

**Susan Glaspell's *The Verge*:
A Socratic Quest to Reinvent Form and Escape Plato's Cave**

Julia Galbus

Susan Glaspell's play *The Verge* (1921) depicts the story of Claire Archer, who attempts to breed a unique plant while her husband, sister, daughter and friends worry that her obsessive quest is driving her mad and vainly attempt to divert her attention. Glaspell refers to Plato in the first stage direction, asserting that a winter storm outside Claire's greenhouse would reveal the inherent Platonic forms of nature on the frost patterns of the glass.¹ From that moment forward, "form" becomes the pivotal term of the drama. Claire tends her horticultural experiments and protests the confining forms of language, art, motherhood, and traditional relationships between people while expressing her desire for destruction and avoiding explanations of her experiment unless coerced. Glaspell utilizes ancient Greek philosophy and culture to dismantle Plato's static metaphysical form theory. At the same time, Glaspell's main character cleverly mimics Socrates' ironic style of dialogic interaction, questioning those who oppose her, and only minimally indicating the kind of new form that she seeks, suggesting that Claire Archer is a philosopher who has escaped Plato's cave.

Because recent feminist critics have questioned the gendered foundation of Platonic metaphysics, Glaspell's charge against Plato's forms obtains a sharper relevance. Platonic forms are the essential templates which make ideas or things the *kinds* of things that they are. Independent of the imperfect material world, forms are more real than any instantiation or copy of a form. Forms are the source of our personal conceptions and cause material things by serving as the model which they imitate. For example, the form of a rose in a greenhouse imitates the perfect Platonic form of rose. Although Socrates sometimes used ordinary objects to explain forms, his goal is to elucidate the forms of abstract ideas like virtue, justice and goodness. Ideally, human interpretations of virtue and justice could be measured against the unchanging, pure forms of those ideas. Unfortunately, people often act as if there are forms for behavior and societal roles. Because Platonic forms are unchanging, the application of the idea of forms beyond their intended scope can wreak havoc with human lives. Therefore, Glaspell's main argument against forms stems from their permanence. Glaspell revises Platonic metaphysics

Julia Galbus is an Assistant Professor of English and the Director of the Humanities Program at the University of Southern Indiana. Her research interests include philosophy and literature, twentieth-century American literature, and autobiography. She has recently presented papers on David Mamet, Margaret Atwood, Edith Wharton, and Ellen Glasgow.

by using the term “form” to represent a new and original creation rather than a pre-existing metaphysical form. She applies the term more broadly than Plato did by including gender roles and species of plants in order to demonstrate how pervasively the idea limits human activity. Using Judith Butler’s work on gender as a constructed social category and her work on the implicit gendered role of matter in Platonic metaphysics, I argue that Glaspell foreshadows late-twentieth century criticism of Plato and depicts clearly why forms can hinder creativity, language, and societal roles. Glaspell’s play is important in American dramatic and theatrical history not only because of its feminist agenda, but also because it anticipates late twentieth-century criticism of Platonic metaphysics.

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, and attended Drake University where she studied Greek and philosophy.² She worked as a newspaper reporter for a few years, quit and moved to Chicago and then to New York, where she co-founded the Provincetown players with Eugene O’Neill. She wrote thirteen plays, fourteen novels, and more than 50 short stories and essays, and was the second woman to earn a Pulitzer prize in drama, for *Allison’s House* (1931). She was a popular, formidable success surrounded by supportive, intelligent friends. Because her husband, George Cram Cook, loved ancient Greek culture, they moved to Greece in 1922, though Glaspell returned to the United States after his death in 1924.³

The Verge has puzzled critics, though it has not been widely circulated or performed. Until the Cambridge edition of selected Glaspell plays was published in 1987, *The Verge* was out of print, and there are no known reviews of it between 1925 and 1991.⁴ The play has been described as “tormented and bewildering,” a “remarkable piece of psychological literature” that combines “comedy and melodrama, feminism and a critique of feminism, social criticism and metaphysical enquiry” reflecting its internal complexity.⁵ Although Glaspell’s *Trifles* and the fictional version of the same plot, “A Jury of Her Peers,” have been widely anthologized since their recovery in the 1970’s, the majority of Glaspell’s work has been neglected.⁶ *The Verge* provides far less resolution than *Trifles*, a realistic drama that employs domestic clues to determine whether a woman has murdered her husband. *The Verge* is an expressionistic story about a scientist determined to breed a new form of plant purely for the sake of its invention.

