

“Making Queer New Things”: Queer Identities in the Life and Dramaturgy of Susan Glaspell

Cheryl Black

Well, all I ask is, don't make Claire queer.
 Claire's a first water good sport—really,
 so don't encourage her to be queer.

—Harry Archer, *The Verge*

Queer means to fuck with gender.

—“Queer Power Now” pamphlet, 1991

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) is the author of fourteen plays (three co-authored), including the widely anthologized *Trifles* (first produced in 1915) and the Pulitzer-winning *Alison's House* (first produced in 1930). As a playwright, Glaspell is most closely associated with the Provincetown Players, the experimental theatre organization she helped found and sustain for its seven-year existence (1915-22) and for which she wrote eleven of her plays. Glaspell's name is frequently linked to that of her more famous Provincetown colleague Eugene O'Neill, but Glaspell's Provincetown colleagues also included an impressively large number of female playwrights, including Neith Boyce, Louise Bryant, Edna Ferber, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Djuna Barnes. The Players encouraged artistic experimentation and social critique in their dramaturgy, and Glaspell proved one of the most radical in both respects. Her aesthetic innovations include the blending of naturalistic features and domestic interiors with symbolic, expressionistic, or surreal undercurrents, nontraditional “action,” linguistic invention, and, most famously, the absent protagonist, introduced in *Trifles* and repeated in *Bernice* and *Alison's House*. As social criticism, Glaspell's plays offered uncompromising critiques of conventional sexual and familial relations and political and moral hypocrisy.

Dramatic critics of Glaspell's own era lacked a suitable critical vocabulary with which to describe, let alone elucidate or analyze, her dramaturgical experiments, which appalled her detractors and frequently baffled even her staunchest admirers.

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Since then, the dramaturgy of Susan Glaspell has been waiting for critical theory to catch up with it. Although Glaspell's critical examination of social issues is not limited to the role of women, the advent of second wave feminism in the late 1970s and 1980s recuperated Glaspell from near-oblivion, and the influence of post-structuralist thought on theories of sex, sexuality, gender, and performance has insured a vigorous stream of new critical perspectives on Glaspell's life and work for the past two decades.¹ Although these scholars have persuasively located Glaspell as one of the most important feminist playwrights of the twentieth century, they (I should say we) have, thus far, underestimated the subversive potential of Susan Glaspell's dramaturgy to critique not only sexism, but also heterosexism in American culture—in other words, its potential as queer theatre.

Jill Dolan recently summarized new theoretical conceptions of "queerness:"

Queerness has come to encompass numerous strategies, all of which carry the charge of multiplicity, openness, contradiction, contention To be queer is not who you are, it's what you do, it's your relation to dominant power, and your relation to marginality, as a place of empowerment. "Queer" opens spaces for people who embrace all manner of sexual practices and identities²

As David Halperin elaborates, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. . . . It is an identity without an essence. "Queer," then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."³ For Halperin, "queer" identities might include not only homosexuals or bisexuals but also non-monogamous or childless couples. For Eve Sedgwick, queer might include the rejection of sexual identity based on object choice.⁴ Other theorists, following Foucault's attempt to avoid essentializing any sexual or gender identity, have theorized queer as a verb, not a noun. To queer, according to Nikki Sullivan, is "to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to de-legitimize, to camp up—heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them."⁵ To queer, then, is to challenge or transgress all fixed categories, to disrupt and destabilize hegemonic assumptions, perhaps especially, and of crucial significance to feminists, to "fuck with gender."⁶ As Sedgwick has argued, "without a concept of gender," there can be "no concept of homo—or heterosexuality."⁷

Laurence Senelick has similarly identified a "queer" aesthetic in theatre, relating to content and form: "Queer theatre is grounded in and expressive of unorthodox sexuality or gender identity, antiestablishment and confrontational in tone, experimental and unconventional in format, with stronger links to performance art and what the Germans call *Kleinkunst*, that is revue, cabaret, and variety, than

to traditional forms of drama.”⁸ This analysis applies the ideas of these queer theorists, along with scholars who have theorized “compulsory heterosexuality” and a “lesbian continuum” to read the theatre of Susan Glaspell, as well as many of her Provincetown colleagues, as “queer.”⁹ Moreover, this investigation proposes that Glaspell, through her dramaturgy, is an early architect of queer theory as it is generally understood today. Although I recognize the tendency for oppositional subjectivities to devolve into binary formulations dependent on their opposites to retain meaning (i.e., gay/straight, liberal/conservative), I believe that contemporary queer theory, in its embrace of multiplicity and fluidity, in its focus on action (doing) rather than essence (being), holds considerable promise for a truly radical vision of sexual and social interaction.

