

High Ambivalence: S. N. Behrman's Disembodiment Project

Robert F. Gross

We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so what we believe
we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.
—Michel de Montaigne, quoted by Behrman¹

High comedy is, as its name indicates, a hierarchical trope in literary criticism, with insistent class resonances. (When high comedy is mentioned, can high society be far behind?) Although George Meredith did not promulgate the term, his celebration of the Comic Spirit at its most rarefied came to be applied to “high comedy” or, what increasingly became its synonyms, “comedy of manners” and “drawing room comedy.” Meredith structured the genre as an exclusive club—only Menander, Molière and Congreve need apply, and both Molière and Congreve on occasion sink beneath the club’s standards. Menander, one suspects, survives unsullied only because most of his plays have vanished. The ‘Bacchanalian’ Restoration wits are denied admission, as are all Puritans, Sentimentalists, Satirists and *Farceurs*. Moments of realism are disfiguring. The Victorian Comedy of Manners, characterized by Meredith as a “blowsy country girl”² has neither the refinement nor the status to pass muster. Exuberance and invention are suspect, and extravagance and excess are beyond the pale. To appreciate the high comic playwright, Meredith admonishes us, requires “a sober liking of your kind, and a sober estimate of our civilized qualities.”³ Comic misrule, it is clear must give way to a decorous poise not far from earnestness.

The Way of the World is Meredith’s touchstone for English high comedy, and for our purposes here, it is less important how Congreve’s play appears to us today, than how Meredith construes it for the purposes of his critical project. For him, it is a celebration of pure intelligence without object, having “no idea in it” worth mentioning, and a plot that is an “afterthought.”⁴ It is as if any exercise of desire would coarsen the proceedings irredeemably. The distinguishing sign of high comedy, for Meredith and his disciples, is sublimation. In its assiduous striving for respectability, and its willingness to renounce desire in favor of idealized play, Meredith’s “An Essay on Comedy” is part of a larger set of strategies to gain

Robert F. Gross teaches Theatre at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where, among other things, he has directed Behrman’s *Brief Moment*. His publications include essays on Gerhart Hauptmann, Arnold Wesker, John Guare, and Harry Kondoleon.

middle-class acceptance for the theatre in Victorian society. The result of Meredith's critical strategy, however, is a conflicted genre—one that needs desire to energize the proceedings but also requires the sublimated transformation of that same desire to prove its good breeding.

In the United States, Meredith's drive toward intellectual gentility found eager adherents, especially from critics like Joseph Wood Krutch, who used the attainment of tragedy and high comedy on the American stage as proof of the culture's maturation.⁵ The genre's hierarchical assumptions, however, never far from the surface, remained in tension with democratic aspirations. Eager to prove that one could be elite without being snobbish, American high comic authors transformed Célimène into a speakeasy entertainer (*Brief Moment*) and a Russian con artist (*Idiot's Delight*), Alceste into a muckraking journalist (*Biography*) and Mirabell into both a self-made man (*Holiday*) and a vaudevillian touring the Balkans (*Idiot's Delight*). Despite these egalitarian gestures, however, the form basically remained one of high style, sophisticated banter, stylish costumes and glamorous stars. After all, the speakeasy singer was Francine Larrimore, and the Russian con artist, Lynn Fontanne.

No figure more clearly registers the tensions and contradictions of American high comic writing in the first half of this century than S. N. Behrman. Not only was he widely praised as the leading writer in this genre by his contemporaries, he was so strongly identified with it that the criticism written about him largely continues to be generic.⁶ At the same time, however, Behrman seems an odd candidate for Meredith's exclusive club. The child of immigrant Eastern European Jews, raised in a poor neighborhood in Worcester, Massachusetts, he was ultimately an outsider to the privileged worlds he often depicted. Indeed his attitude toward both the world of privilege and his privileged genre shows signs of deep ambivalence. In work after work, he challenges the norms of high comedy with anomalous, often antagonistic presences—the anti-semitic in *Rain from Heaven*, the American isolationist in *The Talley Method*, the unscrupulous magnate in *Dunnigan's Daughter*. By introducing troubling emotions, grave topics and abrasive characters into his high comic soirées, he runs counter to the exclusivity of the Meredithian aesthetic with which he is so often identified.

The most vivid image of Behrman's high comic vision comes not in one of his plays, but in an essay about wartime London, published in January 1945 in *The New Yorker*, entitled "The Suspended Drawing Room." (The passage is worth quoting at length, not only for its content, but as a reminder of Behrman's elegant prose style). Walking the streets of the bombed-out city he comes upon a drawing room, the setting so synonymous with his chosen genre as to lead to the alternative appellation, "drawing room comedy." But the sight does not inspire fondness or nostalgia—rather, a sense of the uncanny:

On the third story of a house on the corner, following accurately the theatrical convention of the missing fourth wall, was an exquisite, suspended drawing room: delicately tinted blue walls, molded cornices, the curved rifted ceiling, with a beautifully shaped oval where the central chandelier had been. All but the framework of the rest of the house was gone, but there it hung, this upstairs drawing room, elegant and aloof. I thought of Henry James. Here was his Mayfair, crisply anatomized. What would he have done with that room? With what malevolent ghosts would he have peopled it? What seedlings of social casuistry would have sprouted beneath that nonexistent chandelier, shimmered along those pastel walls. An acute English critic speaks of James as the harbinger of decay and says that he described the final throes of a society he knew was done with. But James did not, I am sure, anticipate quite this finale. He must have visualized a long, slow inanition—the inhabitants of these drawings [*sic*] rooms giving up eventually because of their inability to sustain their own attitudes, to save face before their own pretensions. Certainly he could not have anticipated such rude visitations as there have been, cutting short the tortuous inhibitions, freezing the slow molds of refinement⁷.