The existing scholarship on *The Verge* focuses mainly on Glaspell’s revolutionary treatment of gender. Several scholars note Glaspell’s tendency to link women’s freedom to language. In “Susan Glaspell’s Contributions to Contemporary Playwrights,” Linda Ben-Zvi discusses Glaspell’s ability to forge “women-centered” drama with its own language and distinct point of view. Ben-Zvi maintains that language oppresses women unless they invent their own dialects to signify their distinct meanings.⁷ Similarly, Ann Larabee indicates that for Glaspell,

language makes direct correspondences and metaphors that capitulate to old men and ancestors.⁸ Other critics have emphasized Glaspell's treatment of gender roles. Barbara Ozieblo claims that *The Verge* shows humankind trapped by patriarchally established norms within which only men are permitted to pursue a quest for self-discovery. Ozieblo calls Glaspell's theme ambivalent because Claire's project requires a stressful, perhaps impossibly continuous innovation of new forms.⁹ C.W.E. Bigsby's introduction to Glaspell's plays notes that around 1913 Greenwich Village "came to stand for the determination of women not to be trapped in the roles offered to them" and implies that this attitude pervaded Glaspell's plays once she and her husband moved there.¹⁰ Veronica Makowsky's sweeping study of Glaspell's fiction and drama, *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women*, traces themes of the entrapment of motherhood, the maternal role of the artist, and the cost of children to mothers, all of which appear in *The Verge*. Christine Dymkowski states that Glaspell stresses the organic nature of truth, the natural violence of creation, and the uniquely female capacity to give birth to new life.¹¹

A smaller number of critical responses take a psychological tact. David Sievers' 1955 study of Freud's influence on the American theater calls *The Verge* a portrait of manic depressive psychosis and "possibly the most original and probing play that has been written in America by 1921."¹² Isaac Goldberg's 1922 study of modern drama calls *The Verge* "one long abstraction in three acts."¹³ Focusing on its theoretical agenda, he insists, "there is more than rebellious womanhood in these dramas; there is consciousness of valid self, or of a passion for freedom, of dynamic personality; there is craving for life in its innermost meaning."¹⁴ Both the feminist and psychological interpretations of *The Verge* recognize Glaspell's emphasis on individual freedom and the entrapment of women through traditional roles as well as ordinary language.

Glaspell's play critiques Platonic metaphysics and the societal limitations on gender roles. It is fruitful to study *The Verge* in the context of Judith Butler's recent explication of the connections between gender, Platonic metaphysics, and contemporary phenomenology. Butler has argued both that gender is a performative category, created by its repetition and reinforced by cultural constructions, and that the ancient Greek distinction between matter and form is created "through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine."¹⁵ In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler dismantles the notion that gender is a permanent form rooted in biological sex. She uses a phenomenology that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than a subject of constitutive acts, to demonstrate her contention that gender is "an identity constituted in time" through a stylized repetition of acts, rather than a stable locus of identity from which acts proceed, acts which express supposedly essential gender traits.¹⁶ The repetition conceals the origin of this created category which is so pervasive that we are tempted to assume that those who resist it are unnatural or deviant.¹⁷ In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler links the

body's materiality to the performance of gender by discussing the gender-related terms in Plato's metaphysics. Comparing Plato's *Timeaus* with Irigaray's deconstruction of Plato in two chapters of *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Butler claims that Plato's form theory depends on seeing matter as "a substitution for and displacement of the feminine."¹⁸ There are two modes of materiality: one formed and intelligible, the other displaced by the binary opposition between matter and form. The latter cannot be named because, properly speaking, pure unformed matter does not exist. For Plato, all objects participate in a form. Butler believes that the feminine aspect of metaphysics is simultaneously locked outside the matter/form distinction, but is also its condition; the composite structure between matter and form relies on invisible, unformed "feminine" matter.

Butler's reading depends on the connotations of ancient Greek terms in Plato's *Timeaus*, which she reads as "a collapse and displacement of those figures . . . that secure a given fantasy of heterosexual intercourse and male autogenesis."¹⁹ Because of the masculine bias Butler sees within the metaphysics, she argues that material bodies ought not be an uncontested ground of feminist theory or practice. Whether or not one agrees with Butler that gender is constructed, her reading of Plato sheds light on the anomalous circumstance of Claire Archer's role: a female artist who dares to re-form matter, and who disdains the repetition of form and wants to replace it with something new and more flexible. It also brings to the fore Glaspell's sensitivity to her own position as a female playwright experimenting with gender, language and invention in a patriarchal culture.

