

Something Cloudy, Something Queer: Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* and Tennessee Williams's *Period of Adjustment* as Problem Comedies

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The mature comedies of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams fit awkwardly into their respective canons. Greeted with a lukewarm reception by reviewers, O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933) and Williams's *Period of Adjustment: High Point Over a Cavern* (1960) have subsequently been dismissed by most critics as lesser works, if not actual embarrassments. This relative neglect is perhaps surprising, especially since *Ah, Wilderness!* was O'Neill's second most popular play during his lifetime, running in New York for 289 performances, while the Broadway production of *Period of Adjustment* played for 132 performances over five months (November 1960-March 1961). Both plays were later filmed, and while *Period of Adjustment* has dropped out of the repertory, *Ah, Wilderness!* is the most frequently revived of O'Neill's plays.

These two plays deserve a closer look, since in each case comedic form intensifies the sophisticated engagement with issues of gender and sexuality that has spurred much of the critical commentary on these playwrights' more noted works. Both *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* adopt the conventions of romantic comedy only to place extraordinary pressure on them. By so doing, they expose fault lines endemic to the genre that typically escape the attention of Broadway audiences and critics primed for "straight" comedy. Despite their outwardly conventional resolutions, *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* dramatize the incompatibility of sexual desire and domestic structure—the very elements traditionally forced into wedlock at the close of romantic comedy.¹ *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* are best characterized as problem comedies whose insistence on the destabilizing effects of sexual desire belies their ostensibly happy endings.

In taking a problem comedy to be a particular kind of romantic comedy—in brief, one that draws an alert audience's attention to tensions or contradictions latent in its parent genre's nominal celebration of heteronormativity—I follow the long-standing critical tradition in Shakespeare Studies that sets apart *All's Well*

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That Ends Well and *Measure for Measure*, together with *Troilus and Cressida*, as “problem plays.” In 1896, Frederick S. Boas retrospectively applied this then fashionable term for Ibsenite social dramas to these three plays and also (to some degree) *Hamlet*. According to Boas,

All these plays introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness. Amidst such media abnormal conditions of brain and emotion are generated, and intricate cases of conscience demand a solution by unprecedented methods. Thus throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when, as in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act.²

Problem plays are distinguished by their atmosphere of artificiality and cynicism, especially concerning sexual matters, and by disturbing ambiguities of tone and theme.

Subsequent scholars tend to remove *Hamlet* from the group and to adopt the term “problem comedies” to distinguish Shakespeare’s perplexing trio of 1602-1604 from his earlier, “festive” comedies of the 1590s.³ While critics disagree on what, precisely, constitutes a problem comedy, many agree that Shakespeare’s (in the words of C. L. Barber) “do not feel festive enough; they are not merry in a deep enough way.”⁴ Whereas festive comedies tend to feature the defeat of an external blocking agent (Don John in *Much Ado*, Egeus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), problem comedies seem to foreground union *itself* as the problem by raising issues of sexual compatibility and social hypocrisy. Differences between paired-off characters seem irreconcilable, or unpleasant, or both; sexuality becomes a source of anxiety rather than fulfillment and regeneration.

Does the distinction between problem and festive comedy hold up beyond Shakespeare? Because problem comedy exposes tensions between desire and domesticity implicit in all romantic comedy, virtually any given play can move into the category of “problem play” if enough pressure is brought to bear upon it. Press any festive comedy hard enough, in other words, and it will begin to look problematic. We need only think of the ironic comedy of manners tradition, which culminates in the brittle unions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Moreover, the extent to which any comedy “moves us along dim untrodden paths” is largely in the hands of the director; witness the number of dark productions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the wake of Peter Brook’s famous 1970 staging. A complex interplay of authorial intention, directorial intervention, cultural context, critical

opinion, and audience response determines the reception of a play in any given period. It is hard to imagine post-Holocaust audiences not being uncomfortable at Shylock's forced conversion in *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance.

A fluid continuum, then, exists between problem and festive comedies. Why then retain the distinction? It seems undeniable that certain comedies continually invite us to question the "naturalness" of the union(s) ostensibly celebrated by the action. Thus *Period of Adjustment* clearly lacks the celebratory spirit that infuses Williams's ebullient romantic comedy *The Rose Tattoo*.⁵ The category of problem comedy remains a useful heuristic device. It not only helps us come to grips with plays that have struck many critics as generically confused, dramatically unsuccessful, or both; by testing the limits of its parent genre, problem comedy reminds us of the naturalizing function of romantic comedy. Much as *Hamlet* is both example and metatheatrical critique of revenge tragedy (hence what might be called a "problem tragedy"), problem comedy both asserts and critiques what romantic comedy supposedly takes for granted: the desirability and naturalness of compulsory heteronormativity. This combination of exemplification and critique characterizes *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* and helps explain their mixed reception. Viewed as problem comedies, the two plays offer a disturbing double vision: the normative imperatives of romantic comedy are simultaneously staged and undermined.

One reason so many critics have missed the subversive dimension of *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* is that the playwrights themselves reinforced the impression that their comedies represented a holiday from more profound concerns. In a letter to his eldest son, O'Neill called *Ah, Wilderness!* "purely a play of nostalgia for youth, a sentimental, if you like, evocation of the mood of emotion of a past time which, whatever may be said against it, possessed a lot which we badly need today to steady us."⁶ O'Neill claimed that the play portrayed the family he wished he had grown up in, one that embodied solid middle-class values:

My purpose was to write a play true to the spirit of the American large small-town at the turn of the century. Its quality depended upon atmosphere, sentiment, an exact evocation of the mood of the dead past. To me, the America which was (and is) the real America found its unique expression in such middle-class families as the Millers, among whom so many of my generation passed from adolescence to manhood.⁷

Critics have largely taken their cue from such pronouncements and tend to respond with the mild condescension that seems romantic comedy's due as a genre. Thus Ellen Kimbel attributes the play's success to its "affirmation tinged with nostalgia for a time of innocence, simplicity, and safety," while according to James A. Robinson,

“the play sentimentally affirms the respectable bourgeois family . . . as a source of love, support, and wisdom.”⁸ Kimbel rejects the dissenting view of Thomas F. Van Laan, who discerns more wilderness than paradise in “the smug complacency of the Millers’ narrow world.”⁹ Instead, Kimbel aligns “[t]he play’s fundamental optimism” with its genre of “nostalgic family comedy.”¹⁰