One might expect the occasion would engender reflections on antithesis of savagery and civilization, some reworking of the well-worn trope of the fragility of cultured life, but Behrman's musings are far more ambiguous and sinister. Rather than peopling this violently opened stage set with the wits of Oscar Wilde, Behrman imagines the "malevolent ghosts" of Henry James, sprouting "seedlings of social casuistry." The opposition is not one of savagery and civilization, but of overt violence and insidious decay. The drawing room, in Behrman's reverie, does not elicit nostalgia for some Golden Age of wit, but an awareness of hidden corruption, malnourished and entropic, that is merely laid bare by the abruptness of the bomb. One feels no fondness for the Meredithian social club here. Instead, there is a sneaking admiration for how the bomb has "crisply anatomized" the site of privilege. Even Behrman's loathing of Nazism does not delude him into nostalgia for the upper-crust of British society.

Behrman's vision of the suspended drawing room is certainly not Meredithian. Indeed, Behrman seems to have been less influenced by Meredith than by Lord Morley, the literary critic who was the subject of Behrman's M.A. thesis in English. For Morley, every great comedy had a tragedy concealed beneath the surface, an observation that Behrman applauded as a student, and later echoed in both his plays and critical observations.⁸ This generic observation postulates a

perilous tension between the witty surface of a high comedy, such as *The Misanthrope*, and the pain that is required to give it its strength and dimension. This approach provided a perfect vehicle for Behrman's own deep ambivalence. Great comedy may transcend the wound of tragedy, but only does so by forming a scar, in which the contours of the original injury remain visible. To understand Behrman's idiosyncratic comic mode, we need to scrutinize its scars.

It is easiest to turn first to *No Time for Comedy*, Behrman's 1939 comic success, since none of his plays more overtly thematizes his ambivalent vision. On the simplest level, the play is a high comedy that explores its own limitations against the distant background of growing international menace. The protagonist, Gaylord Easterbrook, is an author of successful high comedies whose drawing room has suddenly been suspended. In the light of the Spanish Civil War, he has come to see his ingenious work as a loathsome indulgence. "Manner—divorced from justice—to hell with that!" he exclaims (106-107).⁹ His agonized attempt to write a more profound play that will mirror the horrors of contemporary life has domestic repercussions, since Gay has penned his last three comedies as vehicles for his wife, Linda Paige, and is now clandestinely composing his new opus under the guidance of Amanda Smith, a self-proclaimed muse. As in many high comedies, the interplay of eros and ideas draws the characters into witty reflections on art, sex, marriage and manners, but Behrman not only adds intense discussions on the problems of a comic playwright in a troubled world. He also makes the play a container for other, less clearly rooted, anxieties.

No Time for Comedy is structured around four conflictual triangles, each succeeding one less clearly etched and definitively resolved than the previous one. Indeed, the fourth conflict is not even directly presented, but is a repressed plot that makes its presence felt through displacements. It permeates the dominant comic tone with a vaguely articulated, but nonetheless deeply felt anguish.

The first and most obvious of the four conflicts centers on Linda, whose marriage to and working relationship with Gay is threatened by her husband's artistic crisis. At first, she responds to his horror at the world situation with airy disbelief, assuming that Gay is merely putting on a mask of idealism when his discontent is sexual. Her detachment is Meredithian, holding a sober, detached estimate of her species: "There are *two* sorts of people, that's all—the brutes and the decent ones—and as far as I can see there's no hope of exterminating the brutes" (36). As her detachment meets with increasing attacks from Gay, however, she comes to suspect that both her marriage and collaboration may be doomed, and considers the amorous advances of Philo Smith, the millionaire husband of Gay's muse. Philo, it turns out, is even more detached in the face of human suffering than Linda is, which leads her to recognize in Philo the qualities that had so angered Gay in her. Confronted with this exaggerated image of her own position, she modifies her views and rejects Philo's cynicism, in favor of Gay's anguished

concern. Linda moves from the embodiment of high comic values at their most shallow—manner divorced from justice—to an appreciation of Gay’s wound: “Gay, for all his absurd little faults—Gay feels. He bleeds” (235) she explains. In the course of the play, Linda has moved from Meredith to Morley.

The conflict expressed in the triangle Gay-Linda-Philo is clearly articulated in the dramatic action, and is resolved through Linda’s rejection of Philo in favor of her husband. Yet it does not resolve the question as to whether Gay can reconcile high comedy with his political conscience. It simply leaves Linda accepting Gay’s doubleness over Philo’s consistent detachment.

The second conflictual triangle puts Gay at the apex, and allows us to examine his situation more closely. This triangle is also potentially adulterous: Linda-Gay-Amanda, but in this play, sex takes a back seat to playwriting. In one of the wittiest exchanges of the play, Linda confronts her rival:

You enjoy inspiring Gay.

Amanda: Yes—

Linda: That is to say you enjoy sleeping with him. I understand that perfectly.

Amanda: Oh, but that’s not true—we haven’t—that’s not true.