The Verge creates a complex critical response to Plato's confining forms. In addition to using the term "form" and alluding to Plato's cave scene in *The Republic*, Glaspell's Claire Archer cleverly mimics the character and attitude of Socrates in *The Verge*. The historical Socrates was Plato's teacher, but Socrates was suspicious of writing, and preferred to exchange his ideas with his students through dialogue. Plato preserves Socrates' style of teaching by writing dialogues in which Socrates is the main character, although there is considerable academic debate about the accuracy of Plato's depiction. Claire Archer repeats Socrates' comic and ironic posture and questions people's mistaken understanding in order to destroy conventions that inhibit human potential, including her own. Like Socrates, she evades direct questions, claiming ignorance and protecting her project. Her quest is solitary and concrete; she develops a new plant just as she tries to develop a lifestyle unconfined by the conventions of marriage and motherhood. Although Socrates is married and has children, his family only appears briefly in *The Phaedo* before his execution. Claire Archer's life is less conventional. During the play she is living with her second husband while two of her former lovers, her sister and her daughter from her first marriage visit. In spite of their seeming openness to unusual marital and family relationships, their flexibility does not extend to Claire's work. She defends its merit and her absorption in it while they

suspect that she endangers her health by challenging so many conventions. They seek soothing explanations of her erratic behavior which Claire refuses to provide because the words would contain and limit her endeavor. The forms she seeks are not binding, but liberating precisely because of their originality. Thus Glaspell modifies the static, patterned metaphysics of Platonic form theory using a Socratic style of inquiry in order to replace it with original, revisable forms.

A pervasive Platonic allusion that Glaspell employs is a reference to the cave scene from the *Republic*. For Plato, the philosopher's task is to acquire knowledge of the forms which order the cosmos. Ordinary people routinely assume information based on limited and erroneous perceptions. It is efficient, but misguided. The Allegory of the Cave illustrates human beings' habitual misperception. The Allegory is central to Glaspell's play because Claire Archer accuses her friends and family members of being like Plato's cave dwellers, unable to see what she has discovered outside. The Allegory depicts people living in a cave with a long entrance open to the light along its entire width. Their legs and necks have been fettered since childhood, so that they remain in the same spot and cannot turn their heads. Behind and above them a fire burns. Between the fire and the prisoners, shadows are cast from puppets.²⁰ Plato compares human beings to prisoners watching shadows of objects on a wall. They mistake the shadows for the objects because they have had no reason or experience to question that belief. When someone escapes the cave and sees the sun and learns what things look like in real light, he returns to teach the others, but appears crazy because his perspective is so unusual.

By pursuing her work as an amateur horticultural scientist trying to breed a hybrid plant, Claire has left the cave of convention which dictates the behavior of genteel women. Her horticulture becomes a symbolic and practical means of moving beyond traditional forms of womanhood. Like Socrates, she is an ironic figure with a project she does not expect others to understand or approve. Yet Claire does not advocate her inquiry for anyone else and she has no students. She does not voice an agenda to change women in particular or people in general to go with her "to the verge," beyond form. Having created a greenhouse of her own in which she labors, she is disinterested in other people's curiosity. Anti-social and solitary, her scientific work separates her from the surrounding community.

Like Socrates in the *Republic* and the *Apology*, Claire defends herself to a mini-polis of family, friends and servants. The male characters in *The Verge* could be placed on various levels of Plato's divided line, which immediately precedes the Allegory of the Cave.²¹ The line shows varying levels of reality in ascending order in order to illustrate the metaphysical relationship between ideas and objects. The line is divided into four sections. The lower sections represent things that can be seen; the upper sections represent things known by the intellect. The lowest segment of the line contains the sensual qualities of matter, like the

redness and smoothness of an apple, “shadows, then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth and bright texture.”²² The second section contains “that of which this is a likeness or an image.”²³ Items at this level include matter and form composites, like plants, animals, people, and artifacts. The lower intelligible section of the line contains the mathematical descriptions of things, such as the numerical property of roundness, and the highest section contains the form itself, the idea of the pure form. Claire’s husband, Harry Archer, is rooted in the sensual and the physical as he seeks comfort and entertainment at the lowest level of the divided line. He thinks Claire should be happy because she “has everything.”²⁴ Dick Demming is an abstract artist who draws “[l]ines that don’t make anything” and can’t tell a person anything.²⁵ Tom Edgeworthy, Claire’s lover, understands her fear of language, but is wary of her search for pure forms. He recommends that Claire be left alone because she “isn’t hardened into one of those forms she talks about. She’s too—aware. Always pulled toward what could be—tormented by lost adventure.”²⁶ His name alludes to the project that almost succeeded, her Edge Vine, which, like Tom, returned to its source rather than exploding into a new species. Only Claire seeks transcendence at the top of the Platonic line, where she can identify old forms and attempt to create new ones.