In a similar way, Williams’s ambivalence about his excursion into romantic comedy fueled the critics’ sense of *Period of Adjustment* as a trivial diversion for this serious playwright. One of few, Williams’s plays explicitly labeled comedies by their author, albeit a “serious comedy,” the tonally ambiguous *Period of Adjustment* attracted hostility as well as condescension from reviewers. A disgusted Robert Brustein went so far as to question Williams’s authorship.¹¹ Gerald Weales notes, “Reviewers on both sides of the ocean split over whether the play was a conventional commercial comedy or a harsh satire, and the perceptions seemed not to depend on whether they liked or disliked the play.”¹² Williams obscured matters by speaking of the play in different terms at different times. At one point Williams called it an “unambitious” comedy whose ending was “non-tragic.”¹³ At another, he asserted that the play “was about as dark as *Orpheus Descending*.”¹⁴ Evidently the playwright did not fully comprehend his own creation, and his statements of intent must be regarded (as so often with Williams, who tended to suit word to context) with skepticism. In general, reviewers considered *Period of Adjustment* superficial, and Weales summarizes the resulting confusion: “Williams calls his play ‘A Serious Comedy,’ but there is some difficulty about the where and the what of the seriousness.”¹⁵ Few, if any, critics have made a case for the play’s lasting interest.

Colored by their authors’ retrospective evaluations, these plays have been glossed as nostalgic wish fulfillment (in the case of *Ah, Wilderness!*) and substandard sex comedy (in the case of *Period of Adjustment*). But if we overcome the temptation to view them as failed or sentimental comedies, or simply as broad satires of bourgeois social arrangements, they stand revealed as problem comedies that undo the normative, heterosexist assumptions they outwardly assert.¹⁶ The principal concern of these plays is not romantic misunderstanding between the sexes, but the constitutive role of bourgeois social structure in the formation of male sexual subjectivity. More precisely, *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* elucidate the bourgeois family’s failure to reproduce what Judith Butler, following Adrienne Rich, terms compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁷

According to Butler,

To guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements, well established in the anthropological literature of kinship, have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires

the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system.

Voicing one of queer theory's central axioms, Butler continues: "the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests."¹⁸ Culture's job is to produce normatively heterosexual subjects by obscuring the ways that sex, gender, and desire fail to mesh smoothly, both within the individual subject and within the "natural" institution of heterosexual marriage.

The same ideological agenda underlies the genre of romantic comedy, whose lovers traditionally overcome external obstacles (such as a *senex iratus*) and/or mutual misunderstanding on the way to a happy union. In Puck's words, "Jack shall have Jill; / Nought shall go ill."¹⁹ Comedic form is itself a site for the production of normative desiring subjects. In romantic comedy, genre recapitulates gender—or else "genre trouble" follows. We recall that Shakespeare's problem comedy *Measure for Measure* ends in a surprise marriage proposal followed by a weird procession led by two actors, both male in 1604, dressed as nun and friar.

To "queer" these plays by tracing their divagations from heterosexual norms is therefore not to argue that *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* are gay plays written in gay code. Nor is it to drag characters out of the closet, since Butler's claim is that neither "homosexual" nor "heterosexual" identities preexist the subject. Rather, institutions and mechanisms such as marriage and compulsory heterosexuality produce the desiring subjects who inhabit them. For Butler, the performative nature of sexual identity means that there is no essentialized subject whose foundational desire may or may not fit the cultural norms that surround it. Indeed, part of these norms' function is to produce the illusion of a preexisting subject in possession of a stable sexual identity—and hence also to produce those subjects who are not "viable" in the given terms of the social. Homosexual subjects/gay characters cannot consciously or instrumentally subvert heterosexuality (as in some models of gay and lesbian liberation); rather, subversion is internal to the processes of acculturation that Butler describes.

This does not mean that the subversion of norms is fruitless or completely compromised, but that the very processes of sexual subjectification are internally riven and doomed from the outset to miscarry. Thus a parallel exists between the performativity of gender described by Butler and the workings of dramatic genre. Just as acculturation produces desiring subjects who then appear to transcend that process, romantic comedy produces desiring subjects who then, in retrospect, can be said to conform to its generic demands.²⁰ As a generic imperative, romantic comedy must produce the very subversion it seeks to contain; temporarily unconstrained

desire is its *raison d'être* (no desire, no play). More radically than writing in gay code, Williams and O'Neill represent the way banal, heterosexual subjects are subverted through their own constitution as *generic* characters—characters who must simultaneously fit and resist the heterosexual imperative that drives romantic comedy.

O'Neill and Williams exploit romantic comedy's conventional trajectory—the containment of potential sexual subversion within heterosexual marriage—only to lay bare the vexed process of male sexual subjectification. *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* illustrate the labor behind the apparently smooth reproduction of heteronormativity and register the price of sexual socialization in human misery. In so doing the plays perform a queer politics by “[challenging] the normalizing presumptions of heterosexuality.”²¹ Each play suggests that bourgeois domestic arrangements both produce and disguise a kind of foundational perversity: repressed incestuous desire in the case of *Ah, Wilderness!* and repressed sexual sadism, stemming from homosexual panic, in the case of *Period of Adjustment*.

Significantly, both plays take place during holidays, times of communal celebration of the prevailing social order. *Ah, Wilderness!* opens on July 4, 1906 in “a large-small town in Connecticut” very much like the New London of O'Neill's youth.²² *Period of Adjustment* takes place on Christmas Eve “in a suburb of a mid-southern city” in or around 1960.²³ In each case, the holiday fails the protagonist. O'Neill's would-be bohemian and socialist rebel, sixteen-year-old Richard Miller, rails against the Fourth and, later that night, finds himself drunk and importuned by a prostitute in the seedy Pleasant Beach House. Williams's ex-war hero Ralph Bates finds himself alone on Christmas Eve in his suburban bungalow, unemployed and abandoned by his wife and three-year-old son. In both plays, a bourgeois protagonist finds himself confused, disoriented, and unhappy precisely when he should be partaking in a ritual celebration along with his family. O'Neill's New England seaport and Williams's Dixon are largely unlocalized settings (O'Neill is careful to exclude regionalisms from the dialogue) because the characters' predicaments are structural rather than personal. Psychosexually speaking, Bates and Miller are American Everymen.

The genre of romantic comedy gives each playwright ample room to explore the ways in which the structure of bourgeois relations thwarts individual desire. References to jail are constant in *Ah, Wilderness!* despite its ostensible celebration of independence, while *Period of Adjustment's* couples sink into domesticity as the ground literally gives way beneath them. Indeed, no other plays in the O'Neill and Williams canons so single-mindedly beat the bounds of heteronormativity. At stake in *Ah, Wilderness!* is whether the family structure can tamp adolescent Richard Miller's burgeoning sexuality until he can be constrained by the institution of marriage. At issue in *Period of Adjustment* is whether two Korean War veterans—one just married, one just separated from his wife—can reconcile

with their spouses despite evident sexual incompatibility. For the comedies to succeed *as* comedies, each character must learn to equate personal satisfaction with heterosexual, bourgeois conformity.