Glaspell, born in 1876, came to maturity in a critical era in the history of sexuality in America. Carol Smith Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, and other cultural historians have looked somewhat nostalgically to the late nineteenth century as a time when America’s sexually segregated and homosocial culture, despite its obvious economic, political, and legal inequities, encouraged long-lasting, intimate, personal relationships between women.¹⁰ Existing all along what Adrienne Rich has characterized as a lesbian continuum, these relationships represented a wide range of emotional, intellectual, physical, and sexual attachments.

The newly acquired privilege of higher education provided special opportunities for women to form romantic relationships (called “smashes,” “crushes,” and “spoons”) that common intellectual or artistic interests enriched. Dorothy Fowler Heald seems to be recalling such a relationship in her description of her former classmate at Drake University, Susan Glaspell: “She was my first heroine in the flesh, a glamorous presence of poetry and romance who fired one’s imagination and made all glorious things seem possible. Her personality was a flame in the light of the student body.”¹¹ At Drake, in 1899, Glaspell met Lucy (“Lulu”) Huffaker, who remained one of her closest friends for fifty years. According to Glaspell biographer Linda Ben-Zvi, “Their friendship was immediate and survived the *Delphic* [editorial] election campaign, which Lucy won. Both had been the “queer” ones in their hometowns; now they found reinforcement in each other.”¹² Here Ben-Zvi employs one of Glaspell’s favorite words to convey the radically unconventional behavior of women:

“*Queer* is exactly the word Susan, in her later writing would have her arbiters of society use in disparagement to describe female protagonists who break with convention or have women proudly apply to themselves, when they wished to distinguish their lives and values from those they observed around them.”¹³

Rather than settling down into marriage and motherhood, Glaspell and Huffaker satisfied their queer desires for education and writing careers.

In 1908, perhaps to forestall her budding attraction to the charismatic and married George Cram (“Jig”) Cook, Glaspell traveled to Europe with Huffaker, touring for three months before they rented “a little flat in the Latin Quarter of Paris . . . where everything was cozy and homelike.”¹⁴ Glaspell later recalled her year in Paris as delightful, and Paris a place where “surroundings are in perfect harmony with the receptive mood and invite and stimulate inspiration.”¹⁵ Glaspell biographer Barbara Ozieblo depicts Huffaker as actively and successfully distracting Glaspell from her infatuation with Cook, back in Iowa.

Glaspell gradually accepted the futility of her love. Huffaker immersed her in Parisian bohemia, dragged her along the “quaint old streets,” and insisted that she attend a full program of French classes, lectures, concerts, and operas. They spent the afternoons over cups of tea with friends, “many of whom had regular receiving days, and one would hear names, and meet people already well known, and many destined to be heard from later.” Huffaker wrote stories for New York papers, and Glaspell mulled over a new novel.¹⁶

Shari Benstock has identified Paris at that time (1900-1914) as the international capital of same sex love among women, commonly designated “Paris-Lesbos.” The friends with whom Glaspell and Huffaker shared cups of tea who were “destined to be heard from later” likely included Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, and other literary figures in Natalie Barney’s lesbian salon.¹⁷ In Paris, Glaspell and Huffaker became socialists, in Greenwich Village, feminists, and in Provincetown, where they first rented a cottage together in 1912, they became charter members of the Provincetown Players. In 1915, Glaspell dedicated the novel *Fidelity* to Huffaker, and they performed together in the world premiere of Glaspell and Cook’s *Suppressed Desires*. Huffaker, once described by Hutchins Hapgood as an “unmarried and unsettled newspaper girl,”¹⁸ later married Edward Goodman, one of the founders of the Washington Square Players. I have discovered no evidence to suggest that Glaspell and Huffaker had a sexual relationship, but their long-lasting friendship may be exemplary of the rewarding, intimate relationships between women that compulsory heterosexuality would soon demonize.

Just as Glaspell and Huffaker’s newly educated generation of American women appeared with visions of social equality and sexual liberation in their heads, along came Freud, Krafft-Ebbing, Havelock Ellis, and a host of other “sexologists” whose theorizing created “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” as fixed and absolute binaries.¹⁹ There was some debate among medical, moral, and legal authorities

regarding the classification of homosexuality as a crime, sin, or disease, which fixed it in the public consciousness as all three. Terms associated with homosexuality included inversion, perversion, abnormal, disorder, germs, aberrancy, degeneracy. Between 1896 and 1916, five hundred and sixty-six articles appeared on women's sexual perversions, inversions, and disorders.²⁰