Plato’s *Republic* takes place outside Athens’ walls, where Socrates can more safely discuss the perfect political state. *The Verge* takes place in Claire’s territories, her greenhouse and her tower, but both places are frequently invaded by others. Glaspell’s language emphasizes boundaries and borders which Claire desires to transcend. As the play opens, Claire and her assistant, Anthony, are working in the greenhouse. Due to a storm and a broken furnace, Claire has diverted the house’s heat to the greenhouse; her Breath of Life, “the flower that I have created that is outside what flowers have been,” is about to blossom and needs a constant temperature.²⁷ Because the house is cold, Harry Archer orders the maid to serve breakfast in the greenhouse, and is clearly more interested in salt for his eggs than in Claire’s project. Claire thinks of little besides her plants which outweigh anyone’s needs. Harry worries condescendingly that Claire takes her plants too seriously. He explains, “I don’t want to see it get you—it’s not important enough for that.”²⁸ Unfortunately, Claire is less self-assured and articulate than Socrates and dependent on Harry to understand her project so that he will leave her alone.

Most of the plot revolves around the attempts of Harry and the other characters to make Claire behave the way they think she should, while she tries to complete her work in spite of them. Claire is frustrated by the traditional choices her sister, Adelaide, and her daughter, Elizabeth, have made, though Elizabeth admits that she has to be well-mannered because she doesn’t do anything interesting.²⁹ Both relatives are concerned with the utility of Claire’s horticultural experiment. Elizabeth describes Claire’s work as “doing one’s own thing” and

“doing a useful, beautiful thing.”³⁰ Elizabeth can’t understand the use of making plants “different if they aren’t any better.”³¹ This perturbs Claire, who seeks the intrinsic challenge of creating a new form without respect to its extrinsic value. Unfortunately but predictably, Elizabeth charges that Claire’s project is morally wrong unless she improves the plants by making them more beautiful. Adelaide suggests that Claire find a way to be like her, “free, busy, happy. Among people, I have no time to think of myself.”³² This conformist choice strikes Claire as a conspiracy in which people try to be alike “in order to assure one another that we’re all just all right.”³³ Claire accuses Adelaide of “staying in one place because she hasn’t the energy to go anywhere else” through a creative venue of her own.³⁴ Claire does not want to be like the people that surround her. Instead it is as if she is in the cave trying to escape, hoping that there are more options outside, but not knowing for certain.

Claire frequently ignores Harry’s directions and suggestions. When Claire refuses to explain to Dick the procedure for cross-pollenating a plant to give it fragrance, Harry charges that Claire doesn’t try to make her work less mysterious, and insists that she should answer Dick’s questions if she can. It is almost as if he suspects there is safety in its articulation, and danger in its mystical, unspoken state. She complies, and in the process, says that she is giving her flower a scent she’ll call “Reminiscence,” which echoes Plato’s suggestion in *The Phaedo* and *The Phaedrus* that knowledge depends on recollection. Claire worries that her new plant might find itself “lonely out in what hasn’t been.”³⁵ The scent provides a metaphorical kind of memory of the plant’s biological predecessors.³⁶ When Dick insists he understands Claire’s explanation, Claire responds in skeptical Socratic fashion, “I wonder if you do.”³⁷ Because her attitude disturbs Harry, he encourages her to be amusing for Tom, her former lover who will be leaving soon. Instead, Claire flirts with Dick, speaking about perversion and suggesting that Harry might think she is Dick’s latest strumpet. Harry chastises her for not behaving like the refined “flower of New England” that she is, ironically invoking a plant to correct her.³⁸ The hint of New England ancestors upsets Claire, and she insists that “[w]e need not be held in forms molded for us. There is outness—and otherness.”³⁹ Glaspell constantly shifts Claire’s moods, conveying the unstable but provocative basis of Claire’s personality, making her mimic the flexible form she seeks. Glaspell suggests that forms confine and contain individual beings rather than reveal true being.