The Miller household is a kind of prison. As Van Laan emphasizes, each member is defined by his or her social role.²⁴ Most constrained of all is father Nat Miller, who must continually calibrate the role of liberal yet firm patriarch in order to satisfy the family's expectations. The first act of *Ah, Wilderness!* tracks Miller's mounting frustration as he is forced to intervene in various domestic crises rather than being allowed to enjoy his holiday. A central conflict emerges between Miller's liberalism and his son Richard's incipient rebellion, which takes the dual form of sexual curiosity and radical politics. Nat Miller's relentless good humor has a teeth-grinding quality as he "*grin[s] through his annoyance*,"²⁵ and his temper periodically explodes when the strain of playing the wise paterfamilias becomes too much for him. Miller's equanimity is a product of tenuous self-control; he bristles at David McComber's accusation that Richard has corrupted McComber's daughter, Muriel. Significantly, Miller owns a family newspaper; his professional role is to reproduce the stultifying middle-class ideology that entraps him.

Nat's wife Essie and her spinster sister-in-law, Lily Miller, are confined to the domestic sphere. Excluded from the men's Sachus Club picnic and the children's socially sanctioned mating rituals (canoe ride, beach expedition), they have nowhere to go and nothing to do on the Fourth: "Well, I thought we'd just sit around and rest and talk," opines Essie.²⁶ The women rely entirely on the men for mobility (Miller offers to take them for a drive). Essie spends the day monitoring her children's movements and policing their sexual lives, making sure they are engaged in wholesome activities and accounted for at all times. Essie herself has no productive role other than maintaining order in the domestic sphere.

As emerging bourgeois subjects at various stages of maturity, the four Miller children are case studies in the process of acculturation. Predictably, the oldest Miller child on view (two older sons are absent from the play) is the least individualized. Nineteen-year-old Arthur is a stuffy prig, a football player who ostentatiously smokes his Yale class pipe and mouths philistine platitudes. In the Millers' world, Yale is a badge of social status rather than an opportunity for intellectual growth: "Every man of your means in town is sending his boys to college! What would folks think of you?" Essie asks Nat when he threatens not to send errant Richard to Yale.²⁷

O'Neill introduces Richard's boy-crazy, fifteen-year-old sister Mildred as a female counterpoint to his protagonist. Whereas Richard's haphazard sexual impulses motor the play, Mildred's sexuality is not yet on her parents' radar screen—the adult Millers are more concerned about whether Richard will contract VD from a prostitute than whether Mildred will become pregnant. But while her sexual precocity potentially threatens bourgeois stability, the fact that Mildred is

dressed identically to her mother “*in shirtwaist and skirt in the fashion of the period*” implies that she will dwindle into *Ladies’ Home Journal* propriety.²⁸

Last, O’Neill presents eleven-year-old Tommy Miller as a Norman Rockwell caricature: “*a chubby, sunburnt boy of eleven with dark eyes, blond hair wetted and plastered down in a part, and a shiny, good-natured face, a rim of milk visible about his lips.*”²⁹ Yet like his older siblings, Tommy is “[*b*]urstring with bottled up energy.” This embryonic sexual energy, which in Tommy’s case can find release only by setting off the firecrackers that so unnerve his elders, provides the biggest threat to the Miller family’s equilibrium and obsessively concerns Essie, who sees sexual danger around every corner.

Just as romantic comedy must produce the very subversion it contains in order to be what it (already) is, the Miller family is constituted by the very energies it struggles to repress. *Ah, Wilderness!* portrays the family as an institution devoted to citing a normative heterosexuality assumed to preexist it, even as its living arrangements foment the very desires it condemns. Temptation everywhere impinges upon the Millers’ apparently comfortable and sedate middle-class world: seditious literature, alcohol, socialism, premarital sex, prostitution, gambling. Vulnerable on every front, the family must police its borders to keep forbidden fruit from entering the domestic space (Essie confiscates Richard’s *risqué* library). More disturbingly, the Miller family is threatened by perversity—in the sense of non-normative desire—from within, as quasi-illicit urges threaten to burst through the Millers’ bland attempts to smooth them over. In particular, the threat of incest haunts the fringes of the play in the coded, displaced form of the two single in-laws under the Miller roof who continually threaten to unite into a pair.

The awkward presence of two misfit relatives within the bourgeois family unit underscores its inefficiency as a mechanism for replicating itself. Shy Lily Miller lives on her family’s sufferance and automatically takes the least comfortable chair in the sitting room. With no real place in the domestic structure, except as a companion to Essie, she is a schoolteacher whose job is to inculcate middle-class values into children (which she herself longs to produce). The other leftover is Essie’s brother Sid Davis, who like Lily boards with the Millers. A feckless yet jovial alcoholic, Sid provides one of O’Neill’s keenest studies in addiction. Dismissed from the newspaper job Nat has found for him, Sid finds refuge in alcoholic haze, in thinly disguised contempt for his brother-in-law and his values, and in his hopeless love for Lily.

Lonely and keenly aware of their parasitic dependence on the Miller household, Sid and Lily love and desire each other. Marriage to each other would not be incestuous in any real way, but the household treats their mutual attraction as a guilty secret, an elephant in the room. Sid and Lily function as placeholders for the taboo desire so evident elsewhere in O’Neill’s drama. Despite being unrelated by blood, they produce the dramatic *effect* of incestuous attraction through their strenuous

performance of *not being a couple*. They play the part of asexual relatives under the same roof with agonizing self-consciousness and discomfort, as if to save the household the excruciating embarrassment their attraction inevitably produces.

As if to stave off the quasi-incestuous implications of such an awkward union, the play must expend much of its dramatic energy explaining why the two *can't* be together. Sid is an inveterate if charming reprobate, Lily a teetotaling Puritan who cannot stomach Sid's drinking and debauchery. Today their relationship would be labeled codependent: Lily keeps Sid under a cloud of guilt but shrives him each time he falls from grace, with the result that he can promise to reform and return to drink with a clear conscience. Indulged by the Millers as a family joke, this unhealthy cycle of recrimination and forgiveness is in place long before the curtain rises and will presumably continue indefinitely. Sid's fall off the wagon at the Sachem Club picnic counterpoints young Richard's sexual continence at the Pleasant Beach Hotel. Denied the woman he desires as punishment for lack of self-control, Sid becomes Caliban to Richard's Ferdinand. By contrast, the play rewards Richard's self-control with the promise of marriage and heterosexual monogamy.