Linda: If it’s not true already then it’s immanent. You’ll *inspire* him into it. I don’t mind telling you I’m intensely jealous. Sleep with him if you like but for pity’s sake don’t ruin his *style*.

(75-76)

The *style* is ostensibly that of Gay’s writing, but his style as a lover is not totally excluded from consideration. Behrman conflates stylus and phallus in a play in which the playwright’s wife’s name is “Paige.” The play’s wit repeatedly derives from a cross-fertilization of sexual and literary impulses, making sex literary and literature, sexy. Philo’s library takes the place usually occupied by the bedroom in farce. When Amanda learns that Linda is calling on her, she asks Gay to hide in there, and the significance is not lost on him: “I don’t mind hiding in a bedroom, but hiding in a library seems kind of dry” (60). When Gay retreats into the study, Philo reflects “Why is he so combative? Am I in the way? Surely not. I even let him use my library,” to which Amanda replies “I find your humor disgusting” (65).

Just as the rivalry between Philo and Gay is not allowed to remain merely sexual, but comes to carry the thematic opposition of cynicism versus suffering, the conflict between Amanda and Linda is tagged with a related opposition, which becomes overt late in the comedy, when Linda suggests that Gay’s romantic triangle might provide a promising premise for his next play:

Write a play about Mandy and me. The two opposite types of women in the life of a man, the *builder-upper* and the *breaker-downer*—the critical faculty versus the clinging vine—
What Every Woman Knows in Reverse.

(107)

Amanda is the builder-upper. She wants to see people exceed their limitations by meeting great challenges greatly. Linda, for her part, not only accepts people as they are, but assumes they can be no more than that. As the embodiment of Gay's critical faculty, the very thought of Linda can deflate his attempts at adultery:

I find myself settling into the worn grooves of seduction—and I never fail—Even when she doesn't know—I never fail to hear her silent laughter reducing my ardor to platitude.

(61)

Gay flees from the critical awareness of his limitations as a writer and lover into a fantasy of potency with Amanda, who has nothing but praise for Gay's new playwriting effort, since her role as muse depends on his success. In time, however, Gay comes to realize that his play is unsatisfactory and abandons both it and Amanda. Returning to Linda, he begins to work out her dramatic conceit—*What Every Woman Knows in Reverse*—hoping that he will be able to use it, as Behrman has in *No Time for Comedy*, to express more substantial concerns.

With Gay's decision to return to Linda, his conflict momentarily appears to resolve itself, only to be put in question again in the very last moments of the play: Amanda calls for Gay on the telephone and Linda tells her husband that he must deal with her. "It's the curtain for your last act—isn't it?" she asks knowingly (122). But Gay is still unable to 'write' the ending that will provide his play with high comic closure. Behrman provides a lengthy stage direction that describes in detail Gay's silent agony at the telephone, ending "*in the eternity of his inarticulateness, the Curtain swiftly comes down*" (122). Gay's inability to provide a curtain line serves three major functions. First, it provides a clever piece of comic business that punctuates the play's final curtain while simultaneously subverting decisive closure, making the ending work in a double register that is both comic and anxious. Second, it suggests that Gay's dilemma has not been resolved by his recent choice of Linda over Amanda. Instead of finally setting out to write his new play, Gay is left mute. His choice may have exacerbated his dilemma instead of resolving it. To embrace Linda's critical faculty over Amanda's aspiration is to choose disillusionment over hope, and reject the transformative potential of the romance genre in favor of the harder-headed social realism of comedy.¹⁰ In favoring the irony that reduces ardor to platitude, Gay accepts castration. The marriage of the Breaker-Downer to the

Man Who Bleeds may be appropriate, but not altogether reassuring.

Finally, the final curtain serves to link Gay's amorous conflict with the third conflictual triangle, which is far more elusive and sinister than the sexual triangles. Here Gay is caught between Linda and Death. When Gay realizes that his new play, tentatively and appropriately entitled *Dilemma*, is going to fall short of his hopes for it, he decides on a new and dangerous course of action: he will go to Spain with Amanda, and fight in the Spanish Civil War. Linda reacts to this plan with characteristic wit. "Peculiar place for a honeymoon. Why *Spain*? I might even add, if I were malicious—why Mandy?" (101). Linda immediately senses the oddness of Gay's resolve; Spain in the throes of civil war is no place for a honeymoon. Challenging his assertions, she finally provokes him into declaring the contours of his dilemma more fully:

While I'm imagining these charming *variations*—as you call them—people are dying—the innocents are being slaughtered. And in my personal life I improvise variations also—Mandy! No, I'm sick of it, sick of my work, sick of myself—I *must* get something *clear* and *outside* myself to be enlisted for. I'm sick of the triviality, sick of ringing changes on what I've already written, sick of the futility theme—If necessary, I swear to God, I want it *shot* out of myself!

(105)

Throughout, Spain has been less a concrete political situation for Gay than an image of mortality. Early on, he reproaches himself for not having joined the Loyalists. He tries to write a play about a young man who is wounded at Guernica and later commits suicide. "My play is dominated by the idea of death," he explained, "because we are" (104). He playfully congratulates Franz Schubert on his early death. In the third triangle of *No Time for Comedy*, Amanda is replaced by death, and Linda struggles against her husband's suicidal tendencies. This triangle is less foregrounded in the plot, and far less amenable to high comic treatment. Indeed, with this configuration, the play begins to undermine any possibility of high comic resolution, as the heroine wrestles with the hero's obscurely motivated orientation towards death.