In 1914, Dr. Irving D. Steinhardt warned young women to "avoid girls who are too affectionate and demonstrative in their manner of talking and acting with you."²¹ In short, virtually all close personal relations between women were demonized as "perverted." Lesbianism and feminism entered the cultural lexicon at about the same time, in the 1910s, and they were inextricably linked. Havelock Ellis proposed that female homosexuality was increasing because of feminism, and Dr. James Weir opined that "agitating for rights" was itself a sign of psychosexual degeneracy.²² In 1901, psychiatrist William Lee Howard linked feminist activism, education, and female homosexuality in his novel, *The Perverts*, featuring a feminist with a Ph.D:

The female possessed of masculine ideas of independence, the "viragint" who would sit in the public highways and lift up her pseudo-virile voice, proclaiming her sole right to decide questions of war or religion . . . and that disgusting anti-social being, the female sexual pervert, are simply different degrees of the same class—degenerates.²³

By these definitions, Glaspell, Huffaker, and their Greenwich Village/Provincetown circle were all degenerates. But with these dire denunciations came hope—the cure for female degeneracy lay in new, improved heterosexuality—and a utopian vision of the egalitarian, companionate marriage was born, propagated by early twentieth-century sexologists and taken up by a number of feminists. The companionate marriage, in theory, ended sexual segregation, sex hierarchy, and sexual frustration. Men and women would be equal partners; they would share economic responsibilities and have more fulfilling sexual relations. Manuals appeared to help men become better lovers of women.²⁴ The companionate marriage was an important ideological weapon to enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Men and women locked in this utopian arrangement had no need to look elsewhere—they were to find all emotional and physical needs satisfied within this self-sufficient, binary unit.

Glaspell seemed to succumb to this propaganda, marrying (the newly-divorced Cook) for the first time at the age of 37, in 1913. Her friends Lucy Huffaker and Provincetown actress Ida Rauh, also in their thirties, married at about the same time. Fired with new feminist and psychoanalytic theories, the Provincetown/Greenwich Village feminists set out to transform themselves into "new women"

and to revolutionize relations between the sexes. One of Glaspell's closest friends and most faithful of supporters, Provincetown literary manager Edna Kenton, published one of the earliest articulations of gender as socially constructed, referring to "Man" and "Woman" as "capitalized impersonalities" and calling for a "world-wide readjustment of human relationships."²⁵ Their general failure to achieve utopian heterosexuality, however, is reflected not only in the divorce statistics (Glaspell's circle of friends married and divorced in record numbers), but also in the grim depictions of heterosexuality and conventional domestic relations that surfaced within their plays.

As I have argued elsewhere, the defiance of traditional gender roles depicted in Provincetown plays by women is impressive, even by third wave feminist standards.²⁶ The protagonist of Neith Boyce's *Winter's Night* rejects marriage to start a dressmaking business, causing her suitor to commit suicide. Evelyn Scott's female protagonist in *Love*, by initiating a relationship with her stepson, similarly drives her husband to suicide. In Alice Rostetter's *The Widow's Veil*, a young Irish matron's dreams of widowhood are thwarted by her ailing husband's untimely recovery. Rita Wellman's *Funiculi-Funicula* allows a child to die because its female protagonist "was never intended to be a mother." When women wrote of domestic conflict, the treatment was primarily serious, and the plays concluded in death (of husbands, male lovers, or children). Women invariably survive. In satirical treatments of sexual conflicts by women, men and children are allowed to survive, but they're depicted as fools or nuisances. Djuna Barnes's *Three From the Earth*, *Kurzy of the Sea*, and *An Irish Triangle* all feature unconventional domestic relations, strong women, and doltish, or absent, men. *Three from the Earth*, which subverted gender identity by portraying dubious maternity, was deemed the most "freakish" (queerest?) of the three.

Jill Dolan recently posed two provocative rhetorical questions: "Can we queer feminism? Should we?"²⁷ A related question, crucial to my argument, is: How do we recognize queered feminism? What allows a critic to distinguish a feminist critique of heterosexual relations from a queer one? I believe that feminist expression moves toward queer expression to the degree that it deviates from the heteronormative (socially and/or sexually) and the traditional (aesthetically). Although many of Glaspell's Provincetown colleagues queered feminism in their plays, Glaspell alone adopted the term, which appears over and over in her plays (and fiction). Years before "queer" came to be commonly associated with "homosexual," Glaspell adopted it, as Ben-Zvi has observed, to describe "female protagonists who break with convention," especially conventionally gendered behavior. *Trifles*'s Minnie Wright looks "queer" after murdering her husband; *The Outside*'s Mrs. Patrick, who refuses to assist the men who intrude on her privacy, even to save a man's life, has "queer ways"; that most "unnatural" woman, *The Verge*'s mad murderess Claire

Archer, makes “queer new things”; and there is something “queer about Alison” who harbored an unlawful passion for a married man in *Alison’s House*.