Although the play displaces the quasi-incestuous implications of the Sid and Lily subplot, through that subplot O'Neill depicts non-normative desire as constitutive of bourgeois family structure rather than as an aberration. Other hints of perverse, incestuous desire shadow the play and suggest that the family must strain to maintain sexual propriety within its ranks. At one point in Act One, Richard pushes Mildred onto the sofa and tickles her; she shrieks as Arthur crows "Give it to her, Dick!" Here incestuous desire is displaced into horseplay, or what Nat Miller dismissively labels "roughhouse."³⁰ As with the opening image of Tommy, O'Neill limns the erotic undercurrent beneath the placid Norman Rockwell surface. Few American plays dramatize more keenly the sheer effort behind sexual continence.

If incestuous attraction haunts the fringes of this play, so too does the possibility of same-sex desire. Michael R. Schiavi observes that few critics have questioned Richard's presumed heterosexual orientation, and those who do are anxious to recuperate Richard's effeminacy as sensitive heterosexuality rather than homosexuality.³¹ Yet O'Neill's suggestive stage directions emphasize Richard's difference from the other Millers:

He is going on seventeen, just out of high school. In appearance he is a perfect blend of father and mother, so much so that each is convinced he is the image of the other. . . . One would not call him a handsome boy; neither is he homely. But he is definitely different from both of his parents, too. There is something of extreme sensitiveness added—a restless, apprehensive, defiant, shy, dreamy, self-conscious intelligence about him.³²

It is hard not to read this “extreme sensitiveness” as raising a sexual question—especially since Richard keeps volumes of Oscar Wilde hidden in his bedroom and daringly recites Wilde’s scandalous poetry before his shocked family. Same-sex desire never surfaces directly: Wilde’s transgression is solemnly labeled “bigamy” by the ignorant Arthur, much to the amusement of Nat and Sid, and homosexuality remains closeted for the rest of the play. Yet Schiavi rightly claims that “Richard’s appropriation of [Oscar] Wilde, when coupled with his many non-masculine traits, evokes a silent threat of homosexuality that his attraction to Muriel alone cannot contain.” Moreover, “Decades of subsequent criticism have passionately attempted to exorcise the homosexual specter raised in Sid and Miller’s stifled amusement.”³³

How then are we to take the play’s numerous references to Richard as a “queer boy”? Although the word “queer” apparently lacked homosexual overtones in 1906 (though perhaps not in 1933), the ever vigilant Essie Miller seems to fear that her son might be subject to homosexual temptation. “There must be some boy he knows who’s trying to show off as advanced and wicked, and he told him about— . . .” Essie leaves her sentence unfinished, but her next speech invokes “that awful Oscar Wilde they put in jail for heaven knows what wickedness.”³⁴ The specter of “some boy” raises the possibility of a rival model of sexual development for Richard, of heterosexualized norms going awry. As in a nightmare, Essie’s vision virtually comes true when Arthur’s classmate Wint Selby, “*a typical, good-looking college boy of the period . . . tall, blond, dressed in extreme collegiate cut,*” entices Richard to the seedy Pleasant Beach House on the night of July Fourth.³⁵ While the adventure is strictly heterosexual—Selby sets up Richard with the prostitute Belle—Wint’s repeated insistence that “I’m not trying to lead you astray” underscores the fact that he is temptation personified.³⁶ In another world, and another play, Richard might have been initiated into a gay lifestyle—and perhaps O’Neill’s suspicion that he had created an incipiently queer protagonist led him to insist during casting that “Re[garding] ‘Richard,’ I needn’t tell you that no fairies need apply—nor anyone who isn’t all-American male boy. It would be fatal.”³⁷

Pace Schiavi, I am not claiming that Richard is gay despite his creator’s protestations to the contrary.³⁸ My point is that O’Neill’s anxiety over casting implicitly acknowledges that the play opens up a queer space in which Richard’s object choice is not predetermined but *produced by* the action, even as the uncertainty of his sexual orientation becomes a source of anxiety for his parents and (perhaps) for himself. To label Richard gay is to simplify Butler’s insight that no sexual “content” precedes the acculturated subject—just as, I am arguing, a stage character’s essence is produced retroactively, in part through generic inscription. As the juvenile lead, Richard is necessarily a subject-in-process; that is his dramatic

function. *Ah, Wilderness!* steers “queer Richard” toward the heteronormativity needed to shore up the play’s generic marriage plot.

As if to exorcise the ghost of same-sex desire, the play inducts Richard into his father’s sexual double standard, in which homosexual desire is not a speakable option. Awaiting Muriel on a strip of beach along the harbor on the night of July 5th, Richard vents his sexual confusion in the light of his earlier, shameful escapade with the prostitute, Belle:

Where was I this time last night? . . . waiting outside the Pleasant Beach House . . . Belle . . . ah, forget her! . . . now, when Muriel’s coming . . . that’s a fine time to think of—! . . . but you hugged and kissed her . . . not until I was drunk I didn’t . . . and then it was all showing off . . . darned fool! . . . and I didn’t go upstairs with her . . . even if she was pretty . . . aw, she wasn’t pretty . . . she was all painted up . . . she was just a whore . . . she was everything dirty . . . Muriel’s a million times prettier anyway . . . Muriel and I will go upstairs . . . when we’re married . . . but that will be beautiful . . . but I oughtn’t even to think of that yet . . . it’s not right . . . I’d never—now . . . and she’d never . . . she’s a decent girl . . . I couldn’t love her if she wasn’t . . . but after we’re married . . . *(He gives a little shiver of passionate longing—then resolutely turns his mind away from these improper, almost desecrating thoughts).*³⁹

Richard’s monologue lays bare his struggle to internalize adult sexual norms, especially the psychological challenge of reconciling male sexual desire and idealized female virtue. To retain their status as desirable marriage partners, “good girls” like Muriel must remain pure, hence likely to frustrate sexual fulfillment, whereas “bad girls” like Belle pander to desire and are, therefore, to be loathed and feared. Richard rehearses the cultural dichotomy whereby women are either virtuous or despicable depending on their perceived sexual behavior. Richard can dally with a prostitute and remain marriageable; Muriel must be either dirty or decent, but not both. Richard fails to see that Muriel and Belle’s polar sexual identities are circumstantial. Indeed, the two “pleasant beach” roles cry out to be doubled by the same actress. Both are necessary to underpin heteronormativity, which by implication splits off sexual satisfaction from the work of reproduction, even while insisting that the former can be found in the latter.