Claire’s evasiveness is underscored by her irony and her refusal to explain her goal. Her attitude is attractive and frustratingly elusive. When Harry and Dick discuss Claire, Harry stammers, unable to categorize Claire easily because she is not archtypal:

. . . you might know all there is to know about women and not know much about Claire. But now about (*does not want to say passion again*)—of, feeling—Claire has a certain—well—a certain—

DICK: Irony?

HARRY: Which is really more—more—

DICK: More fetching, perhaps.

HARRY: Yes! Than the thing itself. But of course, you wouldn't have much of a thing that you have irony about.⁴⁰

Harry is as unable to articulate Claire's personality as she is unable to describe what a new form might accomplish for her. When Harry asks Claire why she refers to World War I as a "gorgeous chance" and she replies, in true Socratic fashion, "I don't know—precisely. If I did—there'd be no use in saying it."⁴¹ For Claire, language is most interesting when one's knowledge is tentative and imprecise. To practical Harry, this makes no sense. Tom seems to understand that articulation can damage an idea or emotion when he replies to Claire, "The only thing left worth saying is the thing we can't say."⁴²

Harry repeatedly pushes Claire to articulate her project in order to demystify it. After rejecting Elizabeth's offer to assist her in the greenhouse, Harry again pushes Claire "[t]o get down to brass tacks and actually say what she's driving at" so that she can "realize just where" she is.⁴³ Claire prefers not to "nail it to a cross of words" but explains that her plants have found otherness, "They have been shocked out of what they were—into something they were not; they've broken from the forms in which they found themselves. They are alien. Outside. That's it, outside" and she continues, "when you make a new pattern you know a pattern's made with life. And then you know that anything may be—if only you know how to reach it."⁴⁴ Claire Archer's new patterns include the new plant and the lifestyle she has created for herself. Implicitly, Glaspell reinforces the relation between language and forms. Since language consists primarily of categories, and categories are directly related to forms because they indicate the kind of being things are, it is necessary that Claire be frustrated by words and by Plato's forms.

When Harry and Adelaide come to see Claire in her tower after she has dismissed the nerve specialist, Claire accuses them of using words falsely:

I'm tired of what you do—you and all of you. Life—experience—values—calm—sensitive words which raise their heads as indications. And you *pull them up*—to decorate your stagnant little minds—and think that makes you—And because you have pulled that word from the life that grew it you won't

let one who's honest, and aware, and troubled, try to reach through to—to what she doesn't know is there.⁴⁵

Glaspell creates an explicit metaphor which connects the plants and language by suggesting that words can be grown and pulled. By misusing language, the people who surround her lose the inherent organic vitality of words. Only Tom appears to avoid this problem by insisting that he and Claire do not need words between them . . . Claire prefers not to “shut them up in saying.”⁴⁶ Eventually, however, he too wants her to “[c]ome from the unrealized into the fabric of life,” to return to being less alone and less unique.⁴⁷

Glaspell gives Claire both a strong suspicion of language and progressive madness which echo the tone and the content of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Its characters give speeches about love, divine madness and self-knowledge as well as the danger that written language poses because writing cannot defend itself against an incompetent audience. Socrates insists that an author cannot trust that writing will be clear or reliable for a reader, since “[e]very speech, once it's in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who've no business having it. It doesn't know to whom to speak and to whom not.”⁴⁸ It can't defend itself without its author. An alternative reading might emphasize the understanding of an idea within a person, such that the written record is a playful image indebted to the original idea but lacking its vitality and seriousness. Socrates insists that some written content is superfluous and playful, and that writing demands careful questioning and instruction. Like Socrates, Claire fears that once she explains her project in words, she will have released her ideas to an incompetent audience. She prefers the chaotic, inarticulate state of her pursuit, the stage at which she is groping to understand it herself. Socrates claims that one cannot write speeches until one knows the truth about the topic, can define all the terms, knows how they are related, and knows the souls to whom the ideas are being communicated. In addition, he insists that one must understand souls to find the form that fits each nature.⁴⁹ Claire Archer's main goal is to create new flexible forms, not to waste time explaining or defending her project by limiting it with conventional but inadequate language.