Glaspell’s first independently authored play, *Trifles* (first produced in 1916), exemplifies queer subversion of heteronormative social institutions (marriage and the law) and queer employment of marginality as a place of empowerment. In this play, two farmwomen conspire to protect their neighbor, who has killed her abusive husband. Glaspell presents domesticity as dystopia—the Wright kitchen is cold, “gloomy,” dirty, and disordered. Mrs. Hale enters, “disturbed” and “looking fearfully about.” Both women move through this location “slowly” and “stand close together near the door.”²⁸ As the men, representing the law (county sheriff and county attorney), set about to solve this crime with self-importance matched only by lack of perspicacity, the women perceive and interpret the subtle signs of loneliness, domestic violence, and revenge. The women are drawn toward each other and toward the absent protagonist, becoming not only sympathetic but also empathetic to her violent act of liberation. When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters come to the unspoken realization that John Wright must have killed his wife’s canary, Mrs. Peters recalls her anger at a similar act of cruelty by a boy whom she had known as a child: “If they hadn’t held me back I would have—hurt him.”²⁹ Mrs. Hale, in response, characterizes the common plight of woman as “queer.” “I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing.”³⁰ Although “married to the law” (her husband is the sheriff), Mrs. Peters, along with Mrs. Hale, subverts institutionalized “justice,” taking the law literally into their own hands by hiding the evidence that might convict their neighbor. Glaspell’s trademark irony permeates the piece, as suggested by the title—significance lies in “trifles,” and the bumbling efforts of the male “authorities” border on parody.

Glaspell’s *Woman’s Honor* (first produced in 1918) de-legitimizes through satire the romantic notion of “chivalry,” exposing it as the flip side of chauvinism. A young man, accused of murder, refuses to provide an alibi that will compromise a woman’s honor. Soon a series of women representing a wide range of gender stereotypes (The Motherly One, the Silly One, etc.) arrive to provide an alibi, plainly demonstrating how meaningless a concept “woman’s honor” is to them. Appalled and baffled, the final line of the play is the young man’s “Oh, hell, I’ll plead guilty.”³¹ What makes this ironic critique of sexual double standards queerly delicious is the implication that the young man is on his way to execution. The “Hero” who would die to protect a “woman’s honor,” despite the abundance of women who arrive to stop his idiotic sacrifice, is presumably allowed *to do so*.³²

But did Glaspell’s “queerness” encompass lesbian sexuality—that is, relations between women that included sexual desire and/or sexual relationships? During Glaspell’s heyday as a playwright, the depiction of overtly homosexual relationships on stage was extremely rare and widely condemned. But did Glaspell subtly and

subversively introduce lesbian sexuality in her plays? In a recently published analysis of Glaspell's *Bernice* (first produced by the Provincetown Players in 1919), J. Ellen Gainor suggests that Glaspell may have discreetly depicted a lesbian relationship between Margaret Pierce, a labor activist, and Bernice, who has just died. Glaspell critic Marsha Noe questions this interpretation for lack of evidence.³³ To be sure, Bernice, who has just died as the play opens, was married to Craig, and the plot centers on her mysterious desire to convince him that her death by natural causes was instead a suicide provoked by his infidelity. The purpose of this ruse, successfully carried out by Bernice's faithful servant Abbie, is apparently to strengthen Craig's character by assuring him that the woman who "never seemed to need him," did.³⁴

The question of evidence, in relation to interpretation of dramatic characters is, under any circumstances, problematic: pre-Freud, what "evidence" allowed for an Oedipal reading of Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude? This particular instance seems to confirm observations by Kim Marra and Robert Schanke that "heterosexuality is simply presumed, automatically buttressed less by facts than by hegemonic assumptions."³⁵ But let me briefly summarize the evidence Gainor offers: That the two women have enjoyed a long, intimate friendship is made abundantly clear in the dialogue; we also learn, as Gainor points out, that Margaret, Bernice, and Bernice's husband Craig all have their own rooms in Bernice's house, that Bernice sent for Margaret, not her husband, when her death seemed near, and that Bernice died breathing Margaret's name: "it seemed to come from her whole life."³⁶ I would argue that, barring heterocentric assumptions, there is as much evidence in the play to suggest a sexual relationship between Margaret and Bernice as there is between Craig and Bernice. Although Margaret has no doubts that Bernice loved her, everyone, including Craig, questions Bernice's love for Craig. "I never had Bernice."³⁷ "She never seemed to need me."³⁸ The only sexual relationships explicitly referenced in the play are Craig's with other women, including the woman he was with when Bernice died. We also learn, through Craig's sister, that Bernice was indifferent to these relationships, that she was not "like most women,"³⁹ that she did not seem to want to hold Craig, although "it's what a wife should want to do."⁴⁰ Given the circumstances, Bernice's bizarre, postmortem sacrifice seems a compensatory gesture, a sign that she had little to give him in life. In this play, as in *Trifles* and, later, in *Alison's House*, Glaspell queers traditional theatrical convention by locating the central focus of the dramatic action in the most marginalized position conceivable—offstage.