In the play’s analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, Belle anchors a system whose rigid gender roles virtually ensure that wives cannot satisfy husbands (Muriel recoils from Richard’s touch, signaling her incipient sexual neurosis). Nat Miller clumsily explains the double standard to his son:

Well, there are a certain class of women—always have been and always will be as long as human nature is what it is—It’s wrong, maybe, but what can you do about it? I mean, girls like that one you—girls there’s something doing with—and lots of ’em are pretty, and it’s human nature if you—But that doesn’t mean to ever get mixed up with them seriously! You just have what you want and pay ’em and forget it.⁴⁰

Miller’s embarrassment renders the scene comic, but this is a rare moment of honest communication between father and son. Here, decent husband and father Miller admits that prostitution is an inevitable by-product of the institution of heterosexual marriage, which almost by definition cannot accommodate male sexual desire. The notion of a male desire that bursts its bounds—and hence its recourse to sexual activity outside marriage—is internal to the heterosexual ideology that condemns such recourse as immoral. Belle is as vital to the family structure as the members around the dining room table are (It is an open family secret that Sid fulfils his sexual needs with loose women.) and the play’s queer critique requires her presence.

At first glance, the resolution of *Ah, Wilderness!* appears to affirm the bourgeois values championed in O’Neill’s commentary. Richard’s basic decency—or uncertain sexual orientation—prevents him from taking Belle to bed, and, by the end of the play, he repudiates his earlier drunken behavior and reconciles with charming, neurotic Muriel, much to the relief of his concerned parents. Having dismissed Richard’s adventures as adolescent high jinks, the play ushers Richard and Muriel toward the marriage bed refused to Sid and Lily. For their part, Nat and Essie close the play standing together in a romantic echo of Richard and Muriel until “*they move quietly out of the moonlight, back into the darkness of the front parlor.*”⁴¹

But this darkness is not accidental. Given the volatile sexuality that threatens the beleaguered Miller family in the course of two short days, the happy ending seems forced. Far from celebrating the Fourth, the major characters spend much if not most of the play in the grip of sexual frustration (Richard), intense anxiety (Essie), addiction (Sid), loneliness (Lily), irritation (Nat), and incarceration (Muriel). Virtually every character is sexually unhappy, and all the play’s comic energy must be harnessed to combat or minimize the threat to the Miller family. (Thus, for example, Sid is a charming rather than violent drunk, while Richard’s rebelliousness is put down to adolescent posturing.) This threat comes both from outside, in the shape of the sexual temptation represented by Belle, and from inside, in the shape of latent desires that cannot be accommodated by compulsory heterosexuality. Wayward heterosexual desire can be accommodated by prostitution, marriage’s secret sharer; by contrast, incestuous and same-sex desires must be forcibly sublimated. At play’s end, Richard and Muriel are primed to become a less happy

version of Nat and Essie; indeed, in 1934 O'Neill toyed with the idea of writing a bleak, post-World War I sequel to *Ah, Wilderness!* that would reveal Richard's disillusionment and the family's unhappiness.⁴² To invoke Boas's definition of the problem play, "the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when . . . the complications are outwardly adjusted" at play's end.⁴³

If *Ah, Wilderness!* depicts a family struggling to sublimate the anarchic pull of desire and reassert bourgeois decorum, from the moment newlyweds George and Isabel Haverstick drive up in a funeral limousine, *Period of Adjustment* shows the engine of heteronormativity to be damaged beyond repair. More than half a century and two world wars separate the sedate Millers from the rootless suburbanites of *Period of Adjustment*. Yet both plays anatomize the construction of male sexual identity and the friction that results when desire must accommodate itself to heterosexual marriage. Williams's thirty-something war veterans, Ralph Bates and George Haverstick, resist the stultification of post-war civilian life: domestic stability, sexual fidelity, steady employment, and social respectability. If the men are dull, it is not because of lack of imagination on Williams's part, but because they stand for types.

They are also parallel figures. Both men have just quit their jobs and are accused of shirking responsibility by their wives. (George was a ground mechanic; Ralph worked for his oppressive father-in-law as a pen pusher.) Both live in faceless suburbs called High (or Hi-) Point. Each must overcome his wife's sexual scruples together with his own sexual problems. And although the plot suggests that the root of their problems is psychological—a matter for impromptu couples' therapy—Williams's analysis is at heart sociological. Ralph and George represent a generation of young men damaged by war and ill prepared for civilian life. Trained to kill abroad and decorated for it at home, the war heroes must adapt to a culture that demands conformity and subservience in the workplace. Taught to view prostitutes as mere "gash," they must satisfy their genteel spouses in bed. Having learned to savor adventure, they must embrace faceless suburbia. Whereas O'Neill's Millers have little sense of the outside world and complacently produce an assembly line of Yale-bound sons, Ralph and George compare present drudgery to prior glory and find the former sadly lacking. Critics who see Ralph's intention to "[cut] out of this High Point over a Cavern on the first military transport I can catch out of Dixon" as Walter Mitty fantasy miss the point.⁴⁴ Unlike Richard Miller, Ralph has a credible escape route, which raises the play's dramatic stakes. Nostalgically pining for the brothels of Hong Kong, Ralph threatens to airlift himself beyond the representational space of bourgeois realism altogether.

As in so much American realism, that space is a living room—although here it is the space not so much of repression (as in *Ah, Wilderness!*) as of suffocation. The play is set in prefab suburbia, "a 'cute' little Spanish-type suburban bungalow," complete with carport and coach lantern.⁴⁵ There are no personal touches; the TV,

bar, and Christmas tree are generic, the fur coat beneath the tree is beaver. Ironically, Ralph plans to sell the entire contents of the house, including the gifts, to a younger version of himself. The much remarked “cuteness” and “sweetness” of Ralph’s suburban bungalow have smothered Ralph’s desire for freedom, just as his wish for a Doberman was thwarted by his poodle-preferring wife (they compromised on a cocker spaniel). Ralph’s suburban life is literally built on the void and sustained by hypocrisy. As he tells Isabel, “this suburb High Point, is built over a great big underground cavern and is sinking into it gradually, an inch or two inches a year. It would cost three thousand dollars to stabilize the foundation of this house even temporarily! But it’s not publicly known and we homeowners and the promoters of the project have got together to keep it a secret until we have sold out, in alphabetical order, at a loss but not a complete sacrifice.”⁴⁶ The suburban dream is a swindle, its inhabitants interchangeable; later, Isabel will return from walking the dog unable to pick out the correct house from a row of identical houses.