Linda accurately intuits that her true rival is far stronger and more sinister than Amanda Smith. "I feel a revulsion from your play altogether," she tells Gay, "because it is dominated by the idea of death" (103)—but she only struggles with this intermittently, before returning to the more easily managed threat of Amanda. For both Linda and Behrman, it is relatively easy to remove an amatory rival from the comedy, but far more difficult to remove the death drive, especially when both its presence and its attractiveness to the protagonist remain unexplained. As death

threatens to displace Amanda, the identity of Linda's real adversary becomes more ambiguous. Although nothing in Amanda's behavior seems sinister, and Linda's description of her as "fluffy" (27) seems apt, Amanda winds up carrying ominous overtones as "a Lorelei with an intellectual patter" (27). Linda may be a figure of castration, but Amanda becomes, however incongruously, an agent of death. For all the high comic banter, Gay is caught between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.

This is not, however, to turn the play into one innocent man's struggle against two *femme fatales*. After all, it is Gay, not Amanda, who invests his dramatic project with morbid fantasizing. Gay's *Dilemma* is an elaborate suicide fantasy in which a young man, believed to have died at Guernica, returns unrecognized to his London home, where his father has come to believe that his son is sending messages to him from beyond the grave, thus proving the existence of the afterlife. The son does not reveal his identity, but stays with his family. He is "a ghost secure in his nonentity; made increasingly aware that he *himself* is not wanted" (57)—as Gay explains it—until he is threatened with exposure and commits suicide to preserve the faith of his father and his father's followers in these ghostly messages. Death, in this scenario, provides protection from desire. Significantly, it is the young man's fiancé who recognizes him and thus imperils his ghostly freedom. In *Dilemma*, the hero's spectral life allows him a precarious moment of peace and freedom.

Like his protagonist, Gay dreams of escaping from desire. He feels himself incapable of escaping from Linda's critical presence, which he has internalized, and paranoically accuses both Mandy and Linda of spying on him. The plot of *Dilemma* expresses his fantasy of power. It begins with the common theatrical fantasy of spectatorship, that of seeing without being seen, but it goes beyond that to elaborate a fantasy of triumph through self-destruction. *Dilemma* is a story in which the hero gains significance through his very absence. The desiring gaze threatens his ghostly power, leading him to triumph through suicide. The self-destructive fantasy of *Dilemma* is the hidden alternate ending to *No Time for Comedy*.

The presence of death is linked with a fourth, repressed conflict in Behrman's comedy. Although there is no reference at all to Gay's relationship with his father, his strongly dichotomized relationships to paternal figures is an important part of his character. *Dilemma* presents a fantasy of a poet-son who willingly dies to preserve the illusions of his father. In the fantasy, he is both martyr and Orphic voice, inspiring the father with messages of consolation from beyond the grave. In reality, however, Gay's personal reactions to the only father in *No Time for Comedy* are vehement, irrational and disproportionate. The third conflictual triangle has Gay caught between the idealized father of *Dilemma* and the real Philo Smith.

We are told that Philo has sons at school, one of whom is at Harvard. From his two references to them, it is clear that they are strangely exempt from his mordant cynicism, which usually extends to humanity at large. Philo is a comic *senex* figure; a rich father with a preference for the past, an amateur historian with "an infallible

memory" (22), and an urbane curmudgeon who strives to be imperturbable. It is Philo who sets the plot in motion when he calls on Linda with the news that his wife has been trying to inspire her husband, and must be saved. In a deviation from the Oedipal rivalries of Plautine comedy, the father figure here does not forbid his son's heterosexual desire because he is a sexual rival, but to save the younger man from what he considers a threat.

In this world which identifies writing with virility, it is the other men who belittle Gay's writing. Pym Lovell accuses Gay of copying down his banter and putting it onstage, and Philo remarks to Mandy, "For a *fashionable* writer your friend's repartees are rather lame," to which Amanda retorts, "*You would lame anybody*" (65). The laming Philo summons up associations with Laius crippling the infant Oedipus, while at the same time Philo, whose name derives from the Greek work for "love," is the unperturbable patriarch who hopes to save his son. Philo encapsulates the ambivalences of the father—protective and crippling—against whom Gay rails while secretly fantasizing a sublime sacrifice in his honor.

Although Linda resolves her ambivalence toward Philo by repudiating him, Gay remains conflicted in his relationship to the paternal figure, alternately attacking Philo and dreaming of dying to support the illusions of the patriarch. Frightened by Linda and Mandy in turn, his insecurity with women manifests itself in paranoia and flight. His anguished silence at the play's final curtain is a form of impotence. Gay as writer and lover is blocked by the sign of the father, a father who never quite appears as a coherent figure, but makes his presence felt throughout the text.

As I have moved forward with this investigation of the comedy's conflictual triangles from the manifest to the latent, I have run the risk of suggesting a depth scenario, in which the latent gives rise to the manifest. That would be misleading. To reduce Gay's concern with the Spanish Civil War to an oedipal crisis would be to reduce the play's dense texture to a single strand, just as to ignore the oedipal dimension would lessen its complexity. *No Time for Comedy's* bright wit is dogged at every step by a powerful negativity: Broadway comedy is shadowed by Guernica, marriage by castration, aspiration by death, and filial self-sacrifice by oedipal rage. Each moment of negativity has its own dynamic, but the result is a deep shadow that repeatedly eludes containment as it shifts our attention from one conflictual triangle to another.