A queer reading of *Bernice* might also locate Bernice's relationship with her faithful confidante, Abbie, somewhere along a lesbian continuum. For Bernice is also the central object of Abbie's affection: "it was the *main* thing in my life—doing what she wanted."⁴¹ When Margaret confides in Abbie that Bernice has been "the beauty in my life," Abbie replies, "I know—just what you mean, Miss Margaret."⁴²

As servant and confidante to a beautiful and absent younger woman, Abbie evokes the image of Daphne DuMaurier's Mrs. Danvers, zealous guardian of the memory of Rebecca. Perhaps critics have more readily seen "lesbian overtones" in the DuMaurier duo as envisioned by filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock precisely because it treats the relationship as sinister and mad.

Gainor proposes that Glaspell's bohemian audience may have variously interpreted such indeterminate sexual relationships,⁴³ and, by way of affirmation, I would like to elaborate on the extent of the lesbian context in which Glaspell created. Greenwich Village has been identified as the site of the earliest middle class American lesbian subculture, which developed during the 1910s and 1920s. By the early 1930s, the headquarters of lesbian subculture in the United States was a block of nightclubs near the Provincetown Playhouse on Macdougall Street.⁴⁴ The feminist organization Heterodoxy, of which Glaspell was a charter member, included a number of lesbian women and lesbian couples (in this case, meaning women who enjoyed sexual relations with other women).⁴⁵ The female membership of the Provincetown Players includes some of the era's most vigorous sexual experimenters, who balked at labels of any kind (Djuna Barnes's famous "I might be anything; if a horse loved me, I might be that" remains my favorite queer motto),⁴⁶ but among those who enjoyed sexual relationships with women are playwrights Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Louise Bryant, actress Marjorie Lacey Baker, and actress and costume designer Blanche Hays. Barnes, whose dramaturgy and fiction would seem to qualify as both lesbian and queer, wrote the first play produced in New York featuring overtly lesbian relationships—*The Dove*, in 1923. Glaspell and her Provincetown colleagues were friends of noted lesbian couples Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, and Helen Arthur and Agnes Morgan.⁴⁷

Outside of Provincetown, Glaspell's plays were championed by two lesbian theatre producers—Edy Craig, whose Pioneer Players produced Glaspell's *Trifles* and *The Verge*, and Eva Le Gallienne, whose Civic Repertory (identified by actor-director Bobby Lewis as a "lesbian theatre") produced *Inheritors* and *Alison's House*.⁴⁸ According to Le Gallienne biographer Robert Schanke, Le Gallienne was attracted to *Alison's House* (produced in 1930) precisely because of its lesbian overtones, which she highlighted in production. In publicizing the work, Le Gallienne emphasized the play's use of events from the life of poet Emily Dickinson, whose relationship with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, was widely if not universally perceived as lesbian. Le Gallienne saw special meaning in the character Ann's confession to Alison's niece, Elsa: "I always wanted to talk to you. I always had—sounds foolish—a sort of case on you. All the younger girls did."⁴⁹ Le Gallienne, who played Elsa and directed, emphasized the physical relationship between Elsa and Ann, adding touching and embracing to suggest intimacy and warmth. Schanke suggests that Le Gallienne's staging to highlight

the lesbian overtones aroused critical hostility.⁵⁰ Glaspell and Le Gallienne became close friends, and in 1944 Glaspell tried to interest Le Gallienne in producing her last play, *Springs Eternal*.

Although her Pioneer Players, initially organized by the Actress' Franchise League, rarely produced American playwrights, theatre entrepreneur Edy Craig was eager to direct Glaspell's *Trifles* and *The Verge*. Perhaps Craig's lesbian gaze enabled her to read these plays as indicting not just sexism, but heterosexism. The marital relationship depicted in *Trifles* is irredeemably bleak: there is no love, and by implication, no sexuality, in this frigid house, and no sign that there ever was: ". . . it never seemed a very cheerful place."⁵¹ The couple is childless—one of the significant distinctions between Glaspell's play and the event on which the play is based—the actual couple in the Hossack case had nine children.⁵²