Despite the play’s patent anti-bourgeois satire, the characters’ collective unhappiness surfaces not as class rage but as sexual neurosis. Much of the comedy springs from Isabel’s “period of adjustment” to her marital status—after first calling herself “Isabel Crane,” she correctly identifies herself as “Mrs. George Haverstick”—together with her incomprehension of her new husband’s sexual needs.⁴⁷ A virgin ejected from nursing school because she could not stand the sight of blood, hysterical Isabel must learn to overcome her prudishness. While the plot centers on whether she will reconcile to her rough diamond of a husband, Williams is not really interested in her character, and she remains offstage for much of the play. Like O’Neill, Williams is less concerned with female hysteria than male sexual frustration.

Although Ralph plays the role of peacemaker between Isabel and George, he begins the play alone and unmoored. His six-year marital life has been an exercise in bad faith: “Marriage is an economic arrangement in many ways, let’s face it honey,” he tells Isabel.⁴⁸ Ralph married Dotty despite finding her sexually unattractive, and he views his marriage’s failure as just deserts: “I done a despicable thing. I married a girl that had no attraction for me excepting I felt sorry for her and her old man’s money! I got what I should have gotten: nothing! Just a goddam desk job at Regal Dairy Products, one of her daddy’s business operations in Memphis, at eighty-five lousy ruten dollars a week!”⁴⁹ Having sold himself too cheaply, Ralph revenged himself on Dotty by forcing her to have surgery to improve her looks.

Conventional Ralph staunchly upholds gender norms—“in this world you got to be what your physical sex is or correct it in Denmark”⁵⁰—yet he *cannot* model or reproduce heteronormativity. Himself an orphan, he accuses Dotty of turning their three-year-old son Ralph Junior into a “sissy.”⁵¹ Ralph attempts to overcome Ralph Junior’s preference for rag dolls by buying him a toy rocket launcher for Christmas, because “a sissy tendency in a boy’s got to be nipped in

the bud, otherwise the bud will blossom.”⁵² Whereas Nat Miller initiates his sons into institutionalized heterosexuality, however clumsily, Ralph Bates presumably fights a losing battle with his sissy son. His confidence in “a *man*’s world coming up, man!” rings as hollow as the buddies’ bachelor fantasy of raising Longhorns for television westerns.⁵³

George Haverstick’s sexual orientation is more ambiguous than Ralph’s. He returns from Korea with the shakes, an ailment that cuts short his career as a pilot and defies neurological explanation. Isabel finds George’s sexual attentions on their wedding night coarse and brutal. Yet according to Ralph, George’s coarseness masks insecurity:

He always bluffs about his ferocious treatment of women, believe me! To hear him talk you’d think he spared them no pity! However, I happen to know he didn’t come on as strong with those dolls in Tokyo and Hong Kong and Korea as he liked to pretend to. Because I heard from those dolls. . . . He’d just sit up there on a pillow and drink that rice wine with them and teach them *English*! Then come downstairs from there, hitching his belt and shouting, “*Oh, man! Oh, brother!*”—like he laid ’em to waste.⁵⁴

Ralph diagnoses George’s shakes as displaced sexual sadism. Moreover, he explicitly links George’s sexual violence with his success as a fighter: “Lacking confidence with it [the penis], you wanted to hit her, smash her, clobber her with it. You’ve got violence in you! That’s what made you such a good fighter pilot, the best there was! Sexual violence, that’s what gives you the shakes, that’s what makes you unstable.”⁵⁵ Later, Isabel in turn traces George’s shakes to performance anxiety: “I expect all men are a little bit nervous about the same thing. . . . About how they’ll be at love-making.”⁵⁶ The play’s ostensible conceit is that these revelations, like that of the imaginary son in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, spark mutual understanding. Ralph’s prescription to George is to try a little tenderness, and the end of the play dispatches both reconciled couples to bed as the earth literally moves beneath them.

The “cure” for female hysteria and male sexual frustration offered by the play is the same: heterosexual intercourse. In condensed form, *Period of Adjustment* thus plays out the classic scenario of homosexual panic as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick argues that since the eighteenth century, the paths to male entitlement in both England and America required intense male bonds that could not readily be distinguished from the most reprobated bonds. As a result, “male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement.”⁵⁷ Sedgwick continues:

The result of men's accession to this double bind [whereby homosocial bonds are enforced even as homosexual desire is proscribed] is, first, the acute *manipulability*, through the fear of one's own "homosexuality," of acculturated men; and second, a reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces. The historical emphasis on enforcement of homophobic rules in the armed services in, for instance, England and the United States supports this analysis. In these institutions, where both men's manipulability and their potential for violence are at the highest possible premium, the *prescription* of the most intimate male bonding and the *proscription* of (the remarkably cognate) "homosexuality" are both stronger than in civilian society—are, in fact, close to absolute.⁵⁸

According to Sedgwick, only self-identified homosexual men are exempt from the otherwise inescapable double bind. Straight men can never be certain that they are not homosexual, for homosexual panic ensures that their desires can never be transparent to themselves.

Williams's unhappily married and only dimly self-aware ex-soldiers exemplify the workings of homosexual panic. The deepest emotional bond in the play is clearly homosocial: Ralph and George have "been through two wars together, took basic training together and officer's training together."⁵⁹ When they first see each other, they "*catch each other in a big, rocking hug. ISABEL stares, ignored, as the male greetings continue.*"⁶⁰ The men's longhorn fantasy is a phallic pipe dream that excludes the women entirely. However, homosexual panic ensures that homosexual possibility never arises. Ralph's militant homophobia pre-empts the possibility of a sexual relationship between the men, who clearly love each other more than their wives. Ralph's sexual attraction to Isabel triangulates his desire for his friend, which can never be consciously acknowledged precisely because compulsory bonds between heterosexual men look the same as prohibited ones.

At least one critic has suggested that George may be gay.⁶¹ But to read the play as written in gay code is once more to diminish queer theory's destabilization of the concept of a stable, knowable sexual identity—whether heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual—that somehow inheres in an individual prior to acculturation.⁶² Rather, the double bind of homosexual panic ensures that Ralph and George can never be certain that they are *not* gay (even as that certainty is the one thing required of them) and so forces them to prove their heterosexuality over and over again through sexual aggression with women.⁶³

The play's diagnosis of George's sexual insufficiency, together with its prescription to cure George's sexual violence through heterosexual intercourse, fuels the very mechanism that ensnares him. Compulsory heterosexuality is not the cure but the flip-side of sexual aggression, homosexual panic by another name. The men's homophobia and misogyny are inextricably linked; in Sedgwick's words, "the worst violence of heterosexuality comes with the male *compulsion to desire* women and its attendant deceptions of self and other."⁶⁴ Misogyny springs not from hatred of women, but rather from the injunction to desire them. This compulsion means that any relation to women for straight men can be experienced only as a demand for heterosexual desire/activity (another version of the dictum "do not be gay"), which is why homophobia generates misogynist violence. Desire "between men" gets enacted (at the expense of women) as sexual sadism, and George's avoidance tactics in the Hong Kong brothel betray his struggle to escape this cycle.