No Time for Comedy marks the beginning of a shift in Behrman's work. Although it adopts the sexual rivalries usually associated with high comedy that Behrman had adopted in such earlier works as *The Second Man*, *Brief Moment*, *Biography* and *Wine of Choice*, its father-son dilemma, merely suggested here, looks forward to his late plays, *The Talley Method*, *Fanny*, *The Cold Wind and the Warm*, *But for Whom Charlie*, his childhood memoir, *The Worcester Account*, and his only novel, *The Burning Glass*. But it is in *Lord Pengo* that the relationship between father and son receives its most sustained treatment. It is almost *No Time*

for *Comedy* in reverse, with its father/son material foregrounded, and its social concerns buried and approached indirectly.

Indifferently directed in its 1962 Broadway premiere, *Lord Pengo* was largely ignored by both reviewers and the public. Even Behrman's admirers have tended to give it little attention, dismissing it as a facile dramatic adaptation of the author's series of *New Yorker* pieces on art dealer Joseph Duveen (later published together under the title *Duveen*), instead of considering its merits as an original work that appropriates the Duveen material for the exploration of themes left untouched in the essays.¹¹

True, Behrman took a great deal from *Duveen* in writing *Lord Pengo*. The story of a conniving and resourceful art dealer to the American *nouveau riche*, with a hunger for publicity and a longing to found an American National Gallery all comes from Duveen, as do a number of specific anecdotes. But Duveen had a daughter, while Pengo has a son, and this change in gender forms the foundation for Behrman's play.

On the simplest level, the plot is familiar. Pengo expects his son Derek to carry on his profession as an art dealer, while Derek wants to be an artist. Pengo unwittingly contributes to the breakup of his son's romance with Daphne, the daughter of two of his best clients, and later opposes another engagement, albeit unsuccessfully. Derek's fight for independence from paternal domination are as old as classical comedy. But Pengo is not the lecherous *senex* of Plautine farce. He is a witty and charming extrovert with a relish for fine objects and hard bargains. He is an artist in commerce, who uses his business dealings as a way of shaping the world in accordance with his dreams. He not only sells works of art to his clients, but amuses them with anecdotes, recommends architects and interior decorators, helps them enter the most exclusive circles of society, and plays Cupid. He ultimately enjoys the pure act of selling far more than any particular piece of merchandise or any profit he might reap. The finances of his firm are always precarious; he is too fond of the extravagant gesture or bold sales coup for them to be otherwise. Mediating between the masterpieces of high culture and the fortunes of American robber barons, Pengo is exhilarated by the constant exchange of goods, services and cash. "With him its a kind of disembodied activity—like praying!" (56), Pengo's secretary shrewdly observes.¹²

Derek is driven both to despair and admiration by his father's devotion to selling, while Pengo cannot comprehend his son's reserve and introversion. Derek is perturbed by the extent to which compromise, artifice and duplicity shape his father's dealings, while Pengo is exasperated by his son's rigid adherence to moral principles. "When your mother bore you," he observes, "she gave birth to a conscience" (11). Reversing the traditional terms of the conflict between father and son, Behrman makes the father the advocate of unbridled energy, and the son the

voice of restraint. Although the dramatist had used *The Misanthrope* as the model for earlier comedies, contrasting protean cosmopolites and inflexible idealists (Abby and Roderick in *Brief Moment*, Marion and Kurt in *Biography*, Linda and Gay in *No Time for Comedy*), it is only in *Lord Pengo* that the Alceste and Célimène appear as son and father.

The conflict in values between the two men is intensified by their quarrels over women. Like Gay, Pengo flees his wife to pursue his work with more freedom, and his neglect of her is tinged with animosity; he cancels engagements and sells a statuette he has promised to her. In a reworking of the Linda-Gay-Amanda triangle, Lady Pengo never sets foot onstage, giving full rein to the protagonist's aspirations. Derek, by contrast, is marked by his devotion to women. His infatuation with Daphne, his later engagement to Yvette, and his repeated observation that his mother has been unjustly neglected by her husband all serve to heighten the tension between father and son. Behrman clearly subordinates the dramatic and thematic functions of these three women by keeping them offstage. They are never given the opportunity to emerge as characters in their own right, but are mere objects of male rivalry. Derek is caught between heterosexual desire and the "disembodied" world of masculine commerce. Daphne, Yvette and Lady Pengo may become the occasions of the men's disputes, but they are not the causes. Their conflicts are not elicited by the presence of any particular woman, but ultimately is obscurely rooted in Behrman's vision of filiation. As with Philo in *No Time for Comedy*, Pengo does not forbid his son women because he wants them for himself. Instead, he wants to keep the son within his own realm of creative activity.

