbolic is momentarily banished from the stage or significantly weakened, allowing an aesthetic play that is rooted in the Imaginary. The world of *Strange Interlude* is one of overheated passion and high theatrics, set off by the absence of the Hero as controlling ego ideal.

Given this dominance of the Imaginary, it can be argued that Gordon is not the only figure whose loss is being mourned and re-incorporated in the action of *Strange Interlude*. For the audience is less invested in the reemergence of Gordon than in the presence of the phallic mother, Nina Leeds/Leading Lady. As a figure in the Gordon Shaw plot, Nina is merely a means to an end, but as virtuoso star turn, she is central, while Gordon is relegated to the role of an offstage houseboy. From the view of the play's plot, Nina exists to produce a new Gordon; from the point of view of theatrical performance, Gordon dies to create histrionic possibilities for Nina.

Looking at the figure of Nina Leeds, the play can be further interpreted as the return of a lost Mother. Nina's own mother is completely absent from the play. Charles Marsden's possessive mother is kept offstage. Sam Evans' mother yearns to efface herself. "You and Sammy have got to forget me," she tells Nina (690). These absences buttress the thesis advanced in Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty*, that white Manhattan culture in the '20s was in revolt against the figure of Victorian motherhood, and that matricide was one of its major myths, seen in such otherwise varied writers as Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Sidney Howard, Olive Higgins Prouty and Sophie Treadwell.⁵⁸ *Strange Interlude* differs, however, in that it presents an extravagant display of the phallic mother, a prophet of "God the Mother" (670),⁵⁹ a dramatic figure of such excess that O'Neill could only imagine exceeding it with the most audacious camp object in all of his writing, the immense maternal engine of *Dynamo*. Nina Leeds represents the return of the vilified maternal, but in a form that is purged of Victorianism. Calculating, sexually aggressive, outspoken and experienced, she presented a new incarnation of the oft-derided Mother that theatrical sophisticates of the '20s could succumb to without feeling Victorian. It is as if Marsden's sexually repressive and snobbish Victorian mother must die so a new, more sexual mother can take her place.

Charles Marsden, who was attacked in Gilman's review as "the most absurd of all these absurd roles,"⁶⁰ occupies a strangely important position in the reception of *Strange Interlude*. Similarly, the popular, comic tradition of reception identifies Marsden as central to what is funny about the play. Take as examples "six day bisexual race" (from the homosexual Alfred Lunt) or "six scenes and an epicene" (from the famously epicene Alexander Woollcott). In both jokes, length and queerness become the play's distinguishing marks. On one level, the jibes can be taken as homophobic, defensive strategies, as Woollcott

and Lunt distance themselves from identification with a figure they might be identified with. On another level, it offers evidence that Marsden is seen, not as merely a supporting player, but the character who is key to defining the nature of O'Neill's enterprise.

Given the camp dynamics of *Strange Interlude*, it is not surprising that, Charles Marsden, O'Neill's only overtly queer male character, plays a dominant role in its dynamics. I use the word "queer," rather than "gay" or "homosexual," because Marsden's sexuality evades such precise categorization. Although modeled on gay painter Charles Demuth,⁶¹ with a surname that points to gay artist Marsden Hartley, O'Neill's early working notes refer to the character as bisexual,⁶² but the character in the play is more strongly defined by his lack of any strongly sexual impulse whatsoever. Although he is the only male character who is allowed to register an awareness of other men's physical attractiveness, registering appreciation of Gordon's "wonderful athlete's body" (635), and giving Evans the "once-over" (657) on their first meeting, concluding "This is certainly no giant intellect . . . overgrown boy . . . likable quality though . . ." (657), we never see him motivated by homosexual desire. At the same time, while he insists through much of the play on his attraction to Nina specifically and women in general, his assertions often bare the trace of desperate accommodation to a heterosexual society, rather than unselfconscious desire. "I wouldn't have a mistress if I could!" thinks Marsden. "If I could? . . . of course I could! . . . I've simply never cared to degrade myself!" (738). Nina dismisses his attraction to her as self-delusion. "Poor Charlie, he only thinks he ought to desire me!" (769) she thinks. But whether there is or is not an element of actual sexual desire for Nina hidden away somewhere, and whether or not Marsden feels some attraction to the other men in the play, the salient aspect of Marsden's sexuality is its feminization. From O'Neill's first description of him, which notes his "indefinable feminine quality" (633), to Ned's description of him as "one of those poor devils who spend their lives trying not to discover what sex they belong to!" (662), Marsden is defined as effeminate, though O'Neill takes pains to point out that this is "nothing apparent in either appearance or act" (633). This description presents a conundrum to the reader, and a seemingly impossible challenge to the actor playing Marsden: if this quality is not to be found in either appearance or act, where is it? This feminine quality is tied to a passivity that far outstrips the more active, and traditionally masculine strivings of Nina Leeds. Péter Egri has pointed out that Marsden is a figure of epic retardation—his entrances rarely further the development of the plot, and usually suspend it.⁶³ The dramatic through-line for Marsden is a nine acts' vigil as he waits for him and Nina to come together in an unconsummated union.