That Williams dramatized a textbook case of homosexual panic through the vehicle of heterosexual romantic comedy seems to have eluded the playwright, although he conceded that the "cure" offered by the generic conclusion did not seem to fit the predicament of the characters. In a 1960 interview with Arthur Gelb, Williams put a positive gloss on the conclusion: "It's written as a play with humor and has an ending that's non-tragic. The people at the end still have problems, but they have found each other, and maybe they can now solve their problems together."⁶⁵ Yet, as in O'Neill's problem play, the resolution lacks optimism. *Period of Adjustment* implies that Ralph, Isabel, George, and Dotty's problems cannot be solved by a night of satisfying lovemaking—hence Williams's later statement that the play was darker than *Orpheus Descending*. The men's spouses will never meet their need for intimacy, satisfied through male comradeship in the services, where prostitutes served as a vehicle of male bonding and as prophylactic against same-sex desire. George has been taught to treat women as sexual objects, Ralph as intellectual inferiors. Isabel is a sexual neurotic whose future happiness is doubtful. And although Ralph and Dotty settle back into their domestic routine (just as the house settles over the cavern of their marriage), Ralph admits to Isabel that he feels no love for his homely wife. Despite John McClain's cheerful assertion that the play overflows with "warmth and wisdom and hilarious good humor" and presents an "uncomplicated attitude toward the relationship between boys and girls," *Period of Adjustment* ends in resignation rather than reconciliation.⁶⁶ If John Simon and others bemoaned the pat nature of the solutions offered by the play as unsatisfying, then that is surely Williams's point—indeed the hallmark of problem comedy.⁶⁷

Both *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* feature the "doubtful and perplexed" unions that characterize Shakespearean problem comedy.⁶⁸ Both, I argue, queer heteronormative assumptions. Given that *Ah, Wilderness!* has been anthologized and widely produced at regional, college, summer stock and community theaters, why has *Period of Adjustment* remained largely unperformed?

Part of the answer must lie in sheer quality; whatever its strengths, *Period of Adjustment* is not Williams at his best, or even his second-best. But also pertinent is the way that each play balances what I have called the double vision intrinsic to problem comedy. The heavily nostalgic period setting of *Ah, Wilderness!* allows actors, directors, and audiences to normalize the play's dark undercurrents as "straight" comedy (just as O'Neill's casting directive recuperates Richard) in ways precluded by *Period of Adjustment's* generic setting, flat characterization, and tonal uncertainty.

Ah, Wilderness! and *Period of Adjustment* challenge critics and audiences either to assimilate them to their authors' wider concerns or else to view them as comic digressions. By arguing that these dramas are best understood as ironic problem plays that critique the compulsory heterosexuality they appear to endorse, I wish to respect their comedic form while emphasizing their subversive undercurrents. Consciously or not, O'Neill and Williams turn to romantic comedy not as a respite, but precisely so as to bring that form's latent tensions to the surface. Structurally, both plays are similar. Nat Miller and Ralph Bates are oppressed by the very gender ideologies they uphold, while Richard Miller and George Haverstick (have-a-stick) must forswear the possibility of homosexual impulses, or at least sexual confusion, in favor of monogamous heterosexuality. Rather than celebrating marriage, maturity, and stability, *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Period of Adjustment* survey the psychosexual damage caused by society's enforced yet always vexed reproduction of heteronormativity. Despite the sometimes ambivalent pronouncements of their authors, the plays deserve serious attention as comedies that both embody and queer the genre to which they belong.

Notes

¹ In Northrop Frye's influential formulation, romantic comedy derives from the Menandrine tradition of New Comedy, which is "concerned with the maneuvering of a young man toward a young woman, and marriage is the tonic chord on which it ends." Frye goes on to state: "The essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation." Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," *English Institute Essays 1949*, ed. D. A. Robertson (New York: Columbia UP, 1959) 58-73. Following Frye, by "romantic comedies" I mean those plays, primarily comic in tone, whose plot turns on complications (whether internal or external) that delay but do not ultimately prevent the mutually desired romantic and/or erotic union of a couple or couples. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which features four such couples and ends in a triple wedding and a marital reconciliation, is a paradigmatic example. See also T. G. A. Nelson, *Comedy: An Introduction to the Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 19-40. Nelson defines comedy "as consisting of two conflicting elements, one being laughter (often mocking, derisive, or discordant), and the other being the movement of a story towards an ending characterized by harmony, festivity, and celebration" (22). Problem comedy blends these two elements in powerfully dissonant ways.

² Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspeare [sic] and His Predecessors* (London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1896; reprinted, Grosse Point, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1968) 345.

³ Influential treatments include William Witherlie Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1931; rev. 1960); E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950); A. P. Rossiter, *Angel With Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures*, ed. Graham Storey (London: Longmans, 1961); Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1981); and Richard Hillman, *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays* (New York: Twayne, 1993). In "Shakespeare's Problem Plays and the Drama of His Time: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*," *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works*, vol. 4, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (New York: Blackwell, 2003) 46-68, Paul Yachnin suggests that these plays reflect Shakespeare's attempt to find a market niche for his company within a competitive field of cultural production.

⁴ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959) 258. Barber here confines his remarks to *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*, in which "the manipulations of happy accidents which make all well at the end are not made acceptable by the achievement of distinctions about values or by a convincing expression of general beneficent forces in life" (259). To what extent the unclassifiable *Troilus and Cressida* belongs in the category of Shakespearean problem comedy remains unresolved.

⁵ In *The Rose Tattoo*, the barrier to Serafina's happiness with Mangiacavallo is her idealization of her dead husband, rather than any ambivalence about sexual compatibility. *The Rose Tattoo* continues to please audiences. Directed by Nicholas Martin and starring Andrea Martin, *The Rose Tattoo* had a successful and well-reviewed run at The Huntington Theatre, Boston, May 14-June 13, 2004.

⁶ Letter to Eugene O'Neill, Jr., May 13, 1933, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Limelight, 1994) 412.

⁷ Cited by Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 762.

⁸ Ellen Kimbel, "Eugene O'Neill as Social Historian: Manners and Morals in *Ah, Wilderness!*?" *Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill*, ed. James J. Martine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984) 138; James A. Robinson, "The Middle Plays," *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 78-79.