Claire disturbs her friends and family because she uses destruction both as a metaphor for escaping a form, and as an intentional act. In an early scene, Claire smashes Tom's breakfast egg to illustrate her belief that destruction can shock a person into aliveness, in the same way that leaving a cave of illusions destroys the illusions but also makes one realize what is true. Claire, like the freed prisoner, compares her escape to a liberating destruction:

You think I can't smash anything? You think life can't break up,
and go outside what it was? Because you have gone dead in the

form in which you found yourself, you think that's all there is to the whole adventure? And that is called sanity. And made a virtue to lock one in.⁵⁰

Harry preferred Claire when she “used to be the best sport a man ever played around with.”⁵¹ Presently, she insists that killing during a war could have led the human spirit to break through to a new form in the same way that plants “explode” their species. Reversing the priority in which humans are valued more than vegetation, Claire suggests that people should not mind being buried because they would lie under plants, a type of “life so flexible so ruthless and ever-renewing.”⁵² While Claire values flexibility over rigidity, her friends and family worry that she might easily sacrifice her life while pursuing her project.

As Claire edges closer to divine madness, the men struggle to define Claire's problem to each other, naming it in order to understand and control it. Plato's *Phaedrus* deems this kind of madness the best form of possession. Such a person beholds the beauty of the world, is reminded of true beauty. . . gazes upward like a bird, and cares nothing for the world beneath, [so] men charge it upon him that he is demented.⁵³ Claire continues to avoid Platonic repetition, preferring to make “patterns that haven't been” even if they cause anguish.⁵⁴ Her insistence on creating a new form reveals the essence of artistic drive. Tom believes that if Claire can find that through her plants, she may not experiment with her life, though it is equally possible that Claire's plants are the first step toward making herself a new form. When Claire tries to explain her goals and her emotions, her language breaks down to stammered phrases with missing words. Linda Ben-Zvi argues that Glaspell's depiction of characters permitted to struggle to say “what they are not even sure they know” is one of Glaspell's most important contributions to drama.⁵⁵ Claire tells Tom that he is afraid of her passion and of his own suffering. Confirming her suspicion, he tells her that she isn't being herself. In a particularly Platonic moment, she questions him:

Why are you so afraid of letting me be low if that is low? You see (*cannily*) I believe in beauty. I have the faith that can be bad as well as good. And you know why I have the faith? Because sometimes—from my lowest moments—beauty has opened as the sea. From a cave I saw immensity.⁵⁶

Claire reiterates the Platonic link between intense beauty and goodness. Breaking into poetry, she exclaims: “Let me tell you how it is with me. / I do not want to work, / I want to be . . .”⁵⁷ She interrupts herself when her speech becomes patterned. Glaspell exemplifies the modernist desire to separate the signified from the signifier. Taking the risk of showing him what she seeks, she exclaims, “we will

come out—to radiance—in far places”⁵⁸ as if to the sun that shines outside the Platonic cave. Tom refuses her invitation to otherness, resisting, “not into this—not back into this—by me—lover of your apartness.”⁵⁹

Glaspell’s transformation of Plato’s form theory culminates in the greenhouse. Reverting back to a sharper comic tone while continuing the theme of destruction, Glaspell gives Claire a chilling attitude. Claire appears to be her former, cheerful self as she jokes about the previous evening, when she rejected help from the psychologist: “From the gutter I rise again, refreshed. One does, you know. Nothing is fixed—not even the gutter. (smiling to HARRY and refusing to notice revolver or agitation) How do you like the way I entertained the nerve specialist?”⁶⁰ Somehow, relations between Harry and Dick have deteriorated, and when Harry chases Dick into the greenhouse with a revolver, Claire verbally disarms him, calling him ridiculous and dull. When Tom comes to say good-bye to Claire, she replies, “God! Have you no heart? Can’t you at least wait until Dick is shot?”⁶¹ Harry relents, “Oh, he’ll not be shot. Claire can spoil anything.”⁶²

Themes of spoiling and destruction continue as Claire prepares to discover whether her experiment has succeeded. Making another fluid transformation of mood, Claire explains that she would never commit suicide because “I’m too interested in destruction to cut it short by shooting.”⁶³ She fears her possible success with the new plant: “I’ve been afraid to know, and almost as afraid of having done it as of not having done it.”⁶⁴ Finally, Anthony brings the plant from the back of the greenhouse, and Claire peers at the *Breath of Life*’s glowing bloom. Dick comments on its originality, “It’s quite new in form. It—says something about form.”⁶⁵ But Harry’s remark that people will like it because of its novelty irritates her, and she asks everyone to leave. Once alone, Claire discovers that the *Breath of Life* has attained the new form she strove for, and she speaks poetic lines which seem to form a dialogue:

Breath of the uncaptured?
 You are a novelty.
 Out?
 You have been brought in
 A thousand years from now, when you are but a form too long
 repeated,⁶⁶
 Perhaps the madness that gave you birth will burst again,
 And from the prison that is you will leap pent queerness
 To make a form that hasn’t been—
 To make a person new.
 And this we call creation.⁶⁷

In spite of the new form she has created, Claire seems to go mad just after she sees

its glowing blossom. In the final scene, Claire pushes Tom through a glass greenhouse wall while trying to strangle him. He represents a temptation to abandon her project when he offers to keep her safe, and therefore he is her most dangerous threat. She removes the temptation to be with him, wishing “[n]ot to stop it by seeming to have it,”⁶⁸ where “it” represents her pursuit of knowledge and happiness through her experiments. Tom’s death is also her gift to him, for he will truly be outside what is, where Claire has been trying to arrive. The play closes while Claire sings “Nearer My God to Thee.”⁶⁹ Claire is closer to the divine, but she loses the protection her unusual family could have provided her when she kills Tom.

The tragic ending prevents an easy reading of Claire Archer’s success and leaves the reader to question the sanity of destroying and creating forms. The ending parallels the futility of Socrates’s death sentence; the polis elects to condemn the citizen who challenged their categories. Glaspell’s audience is left hovering over the Platonic divided line, wanting to experience all the levels at once without being trapped by madness, hoping new forms might be invented without the destruction of those who seek them. Yet, Plato praises the creative madness inspired by the love of the beautiful, and implies that it is the necessary result of transcendent creativity. According to Plato, the best kind of madness stems from this passion for the beautiful and is philosophy.⁷⁰ For Glaspell’s Claire, “beauty is that only living pattern—the trying to take pattern,”⁷¹ the formation of a new pattern outside the old forms.

Glaspell interpreted Platonic forms as incarcerating patterns revealed in ordinary language. In order to subvert the artificial limits on women’s roles, she created Claire Archer, a female scientist who transformed matter, rejected motherhood, and refused to play the hostess and happy wife when her priorities lay elsewhere. Claire proves a “brave flower of all our knowing” because her character portrays the frustration, absorption, and excitement of developing a new form. After demonstrating the extent to which Platonic forms can be used to restrict people’s lives, Glaspell portrays the difficulty of moving outside the Platonic cave to invent more flexible categories. Without emotional support, intellectual respect, psychological strength, and a solitary place to experiment, Claire’s project succeeds only to be abandoned as she loses her psychological stamina and becomes possessed by a transcendent vision.

Glaspell’s *The Verge* suggests that we can replace Plato’s static forms. Claire Archer mimics Socrates as she questions those who oppose her project and her uniquely gendered lifestyle. Biographical details from Glaspell’s life support her academic grounding in the classics which explain her allusions to Plato’s middle dialogues. Recently, critics have noted Glaspell’s revolutionary treatment of gender and have connected it to contemporary feminist criticism. Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance and her development of the gendered foundation of Western metaphysics provides a crucial context for reading *The Verge*. The play

offers a comic but sincere quest to reinvent metaphysical form and traditional human relationships for the sake of individuals who choose not to conform. Glaspell extends the performance of gender on both a theoretical and pragmatic level, spanning Plato's divided line in order to display her understanding and her critique of it at the same time. In doing so, Glaspell helps lay the groundwork for the current generation of feminist scholars who continue to expand the performance of gender and to revise Platonic forms.

Notes

1. Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*, *Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. by C.W.E. Bigsby (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987, 57-101) 58.
2. Veronica Makowsky, "Passive Resistance to Active Rebellion: From *Trifles* to *The Verge*," *Susan Glaspell's Century of American Women: A Critical Interpretation of Her Work* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 15; Arthur Waterman, *Susan Glaspell* (New York: Twayne, 1966) 18, 48.
3. Linda Ben-Zvi, "Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill: The Imagery of Gender," *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 10.1 (1986): 22-27, 22. Ann Larabee, "Death in Delphi: Susan Glaspell and the Compassionate Marriage," *Mid-American Review* 7.2 (1987): 93-106, 103.
4. Mary E. Papke, *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1993) 163.
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11. Christine Dymokowski, "On the Edge: The Plays of Susan Glaspell" *Modern Drama* 31.1 (1988): 102.
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13. Isaac Goldberg, *The Drama of Transition: Native and Exotic Playcraft* (Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd Co, 1922) 474.

14. 474.

15. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge: 1993) 30.

16. Butler, "Performative" 270.

17. 273.