This characterization of the non-heterosexual male as passive and effeminate is a timeworn stereotype. As such, he occupies an important but less immediately understandable place in the production of a new Gordon. While Darrell and Evans play the easily recognizable roles, respectively, of sire and lover, and father and cuckold, as do Joe and Tony in Sidney Howard's slightly earlier *They Knew What They Wanted* (1924), as well as O'Neill's own *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), Marsden offers nothing tangible to Nina Leeds' male seraglio. Indeed, Marsden is an anomalous figure not only in the heterosexual economy of this play, but in O'Neill's work in general. What is most unusual and non-stereotypic, however, is that this figure winds up being identified with the Father. When Nina needs important advice, Marsden takes on her father's tone of voice (673, 817), or his gestures (799). Nina even refers to Marsden's role as that of "father" (756). In a play whose action is driven by the desire to reproduce Gordon, the phallic hero, the "Sons of the Father have all been failures" (817). The final triumph is that of the non-phallic, feminized, queer father—a fatherhood purged of aggressive masculinity. In a highly unusual displacement of heterosexuality on the Broadway stage, *Strange Interlude* ends with the heterosexual males banished from the stage, and the union of a straight woman and a queer man. In the interactions between Nina and Marsden throughout the play, O'Neill tries to dramatize a *friendship* between a man and a woman, a state of emotional intimacy in which sexual consummation is infinitely deferred in favor an extended celibate foreplay, the chaste romance of diva and gay fan.

The relationship between Marsden and Nina not only retards the forward movement of the plot—it can also suspend the passage of time, as Marsden plays the role of Nina's deceased father to Nina, who momentarily removes herself from the dramatic context of the scene. Unlike Evans, Darrell and Gordon, Nina and Marsden are sometimes able to suspend the forward impetus of the plot, and the striving it entails. At the end of the play, Marsden encourages Nina to forget the entire action of the play, returning to an earlier state of affairs. In this regard, Marsden and Nina are able to relinquish the vision of mastery embodied in the classical masculine hero, who avoids threatening ambiguities by entrusting himself to linear time and narrative.⁶⁴ The woman and the queer man, therefore, are the two who are able to move outside of linearity and narrative control, creating points that subvert the well-made plotting of *Strange Interlude*. They also provide a contrast to that plot, with its heterosexual drive toward the production of a Gordon. Once a Gordon is produced, they are left to themselves, the contented residue of a *macho* process that no longer needs them. Thus, the action of *Strange Interlude* is ambivalent—it is (1) the reproduction of the Hero and (2) the liberation of straight woman and queer man from the figure of the Hero and the impediments he has placed between them and their unsanctioned relationship.

The possibility of partial identification with Marsden allows the spectator to enter into an imaginary relationship with Nina that parallels both the child to the phallic mother, and the gay fan to female star. This particular spectatorial relationship (and it is not the *only* one) maximizes the play of theatrical and camp pleasures, rooted in the Imaginary. It allows an approach to a text of heterosexual authorship, and a response to the queer elements in it. For indeed, in its extreme theatrics, deflation of *machismo* heroics, ironic view of the nuclear family as a place of deception and incipient insanity, and ultimate decentering of heterosexuality, *Strange Interlude* can be appreciated as a *queer interlude*.