⁹ Thomas F. Van Laan, "Singing in the Wilderness: The Dark Vision of O'Neill's Only Mature Comedy," *Modern Critical Views: Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987) 107.

¹⁰ Kimbel, "Eugene O'Neill as Social Historian" 139.

¹¹ Robert Brustein, "Disputed Authorship: *Period of Adjustment* by Tennessee Williams," *Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions, 1959-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) 117-19.

¹² Gerald Weales, "High Comedy Over a Cavern." *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 1 (1989): 28.

¹³ Arthur Gelb, "Williams and Kazan and the Big Walk-Out," *New York Times*, 1 May 1960, sec. 2, 1. Reprinted in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson and London: UP of Mississippi, 1986) 67.

¹⁴ Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, "Williams on Williams," *Theatre Arts* (Jan. 1962): 16-19,

72-73. Reprinted in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* 104.

¹⁵ Weales, "High Comedy Over a Cavern" 31.

¹⁶ Among those who stress the ironic or satiric implications of the plays are Albert Bermel, "O'Neill's Funny Valentine," *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 12 (1998): 18-22; Frederic I. Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) 142-43; Alvin Goldfarb, "Period of Adjustment and the New Tennessee Williams," *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1977) 310-17; Van Laan, "Singing in the Wilderness"; and Weales, "High Comedy Over a Cavern." Joel Pfister, *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P) 168-82, emphasizes O'Neill's concern with the reproduction of the middle class over that of heteronormativity.

¹⁷ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," *Signs* 5 (1980): 631-60.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 275. Butler develops her theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and somewhat revises it in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also the English Institute essays gathered in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁹ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) III.2. 461-2.

²⁰ For a compelling argument that genre is performative—an experience without an origin that (re)produces itself by swerving from an *imagined* norm—see Michael Goldman, *On Drama: Boundaries of Genre, Borders of Self* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000).

²¹ Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke, Introduction to *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, ed. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 8. For queerness as "less a fixed attribute of a given text than an effect produced by the interplay between and among text, actor, director, and spectator," see David Savran, "Queer Theater and the Disarticulation of Identity," *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York UP, 2002) 152-67. My quotation is from 154.

²² Eugene O'Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1955) 185.

²³ Tennessee Williams, *Period of Adjustment: High Point over a Cavern* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 2. I cite the version originally published by New Directions in 1960 and reprinted in volume 4 of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* in 1972, rather than the version published in *Esquire* (December 1960) or the acting edition (Dramatists Play Service, 1961), on the assumption that the New Directions script reflects a version finally acceptable to Williams.

²⁴ Van Laan, "Singing in the Wilderness" 102.

²⁵ O'Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!* 189.

²⁶ 191.

²⁷ 289.

²⁸ 86.

²⁹ 186.

³⁰ 194.

³¹ Michael R. Schiavi, "Eugene O'Neill's 'New Men' and Theatrical Possibility: *Strange Interlude* and *Ah, Wilderness!*" *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 12 (2000): 53-73.

³² O'Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!* 193. The stage direction reinforces the quasi-normative Oedipality of the family, since the "spitting image of his mother/father" attraction may suggest the willful rationalizing of an incestuous yearning of parent for child. I am grateful to Kevin Ohi for this observation, and for his careful reading of a previous draft of this essay.

³³ Schiavi, "Eugene O'Neill's 'New Men' and Theatrical Possibility" 67.

³⁴ O'Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!* 196

³⁵ 218.

³⁶ 219.

³⁷ Letter to Philip Moeller, August 19, 1933, *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill* 421. Daniel Sullivan's 1998 Lincoln Center revival of *Ah, Wilderness!* cut all the "queer" references in the text. According to Schiavi, "Eugene O'Neill's 'New Men' and Theatrical Possibility" 70, the production's attempt to reconcile a macho performance by Sam Trammell with Richard's sensitive effeminacy resulted in "an uneasy gender melange."

³⁸ On the issue of how a "straight" writer like O'Neill can produce a play with distinctly queer resonance for audiences, see Robert F. Gross, "O'Neill's Queer Interlude: Epicene Excess and Camp Pleasures," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 12 (1997): 3-22. Gross reminds us: "One need not be queer to write queer. . . . The investments of artist and audience are multiple, rather than limited exclusively by the singularity of sexual preference" (15). Gross argues, as I do, that most O'Neill critics miss the generic irony and self-consciousness embedded in his work.

³⁹ O'Neill, *Ah, Wilderness!* 276.

⁴⁰ 295.

⁴¹ 298.

⁴² See Pfister, *Staging Depth* 181-82. In one sense, this play became *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; the Tyrones inhabit virtually the same New London living room as the Millers, closely modeled on the O'Neills' own at 325 Pequot Avenue.

⁴³ Boas, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors* 345.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Period of Adjustment* 18.

⁴⁵ 3.

⁴⁶ 15.

⁴⁷ 5.

⁴⁸ 17.

⁴⁹ 48.

⁵⁰ 52.

⁵¹ 106.

⁵² 51.

⁵³ 52.

⁵⁴ 33.

⁵⁵ 85.

⁵⁶ 118.

⁵⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic," *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 185.

⁵⁸ 186.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Period of Adjustment* 11.

⁶⁰ 37.

⁶¹ According to Arthur Ganz, "Tennessee Williams: A Desperate Morality," *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 126, George "has rejected his homosexual nature or at least pretended to a virility he does not possess" and "must publicly admit his weakness before he is bedded down, blissfully it is assumed, with his hysterical bride."

⁶² "Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire." Annemarie Jogose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York UP, 1996) 3.

⁶³ For Sedgwick it is a "fact" that "male heterosexual entitlement in (at least modern Anglo-American) culture depends on a perfected but always friable self-ignorance in men as to the significance of their desire for other men" (209-10). Thus in Sedgwick's reading of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," which grounds her discussion, the "closeted" John Marcher's secret is not that he is gay, "for Marcher is not a homosexual man." Rather, Marcher's is the secret of homosexual panic: "it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining *a* homosexual secret" ("The Beast in the Closet" 205). Marcher's journey from homosexual panic to compulsory heterosexuality anticipates that of Williams's war veterans. George and Ralph's actual sexual orientation (which Williams leaves open) is beside the point, for homosexual panic ensures that the straight man *cannot* know that he is not gay.

⁶⁴ 198.

⁶⁵ Gelb, "Williams and Kazan and the Big Walk-Out" 67.

⁶⁶ John McClain, "Tennessee at His Best," *New York Journal-American*, Nov. 11, 1960: 11.

⁶⁷ John Simon, "Theatre Chronicle," *Hudson Review* 14 (1961): 83-92.

⁶⁸ David Bevington, *Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 97.