Although most of Glaspell's plays present "female protagonists who break with convention," her most unconventional protagonist, her queerest creation, is unquestionably Claire Archer, who inhabits Glaspell's most formally and ideologically radical play, *The Verge*. Stephen J. Bottoms, one of the few directors to tackle this complex work recently, has asserted that "*The Verge* is best described as a 'queer,' hybrid play that refuses to settle into a single pattern as adamantly as Claire refuses to settle for a fixed gender identity."⁵³ If, as Laurence Senelick has argued, queer theatre is "grounded in and expressive of unorthodox sexuality or gender identity, antiestablishment and confrontational in tone, experimental and unconventional in format," *The Verge* may be categorized a masterwork of queer theatre.⁵⁴

The play's protagonist, a horticulturist metaphorically engaged in creating new plant species, "making queer new things," is actually seeking a radically different way to be human. She has divorced her first husband, treats her present husband with contempt, and is repulsed by her conventional daughter, attacking her physically and verbally in one scene: "To think that object ever moved my belly and sucked my breast!"⁵⁵ Although Claire is surrounded by three very different men—four including her faithful assistant Anthony, who seems a cross-gendered Abbie—she despises her husband (Harry), dismisses her lover (Dick), and finally strangles the friend (Tom) for being "too much" and "not enough."⁵⁶ The precise nature of Claire's frustrated energy, which seems profoundly sexual, remains somewhat elusive: perhaps no man can satisfy Claire sexually, or perhaps *The Verge* in some way presages Sedgwick's critique of sexual object as primary in identity-formation.

Queer theorist Carol Queen could be describing Claire in her assertion that "It is the queer in me that . . . lets me question the lies we were all told about who women are, who men are . . . the queer in all of us clamors for pleasure or change, will not be tamed or regulated, wants a say in the creation of a new reality."⁵⁷ Early in the play Claire urges Tom to "[try] and [try] things. Isn't that the way one

leaves the normal and gets into the byways of perversion?"⁵⁸ Leaving the normal, for Claire, includes rejection of her conventional daughter:

ADELAIDE. A mother cannot cast off her own child simply because she does not interest her!

CLAIRE. (An instant raising cool eyes to ADELAIDE): Why can't she?

ADELAIDE. Because it would be monstrous!

CLAIRE. And why can't she be monstrous—if she has to be?

ADELAIDE. You don't have to be. That's where I'm out of patience with you Claire. You are really a particularly intelligent, competent person, and it's time for you to call a halt to this nonsense and be the woman you were meant to be!

CLAIRE. (Holding the book up to see another way): What inside dope have you on what I was meant to be?⁵⁹

When Adelaide accuses Claire of being an “unnatural” woman, Claire retorts “at least it saves me from being a natural one.”⁶⁰ Throughout the play, Claire, who speaks longingly of “otherness” and alienation, is described as “unnatural,” “monstrous,” “mad,” “cruel,” and, repeatedly, “queer.” After strangling Tom, Claire escapes into madness, a controversial ending for a radically feminist play.

The moment for Claire, however, seems triumphant, and for the play, an eminently suitable conclusion to a radical critique of normality. From the perversely empowered, quintessentially marginal position of madness, Claire has finally succeeded in “breaking through”:

CLAIRE. Plants do it. The big leap—it's called. Explode their species—because something in them knows they've gone as far as they can go. Something in them knows they're shut in to just that. So—go mad—that life may not be prisoned. Break themselves up into crazy things—into lesser things, and from the pieces—may come one sliver of life with vitality to find the future. How beautiful. How brave.

In the play's concluding moments, Claire is, as she says simply, prefiguring the language of queer liberation: “Out.”⁶¹

If Claire blurs gender boundaries, the play also ruthlessly blurs genre and style. Glaspell's stage directions suggest an expressionist visualization, especially the twisted tower of Act II, with its “queer bulging window,” which one critic compared to a womb.⁶² Glaspell's stage directions also specify arresting patterns created by the vines in the greenhouse, perhaps suggesting the form of a cross. Her characters

veer between realistically complex human beings and caricatures; the actions move from antic farce (frequent, comically-contested opening and closing of doors, eggs rolling around on the floor, guns going off), to sophisticated, sexually charged banter (rather Coward-esque), to violence, madness, and murder. The juxtaposition of ordinary (breakfast squabbles over salt and pepper) to extraordinary (savagely verbal and physical attacks) borders on grotesque. Glaspell's language veers from crisp naturalism ("You talk nutty. Everybody says so.") to invention (her coinage of "otherness," "by-myself-ness," and "allness") to witty symbolism (Claire has a purely physical relationship with "Dick") to lyricism:

My love, you're going away—
 Let me tell you how it is with me:
 I want to touch you—somehow touch you once before I die—
 Let me tell you how it is to work.
 I want to be;
 Do not want to make a rose or make a poem—
 Want to lie upon the earth and know.⁶³

Glaspell's use of dashes, pauses, repetitions, and similar linguistic inventions has been compared to "l'écriture féminine."⁶⁴ Although Claire's laboratory may be viewed as a metaphor for society or the world in general, it also stands in nicely for the Provincetown Players' experimental stage, rendering *The Verge* one of Glaspell's most reflexive works.