Strange Interlude is not a joyless failure, but is a play that offers many pleasures that audiences have been more inclined to enjoy than have the critics. Like Judith Bliss's audiences at *Love's Whirlwind* they love it, "and it doesn't make them laugh—much,"⁶⁵ since the laughter of camp no more excludes affection, than our ability to laugh at our friends excludes love and loyalty. Critical theory has been much more devoted to trying to explain why we should respect or reject plays than to explaining why we are fond of them. In contrast, a camp approach begins with affection, since "camp taste nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles."⁶⁶ Camp reading admits the critic's attraction to the work in all its idiosyncrasies. Because of this, it is a useful corrective to much of our cold, detached and suspicious criticism.⁶⁷ It therefore is useful not only to gay and lesbian critics looking at gay and lesbian works, but to critics who are looking at other types of work as well. It allows us to address certain types of spectatorial pleasures, which we have been ashamed to admit, especially within the works of canonical playwrights. And it raises important questions. In the specific case of *Strange Interlude*, for example: what were the forces that allowed this work to erupt into the Broadway theatre with such success? How does the discovery of such a camp, queer drama in the middle of the career of a heterosexual male dramatist prompt us to re-examine his work and the times he lived in? What were the forces that led him to his strange dramatic "masquerade" as a queer man? Finally, do the late plays of O'Neill, rather than being the summit of his career, in fact mark a retreat from the more subversive and daring structures of a play like *Strange Interlude*?

Notes

My thanks to Ann Wilson, of the University of Guelph, Stephanie Barbé Hammer, of the University of California-Riverside, and James Gullledge, for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1. Noel Coward, *Hay Fever*, in *Plays: One* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979) 20, 21.

2. Robert Brustein, *Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions, 1959-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) 141.
3. Richard Gilman, *Common and Uncommon Masks: Writings on Theatre, 1961-1970* (New York: Random House, 1971) 68.
4. 68.
5. Frederic Carpenter, "Strange Interlude—Strange Criticism," *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 8:3 (Dec. 1984) 22-24.
6. Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of O'Neill* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 314.
7. Carpenter 23.
8. Brustein 141.
9. Michael Manheim, *Eugene O'Neill's New Language of Kinship* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1982) 70.
10. Brustein 143.
11. Gilman 68.
12. Kurt Müller, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit: Die Erfahrung der Moderne im Leben und Werk Eugene O'Neills* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993) 147-148.
13. Richard F. Moorton, Jr., *Eugene O'Neill's Century: Centennial Views on America's Foremost Tragic Dramatist* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991) subtitle.
14. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 156.
15. Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 285.
16. 286.
17. *Strange Interlude* has inspired an unusual amount of parody, both at home and abroad. See Péter Egri, "The Psychology of Alienation, or What Parodies are Good for: A Note on O'Neill's Modernity," *The Recorder* 3 (1989) 37-39.
18. Robert Feldman, "The Longing for Death in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*," *Literature and Psychology* 31:1 (1981) 39-48; Doris Alexander, "*Strange Interlude* and Schopenhauer," *American Literature* 25:2 (May 1953) 213-228; James A. Robinson, *Eugene O'Neill and Oriental Thought: A Divided Vision* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982) 147-161; M. Maufort, "Communication of Translation of the Self: Jamesian Inner Monologue in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1927)," in *Communiquer et traduire: Hommages à Jean Dierickx*, ed. Gilbert Debusscher and J.P. van Noppen (Bruxelles: U of Bruxelles, 1985) 319-328. For the only recent notable exceptions to the traditions of ignoring or gentrifying *Strange Interlude* see Péter Egri, "Epic Retardation and Diversion: Hemingway, Strindberg and O'Neill," *Neohelicon* 14:1 (1987) 9-20, for his interesting analysis of structural devices in the play, and Kurt Eisen, *The Inner Strength of Opposites: O'Neill's Novelistic Drama and the Melodramatic Imagination* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994) 3-114, for his careful analysis of the role of the novelistic, and Ronald H. Waincott, *Staging O'Neill: The Experimental Years, 1920-1934* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 229-239, for his very useful history of the play's premiere production.
19. Doris Alexander, *Eugene O'Neill's Creative Struggle: The Decisive Decade, 1924-1933* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992) 113.
20. Bogard 314.
21. Peter Matthews, "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood: A 'Homosexual' Visual Economy," *Screen* 29:3 (June 1988) 20.
22. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli [*sic*] and Melodrama," *Screen* 18:2 (June 1977) 115.
23. For an even more extreme and energetically argued (though less carefully documented version of the relationship between screen melodrama and gay sensibility, see Mark Finch and Kwietniowski, "Melodrama and *Maurice*: Homo is Where the Het is," *Screen* 29:3 (June 1988) which asserts "the subtext for a weepie is always homosexuality" (73).