This vision is given symbolic expression by a painting that hangs in Pengo's galleries throughout the play, accompanying him, unsold, from his gallery in London to New York—Masaccio's "The Circumcision." The painting had been one of Pengo's bad investments; he has been unable to sell it for thirty-five years. The mere presence of such a painting could easily suggest a Freudian dimension to the critic, but Behrman has Pengo move the Freudian dimension from subtle suggestion to audacious flaunting. When he finally succeeds in selling the painting to a psychoanalyst's wife near the end of the play, Pengo exults "Can you imagine a better present for a psychiatrist? Why, it's like selling it to Sigmund Freud himself" (128). In one of his more extravagant flights of mythmaking, Freud had speculated that primitive fathers had castrated their sons, and later generations substituted circumcision as a symbolic equivalent of this original savagery.¹³ For Freud, the ritual remains a testimony to the Oedipal enmity between father and son, but Behrman elaborates on its significance, placing it in a chain of displacements that attempt to resolve the impasses of *No Time for Comedy*. (Behrman admits at the outset that there is no evidence of Masaccio ever having painted a Circumcision [xi-xii] but the fabrication suits his purposes splendidly.)

The Masaccio hangs on the wall throughout the first act, but elicits no

comments until the second, when the tensions between Derek and Pengo have grown stronger. Pengo complains that his customers will not buy it because it is too “gloomy” (64). Despite the fact that it has been in his possession for years, he misidentifies the painting as a representation of the Ascension. This misidentification is revealing. Pengo refuses to see the son suffering symbolic castration at the father’s command; instead, he openly misconstrues it as the ascent of the son to the father’s right hand in Heaven, or in the firm of Pengo & Son. In other words, he chooses to see the son united with the father, rather than see any evidence of potential emasculation. Pengo’s act of misinterpretation reflects his inability to understand Derek’s need to develop along lines other than his own. Both the Ascension and Circumcision are aspects of a patriarchal myth, but Pengo chooses to see the configuration that reflects less sinisterly on his role.

As the second act proceeds, we see Pengo trying to sell the painting to millionaires Sylvester Schmitt and Enoch Drury, both of whom are repelled by its dark coloring and subject matter. After Pengo’s stormy confrontation with Derek, he stands before the Masaccio and vents his anger upon it. He shouts “Nobody wants it—nobody will buy it!” and, alarmingly, flings it across the room (102-103). The failure of Pengo’s plans for Derek and his attempts to sell “The Circumcision” show the limits of his power. Both son and painting stubbornly refuse to enter into the complex economy that defines Pengo’s world. The precise character of these failures had been revealed in the confrontation with Derek. Pengo had planted a charming but unscrupulous young man in Primrose Drury’s home, hoping that he would both help assuage Prim’s loneliness and encourage her to spend money on redecoration. The employee, however, taking advantage of the situation, wooed Prim’s daughter, Daphne. Pengo has thus wounded Derek, and damaged their relationship in his attempt to further his commercial ambitions. His system has frustrated itself, and the image of the circumcision has become a memorial to an inexorable remnant of violence in an apparently suavely civilized system. Pengo may rail against it, but he still participates in it.

In the final act, which is set five years later, a fatally ill but still energetically selling Pengo is at last reunited with his son. Both admit their errors, and express their affection for each other’s uniqueness. In the aftermath of this reunion, Pengo is able to sell “The Circumcision” The final moment of the play shows Pengo leaving his gallery, waving the painting “an affectionate farewell” (232).

Though Behrman openly invokes Freud in relation to “The Circumcision,” it would be wrong to conclude that a Freudian reading exhausts the resonance of the image in this play. Behrman places circumcision within a dramatic context that moves it beyond the mere illustration of a Freudian concept, and, indeed, uses it to articulate a point of view that revises Freud’s tragic pessimism. The Masaccio shows us the violent making of a sign, a physical mark that testifies to the primordial tension between father and son, but also testifies to the symbolic solution to that

tension, since the father comes to demand only a symbol of castration, not emasculation itself. This movement from castration to circumcision is a symbolic displacement that moves toward civilization. This movement continues in a series of further civilizing displacements alluded to in Masaccio's painting. In Judaism, circumcision becomes a sign of the Chosen People's covenant with Yahweh; in Roman Catholicism, the Feast of the Circumcision was celebrated as one that showed Jesus's obedience to the will of God the Father, and was interpreted as a prefiguration of his later suffering and death.¹⁴ In both traditions, the acquiescence to a symbolic act becomes proof of fidelity and a sign of salvific action. The fact that such a symbolic resolution is possible brings us out of the realm of tragedy, and into that of divine comedy.

Behrman, in turn, continues to displace meaning from divine to high comedy, using Masaccio's artistry and Pengo's commerce as secular solutions to primal rivalry. Masaccio masters the tensions of circumcision by giving them artistic representation. Pengo, in turn, moves the representation into the flow of social exchange through his eloquence and ability to sell. Paradoxically, both master the scar by putting themselves at the service of it, and allowing their talents to transform it. "The Circumcision" presides over the action of *Lord Pengo*—dark, anxiety-producing in its subject matter, and stubbornly resisting attempts to "move" it for most of the comedy. Its final sale shows both the triumph of Pengo's energies and the creation of further energy, in the forms of the customer's satisfaction, the salesman's exuberance, and the exchange of money for art. In *Lord Pengo*, commerce, romance, art and repartee are all vehicles for the flow of creative energies among the characters. Thus, the transformation of psychic tension into sales is no less worthy an act of sublimation than the transformation of tension into art.

When Pengo sells "The Circumcision," he transcends the tension to which the painting testifies. The action is the penultimate in a series of creative, symbolic transformations that have triumphed over the initial savagery of castration. With each symbolic displacement, the representation becomes less direct and physical, and more elaborate and civilized. Father and son have moved from violence to sign, through religious practice, festive commemoration, art, and finally, to commerce. At each step, the conflict has grown more indirect and comic, through it never quite succeeds in obliterating the primal truth of its origin.