As we have seen, Glaspell employed the term "queer" in a special sense and, as I maintain, was in fact theorizing a queer, anti-essentialist identity. But the word's excessive repetition (eighteen times) in this work is puzzling: is it possible that, by this time (November 1921), Glaspell was aware of its association with a particular kind of gender and sexual outlaw? According to Malcolm Cowley, the term "queer" was becoming associated with homosexuality, and homosexuality with the Greenwich Village arts community, in the 1920s.⁶⁵ Feminist critics and, especially, the Heterodoxy membership passionately embraced *The Verge*: "It seemed to me, while these women were talking about *The Verge*, that I was in church, that they were worshipping at some holy shrine."⁶⁶ The play's detractors most strenuously objected to Claire's gender violations, one pronouncing her a "fraudulent female."⁶⁷ Perhaps, in 1921, the Greenwich Village audiences, as well as some of the uptown critics, detected in Claire more than the ordinary New Woman or feminist, which may explain why Alexander Woollcott pronounced the character "abnormal."⁶⁸ Other writers who were offended pronounced the play "unhealthy," "neurotic," "intolerable," and "a queer study of eroticism."⁶⁹ Both the condemnation of this play by sexist and heterosexist critics and the championing

of this play by feminist and lesbian audiences suggest that *The Verge* may have special resonance as queer theatre.

Lawrence Senelick has proposed that queer theatre “cannot be created from without: the status of its creator as a ‘queer’ within a ‘straight’ society is, at some level, its raw material.”⁷⁰ This exploration does not seek to attach to Susan Glaspell a lesbian sexual identity, or to fix any single interpretation of her plays or the characters in her plays. To do so would contradict the overt resistance to conformity that distinguishes both her life and her ambiguous and complex works. This study does propose, however, that Susan Glaspell was engaged in theorizing and embraced for herself a “queer” identity that included, but was not limited to, gender and/or sexual identity.

Susan Glaspell was queer in her geographic and ideological departure from her middle class, Midwestern roots. She was queer in her desire for education and a career as a writer, in her artistic ambitions, in her delay of marriage, in her sexual desire for a married man and later in life, for one nearly twenty years her junior. She was queer in her childlessness, in her critique of sexism, racism, and other forms of injustice within American social institutions, in her bold expression of “unwomanly” behavior: unruly sexuality, unbridled ambition, rage, and violence. She was queer in her use of irony and parodic humor, in her jarring juxtaposition of tone and mood that keeps her readers and spectators off-balance, in her unique displacement of traditional dramatic focus from onstage to offstage.

In her most politically and artistically radical works, these ideological and formal subversions may be read as queer dramaturgy, and Susan Glaspell, in her continual identification of subversive gender and sexual identity as well as subversive aesthetic creation as “queer,” functions as a queer theorist and may be regarded as a pioneer in queering feminism. These works emerged at the advent of the invention of compulsory heterosexuality as a political and economic institution in American life, and they resonate with new vitality in our current cultural climate’s attempt to reify the “sanctity” of heterosexual unions and to constitutionally prohibit any other kind.⁷¹

Notes

1. See, for example, Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005); Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown: 1915-22* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002); Martha C. Carpentier, *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2001); J. Ellen Gainor, *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics: 1915-48* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001); Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell, A Critical Biography* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000); Linda Ben-Zvi, ed. *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995); Veronica Makowsky, *Susan Glaspell’s Century of American Women* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); Marcia Noe, *Susan Glaspell: Voice*

from the Heartland (Macomb: Western Illinois University Monograph Series, 1983). See also Christopher Bigsby's Introduction to *Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).

2. Jill Dolan, Introduction to *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York UP, 2002) 5.

3. David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 62; qtd. in Sullivan 43-44.

4. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990).

5. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York UP, 2003) vi.

6. Anonymous, "Queer Power Now" pamphlet circulated in London, 1991, cited in Cherry Smith, "What Is This Thing Called Queer," *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 277.

7. Sedgwick 31.

8. Lawrence Senelick, "The Queer Root of Theatre," ed. Solomon and Minwalla 21.

9. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5.4 (Summer 1980): 631-60; Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," *Toward An Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 157-210; Sedgwick 31-32; Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 24-26. Foucault's explication of "the deployment of sexuality" is closely related. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990) 81-131.

10. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

11. Noe, *Susan Glaspell: Voice from the Heartland* 16.

12. Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 36.

13. 36.

14. Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000) 42.