24. Throughout this essay, the term "gay" should be read with the important proviso Mark Finch has applied to it: "gay culture means something more specific than it pretends: a discursive system developed out of a metropolitan, white, middle-class and male gay community. Gay culture speaks from and to this position; it describes a socially-defined audience and an attendant cluster of texts." "Sex and Address in *Dynasty*," *Screen* 27:6 (Nov. 1986) 24.

25. Matthews 19-20.

26. Bogard 304.

27. Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 650.

28. O'Neill's animosity to name actors may well have been yet another aspect of his troubled relationship with his celebrated actor/father. Carl Van Vechten also observed that O'Neill was "jealous" of good and successful actors (Gelb 650).

29. Eugene O'Neill, *Strange Interlude*, in *Complete Plays, 1920-1931* (New York: Library of America, 1988) 756. All further quotations from this edition are noted parenthetically within the text.

30. For a discussion of the interaction of the Broadway star system with dramatic structure, see Robert F. Gross, "Servant of Three Masters: Realism, Idealism and 'Hokum' in American High Comedy," in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William Demastes (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1996) 71-90.

31. In the original production of the play, the Theatre Guild did not pair Fontanne with her husband and frequent co-star, Alfred Lunt, but surrounded her with fine actors who did not share her star status.

32. Eisen 110.

33. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*, rev. ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963) 162.

34. Edwin A. Engel, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953) 220.

35. Jacques Lacan, "Mourning and the Interpretations of Desire in *Hamlet*," ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. James Hulbert, *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977) 38.

36. Brustein 134.

37. Coward 75.

38. In this regard, Rita Terras's attempt to link the play to the Nazi cult of the hero ignores the ironic aspects of the play. See "A Spokesman in America: O'Neill in Translation," in Moorton 93-94.

39. For a useful history of American business in the '20s, see Leuchtenburg 179-199.

40. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 24-27.

41. Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Movies with a Message," *Harper's Magazine* 196: 1177 (June 1948): 570-572.

42. Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectives at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 61.

43. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 284.

44. Jack Babuscio, "Camp and Gay Sensibility," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer, rev. ed. (New York: New York Zoetrope, 1984) 40-57.

45. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 310-311.

46. Alexander Woollcott, "Giving O'Neill till it Hurts," *Vanity Fair* 29 (Feb. 1928) 114.

47. See Maufort, Eisen, and Egil Törnqvist, "To Speak the Unspoken: Audible Thinking in O'Neill's Plays," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 16:1 (March 1992) 55-70.

48. Sheaffer 287.

49. Gelb 650. It is interesting to note that the 1928 production, the most successful English-language production of *Strange Interlude* to date, was directed by a man noted for his

sensitivity to high comedy and starred one of the preeminent high comic actors of her generation, Lynn Fontanne. Contrast this with the much less successful 1963 Actors Studio revival, with Actors Studio “dramatic” actor Geraldine Page, and director José Quintero, who was noted for his productions of some of O’Neill’s gloomiest plays, and whose approach to this script was described as “reverential” (Brustein 143). A sensitivity to comic values and lightness of touch may well be essential to a successful production of this play.

50. Sontag 291.

51. See David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991): 103-121, and James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville’s ‘Pierre’* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 44-61. For a more restricted and strongly politicized view of camp, in which gays are given a particularly privileged relationship to it, see Moe Meyer, “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 1-22. Meyer’s attempt to reserve a “pure” Camp [Meyer’s capital] style as the special preserve of certain sexual minorities is both methodologically dubious, and snobbishly exclusive when compared to the more generous stances of Bergman, Creech and Sontag.

52. Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 156.

53. Creech 51.

54. Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 50.

55. Matthews 20-24.

56. Edward Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Atheneum, 1965) 189.

57. Albee 194

58. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) 43-44, 217-253.

59. The play originally ended with a prayer to “Our mother who art in heaven” (Alexander, *Creative Struggle*, 123).

60. Gilman 69.

61. Barbara Haskell, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1987) 58.

62. Virginia Floyd, *The Plays of O’Neill: A New Assessment* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985) 337.

63. Egri, “Epic” 13.

64. Jonathan Rutherford, *Men’s Silences: Predicaments in Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 129.

65. Coward 21.

66. Sontag 292.

67. For an excellent analysis of criticism as defense mechanism, see Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 9-14.