The Masaccio, however, also achieves another dimension in *Lord Pengo*, in which circumcision refers back to Pengo's Jewish identity. The play, oddly enough, suggests this aspect gingerly. When Pengo tries to sell the portrait to robber baron Enoch Drury, he rejects it brusquely, and the script momentarily bristles with an antisemitic slur which is deftly deflected:

Drury: I am not interested in Jewish rites. (*Thinks perhaps this is tactless*)

No offense, your Lordship.

Pengo: Not at all. I understand prejudice. I have a few of my own. But Berenson says of this little picture—

(81)

Elsewhere, Pengo refers to himself as an outsider, who must use unorthodox methods to succeed with his clients, but he leaves the precise nature of his outsider status vague. In a similar context, Derek contrasts English “restraint” with his family’s more effusive Hungarian style (37). It may be that Pengo’s ethnicity has been softpeddled in its tailoring for the play’s original star, Charles Boyer, but the interchange with Drury, the overall emphasis on Pengo’s outsider status, and Joseph Duveen’s Jewishness, all point strongly toward Pengo’s ethnic background. Indeed, the end of Act II, in which a weary and momentarily defeated Pengo goes off to see a travelogue of the Holy Land loses most of its resonance if Pengo is a Hungarian gentile.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud considered the roots of antisemitism, and came up with some causes relevant to Lord Pengo: diasporic Jews, he argued, often only exhibit small, even “indefinable” differences from their host cultures; they show remarkable resilience in their surviving oppression; often thrive in commerce and artistic activity, and produce, through circumcision, an uncanny effect.¹⁵ This list of factors contributing to antisemitism provide a profile of Pengo, whose business place, no matter how successful, is marked by the presence of the scar of that uncanny “Jewish rite” which resists commerce. The scar of circumcision comes to mark the distance between Pengo and his customers. In this context, it becomes clearer why Pengo desperately pins his hopes on the “disembodied” activity of selling; on the prospect that commerce will provide the means of assimilation for him and his family into a capitalist society. His name, after all, effaces his ethnic background in favor of commerce—the “pengo” was the standard of currency in Hungary between the two World Wars.

There remains, however, one more step in the displacements from castration to commerce, which needs to be considered, one that moves beyond commerce. Pengo sells the Masaccio to Prim, who, after many years of unrequited infatuation has at last found happiness with the man who used to be her psychiatrist. Once she became his wife, she explains, she found she no longer needed psychoanalysis (109-110). For Prim, who has moved beyond Freud, the painting is an anniversary gift, making it a celebratory object that is no longer sold, but given in affection. Prim’s act transcends economy, and moves into a realm of concord and sexual intimacy. In *Lord Pengo*, love becomes the ultimate step in the civilizing process, one that allows the sexual anxiety that has suffused the play to return to a desublimated, phallic celebration.

At the same time, however, it sends an ambivalent message about Jewish

assimilation. Though sold to the gentile Prim, it is a gift for her Jewish husband (“It will have a professional interest for him—as well as racial” explains Pengo [127]). Thus, the sign of ethnic difference stubbornly resists movement through the economy and is only finally moved by being able to return to one of its own. Selling, it seems, can never achieve full disembodiment.¹⁶ And so the scar remains. No matter what he sells, Pengo “a court jester” (38) of “Hungarian” impulsiveness, must admit that he is not liked by most of his clients, who, for the most part, find him no more acceptable than in their set than Meredith’s blowsy country girl.

The drive toward disembodiment echoes the hero of *Dilemma*, “secure in his nonentity, made increasingly aware that *he himself* is not wanted” (57). Both Gay and Pengo flee desire, hoping for the success of a self-effacing project. Gay works to disappear into his writing, a figure of the playwright, secure in his body’s absence from the stage, with his words and desires no longer his own, but translated into *other* bodies who are scrutinized and desired by the audience. Pengo relishes his dissolution into the flow of commerce, disappearing behind Giorgiones, Titians and Rembrandts—one pengo in constant circulation. Yet the accomplishment of the project of disembodiment is death. The plot of *Dilemma* ends in suicide, while Pengo, having sold the Masaccio, has nothing left to do but go to his death. Gay is traumatized by the realization, while the older Pengo accepts it with suave equanimity, waving farewell to the stubborn picture he has finally conquered. In both cases, however, the choice is ominous—the scarred body, or dissolution. Perhaps not *no* time for comedy, but certainly an odd one.

Meredith’s form of high comedy depended on sublimation and exclusivity. Perhaps this is why the high comic form scarcely survived the Second World War. The acting technology of the Actors Studio, as exhibited in the powerfully desublimated performances of Kim Stanley and Marlon Brando, ran counter to the assumptions of the Meredithian aesthetic, and the New Leftist histrionics of the 1960s and 70s, whether of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, Joseph Chaikin, Charles Ludlam or Richard Foreman, were even less likely to favor sublimation. Despite the nostalgia of devoted theatergoers, who desperately cling to past pleasures, and the inherent conservatism of genre critics, who are always tempted to exalt the objects of their study to transhistorical phenomena, high comedy in the Meredithian tradition has been dead for nearly half a century.