15. Noe 25.

16. Ozieblo 42.

17. Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986) 47.

18. Hutchins Hapgood, *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939) 368.

19. See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton Group, 1995).

20. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 49.
21. Irving D. Steinhardt, *Ten Sex Talks With Girls*, 1914.; qtd in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 37.
22. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 47.
23. 47. In the late twentieth century, similar views were still being voiced. At the 1992 Republican Convention, for example, televangelist and presidential hopeful Pat Robertson declared that feminism “encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” See <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-8-23-US-Robertson-x.htm>>.
24. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 91 and 325n53. Representative titles include Maria Stopes, *Married Love* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1918); Theodore H. van de Velde, *Ideal Marriage* (1926; New York: Covici Friede, 1930); Gilbert van Tassel Hamilton, *A Research in Marriage* (1929; New York: M. D. Lear, 1948).
25. Edna Kenton, “Feminism Will Give—Men More Fun, Women Greater Scope, Children Better Parents, Life More Charm,” *Delineator* July 1914: 17.
26. Black 53-73.
27. Dolan, Introduction to *The Queerest Art* 5.
28. Susan Glaspell, *Trifles, Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. Bigsby 6.
29. 43.
30. 44.
31. Susan Glaspell, *Woman’s Honor, Plays* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1920) 156.
32. For a more thorough exploration of parody and reflexivity in *Woman’s Honor*, see Sharon Friedman, “Honor or Virtue Unrewarded: Glaspell’s Parodic Challenge to Ideologies of Sexual Conduct and the Discourse of Morality in the Early Decades of the Twentieth Century,” unpublished paper delivered at the American Theatre and Drama Society Conference, March 2005.
33. Marsha Noe, Review of *Susan Glaspell in Context* by J. Ellen Gainor, *Theatre Journal* 55.3 (October 2003): 570-71.
34. Susan Glaspell, *Bernice, Plays* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1920) 170.
35. Kim Marra and Robert Schanke, eds. *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 9.
36. Susan Glaspell, *Bernice* 220.
37. 173.
38. 170.
39. 177.
40. 186.
41. 164.
42. 183.
43. Gainor 106.
44. Faderman, *Odd Girls* 83-88.
45. See Judith Schwartz, *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village, 1912-1940* (Lebanon, NH: New Victoria Publishers, 1982).

46. Barnes to Emily Coleman, 27 October 1935; qtd in Philip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995) xix.
47. Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap founded the *Little Magazine*; Helen Arthur and Agnes Morgan were company manager and stage director, respectively, for the Neighborhood Playhouse.
48. Kim Marra and Robert Schanke, *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998) 144.
49. Susan Glaspell, *Alison's House* (New York: Samuel French, 1930) 118.
50. Robert Schanke, *Shattered Applause: The Lives of Eva Le Gallienne* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992) 90-91.
51. Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* 39.
52. See Ben-Zvi, "Murder She Wrote," *Essays* 23.
53. Stephen J. Bottoms, "Building on the Abyss: Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* in Production," *Theatre Topics* 8.2 (1998): 130. Bottoms tucked into an endnote the possibility of homoerotic subtext in *The Verge*, an intriguing thread his discussion did not follow (146n5). Bottoms and Ben-Zvi are the only other writers I am aware of to suggest a connection between Glaspell's use of "queer" and contemporary queer theory. I highly recommend Bottoms's essay to anyone interested in producing this play.
54. Senelick 21.
55. Glaspell, *The Verge, Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. Bigsby 78.
56. 99.
57. Carol Queen, "The Queer in Me," *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*, ed. Loraine Hutchins and Lana Kaahumanu (Boston: Alyson, 1991) 20-21.
58. Glaspell, *The Verge* 63.
59. 79.
60. 84.
61. 100.
62. David Sievers, *Freud on Broadway* (New York: Hermitage House, 1955) 71-72.
63. Glaspell, *The Verge* 88.
64. Marcia Noe, "The Verge: *L'Écriture Féminine* at the Provincetown," *Essays*, ed. Ben-Zvi 129-44.
65. Miller 140.
66. Dancer Elsie Dufour; qtd. in Hapgood 377. Ruth Hale and Maida Castellun (also Heterodites) were two critics who defended the play against its virulent detractors, of whom there were many.
67. Robert A. Parker, *New York Independent*, 17 December 1921, Provincetown scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
68. *New York Times*, 15 Nov 1921: 23.
69. Reviews of *The Verge* may be found in Mary Papke, *Susan Glaspell, A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993). See also Black, 65-67.
70. Senelick 21.
71. On 24 February 2004, President George Bush petitioned Congress to send to the states for ratification a constitutional amendment "defining and protecting marriage as a union of man and woman as husband and wife" <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040224-2.html>>.