18. Butler, *Bodies* 37.

19. 49.

20. Plato, *Republic, The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961) 747-748, 514 a-c.

21. Plato, *Republic* 745-747, 509d-511e.

22. *Republic* 745, 510a.

23. *Republic* 745, 510a.

24. Glaspell 71.

25. 65.

26. 71.

27. 63.

28. 62.

29. 74.

30. 75.

31. 76.

32. 80.

33. 80.

34. 81.

35. 64.

36. 99.

37. 64.

38. 64.

39. 64.

40. 66.

41. 70.

42. 70.

43. 76.

44. 76-77.

45. 83.

46. 86.

47. 86.

48. Plato, *Phaedrus* 521, 275e.

49. Plato, *Phaedrus* 523, 277c.

50. Glaspell 65.

51. 71.
52. 70.
53. Plato, *Phaedrus* 496, 249e.
54. Glaspell 86.
55. Ben-Zvi, "Susan Glaspell" 156.
56. Glaspell 87.
57. 88.
58. 89.
59. 89.
60. 94.
61. 95.
62. 95.
63. 95.
64. 95.
65. 96.

66. Glaspell might be alluding to the myth of Er in book 10 of Plato's *Republic*. One thousand years is the period during which a soul is trapped beneath the earth before it is reincarnated with a new form, determined by the quality of its previous life. Plato, *Republic* 615a.

67. Glaspell 96.
68. 99.
69. 100-101.
70. Plato, *Phaedrus* 496, 249e.
71. Glaspell 97.

Fig. 1: Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist

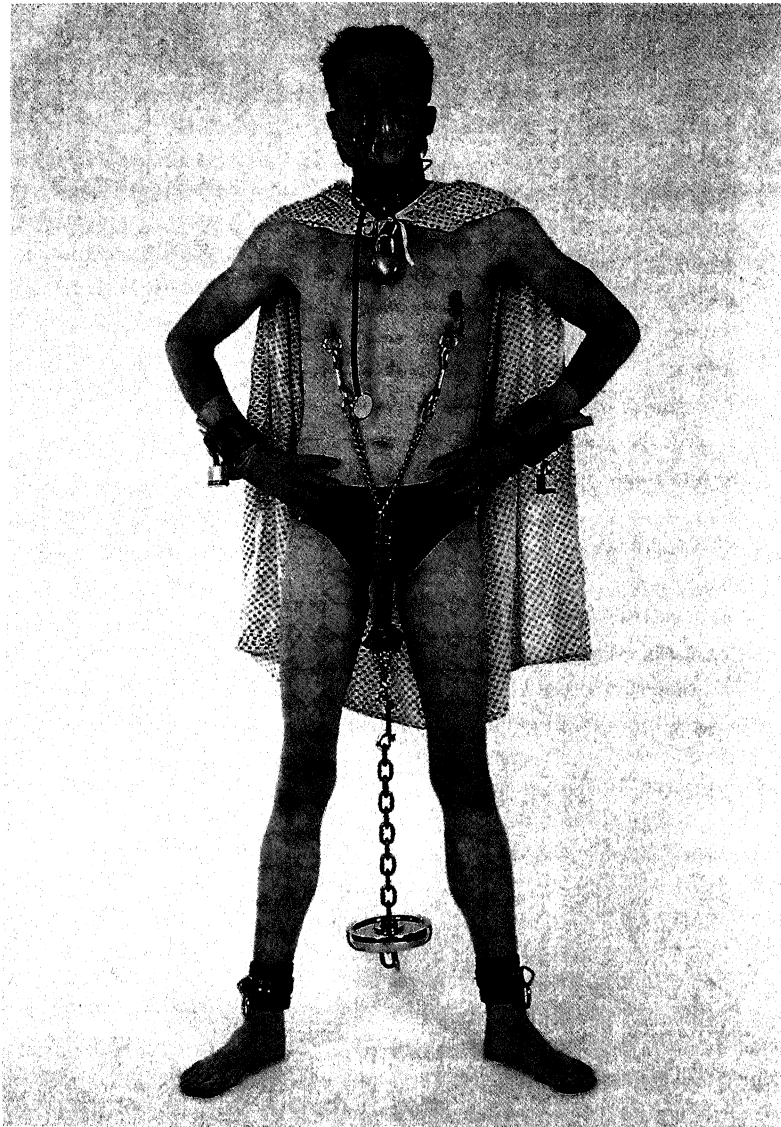


Photo taken by Sheree Rose, 1992