Although Behrman has been praised as a writer of Meredithian high comedy, his ambivalences actually presage the genre’s demise. Stressing divided emotional responses by bringing comic material in uncomfortable juxtaposition with more troubling matter, he created deep fissures within both his plays and main characters. In Behrman we witness the failure of the Meredithian aesthetic, which assumes a unified tone and subject, under the fracturing pressures of modernism. In this respect, Behrman is an important transitional figure, between the largely unproblematic comedies of Arthur Wing Pinero, W. Somerset Maugham, Clyde

Fitch, Rachel Crothers and Philip Barry, and the deeply fragmented and often agonized comic worlds of John Guare, Christopher Durang, Harry Kondoleon and Nicky Silver. Behrman is the first high comic playwright to repeatedly test the limits of his genre, sometimes beyond its endurance. Yet Behrman is distinguished from his successors by his reticence. He is more inclined to turn the death drive that haunts his plays inward, toward fantasies of suicide and self-effacement, while his successors more freely turn outward in sadistic displays of sarcasm and invective. Their wounds are rawer, and more inclined to drip blood than be discreetly scarred over. For the most part, disemodiment does not tempt them as a solution to their problems. In this respect, Behrman remains the representative of an earlier stage and social decorum. Like Henry James's characters in the suspended drawing room, his is a world of "tortuous inhibitions." As a result, his experiments may sometimes seem timidly introverted to us, but it is still worth exploring the intricate labyrinths forged by his ambivalences.

Notes

1. Behrman reveals himself to have been "addicted" to Montaigne from early on, leaving him with a fascination with duality, which provided, not only the topic of his first success, *The Second Man*, but led to an unfulfilled ambition to write a play about Montaigne. See *People in a Diary: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972) 324-328.

2. George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1956) 6.

3. 46.

4. 18.

5. See, the overall argument of Krutch's *The American Drama Since 1918: An Informal History* (New York: Random House, 1939), with special notice to his equations of Eugene O'Neill and Behrman, for example on 313. For "comedy in the classical tradition" as a sign of cultural development, see 182.

6. From Behrman's contemporaries, see Brooks Atkinson, *The Lively Years, 1920-1973* (New York: Association Press, 1973), Bruce Carpenter, "Mr. Behrman, Presenting High Comedy," *Theatre Time* 2 (1949): 17-20, and Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama: Comedy of Manners," *Nation* 124 (27 April 1927): 484, for only a few of many examples. Indeed, it's very difficult to find contemporary criticism on Behrman that does not discuss genre. For more recent evidence of this critical tradition, see Cyrus Hoy, "Clearings in the Jungle of Life: The Comedies of S. N. Behrman," *New York Literary Forum* 1 (1978): 199-227, B. D. Joshi, *Major Plays of Barry and Behrman: A Comparative Study* (Jaipur: Pointer Publishers), 1989--and this paper. In most of these sources, the discussion of the genre is strongly indebted to Meredith.

7. S. N. Behrman, *The Suspended Drawing Room* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965) 26-27.

8. S. N. Behrman, *Lord Morley as Literary Critic*, M.A. Thesis, Columbia University, 1918, 20-30. For a later example of Morleyan resonances, see *People in a Diary* 197-198.

9. S. N. Behrman, *No Time for Comedy* (New York: Samuel French, 1939). All quotations from this play are cited in parentheses.

10. For the utopian impulse of romance as opposed to comedy, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1981) 141-143.

11. See, for example the dismissive treatment given to it by the usually appreciative Kenneth T. Reed in *S. N. Behrman* (Boston: Twayne, 1975) 87-88.

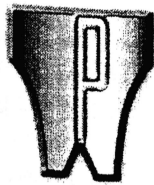
12. S. N. Behrman, *Lord Pengo* (New York: Random House, 1963). All quotations from this play are cited in parentheses.

13. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, v. 23, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1964) 81.

14. For Christian exegeses of Jesus's circumcision, see Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

15. "Among the customs by which the Jews made themselves separate, that of circumcision has made a disagreeable, uncanny impression, which is to be explained, no doubt, by recalling the dreaded castration and along with it a portion of the primaeval past which is gladly forgotten." Freud 91.

16. Nor does this fascination with circumcised penises ever fully achieve exclusive heterosexuality. For the interaction of Jewish masculinity and homosexuality in Behrman's work, see my "What Makes Sammy Run?: S. N. Behrman and the Fugitive Kind" in *Hollywood on Stage: Playwrights Evaluate the Culture Industry*, ed. Kimball King (New York: Garland Publishing) 19-38. In Behrman, the movement toward disembodiment may be a flight from male homosexual desire.



Women & Performance

a journal of feminist theory

who we are

A vital forum for discussion on gender and representation, *Women & Performance* features essays, scripts, interviews and articles on performance from interdisciplinary feminist perspectives. We encourage dialogue between varied fields of performance scholarship (ethnography, dance and theatre history & criticism, performance studies, cinema studies, cultural studies), and explore emerging feminist critiques of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, technology, and nation.

our mission

With each issue, the journal seeks to reaffirm its commitment to feminist writing, and to extend and reformulate notions of performance and performativity, so as to advance, challenge or reinvent issues critical to ongoing discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. We are also committed to serving women's groups and feminist theorists at a national and international level.

how to order

Contact us or visit our web site:
Women & Performance, New York University,
Tisch School of the Arts, 721 Broadway, 6th Floor,
New York, NY 10003
(212) 998-1625
women@echonyc.com
www.echonyc.com/~women