

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## A Streetcar Named *Dies Irae*: Tennessee Williams and the Semiotics of Rape

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Number 10

[T]he nature of the theatrical sign, whether analogical, symbolic or conventional, the denotation and connotation of the message—all these fundamental problems of semiology are present in the theatre.

— Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (1964)

I think we all live with rape. My God, we're all victims of rape, symbolically.... Society rapes the individual.

— Tennessee Williams to David Frost (1970)

When Cecil Brown asked Williams in their 1974 interview if Blanche was mad at the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams responded,

I think she's broken at the end.... She had personal, great strength and personal vulnerability that was finally broken.... She's a tiger, extreme tigers are destroyed, not defeated. (277)

Over the years, numerous critics have taken Williams to task for resorting to violent sexuality to demonstrate that brokenness. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, deride Williams for reconstituting the “penis as a pistol with which to shoot women into submission” and for using rape as a means by which to punish Blanche for “her crimes” (45) of “flagrant sexual misconduct” (51). Kathleen Lant even calls Williams an outright misogynist who “draws on the most heinous and trivializing myths about woman and about rape that inform our culture,” demonstrating, she argues, that Williams “bears as many prejudices toward the modern woman as does a brute like Stanley” (230–31).<sup>1</sup> Kaarina Kailo concurs that the rape is used “to silence the female viewpoint” yet believes Williams simply wanted Blanche to be mad by the end—and the rape secures that dramatic goal by allowing her to avoid waking up “in the world that has castrated” her (124). For Susan Koprince, who views the play from “a modern sociological perspective” (43), *Streetcar* dramatizes the battered wife syndrome endemic in American society, where Stanley’s rape of Blanche “allows him to destroy” her (51), while Jacqueline O’Connor argues that “the rape stands as a representation of Blanche’s inability to conform to the sexual standards for women in her society, and she is punished for that shortcoming” (*Dementia* 50). Taking an opposing view, Gene D. Phillips wishes not to “justify Stanley’s rape of his sister-in-law” but rather “to explain it”:

When he finally assaults her in the play’s climax...it is the action of a desperate man equipped with more brawn than brains to cope with a calculating creature who declared war on him when she first stepped across his threshold. (73)<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and Gary Harrington have examined the many metonymic and metaphoric filmic images in Kazan’s depiction of Blanche’s rape, but they still refer to the act in terms of “Stanley’s *bodily weapons*” used to “*kill*” her (Paquet-Deyris 180–81).<sup>3</sup>

Such interpretations of *Streetcar* as promoting domestic violence and sexual transgression, however, employ conventional teleological readings that are necessarily influenced by theatrical mimesis; that is, they impose a design upon the play that views rape as ineluctable, a reading that the drama text alone only partially supports.<sup>[4]</sup> As June Schlueter writes, “a moral and an aesthetic retrospective reading toward closure” is inescapable with *Streetcar* (72).<sup>[5]</sup> To be sure, a play is both a literary work and a public performance, and those who view it are arguably more susceptible to its violent ending than those who only read it. But once *Streetcar*’s floating “rape” sign left the scripted page and entered into the fixed signification of stage or screen performance, its multiple meanings in the play were either lost, distorted, or irreversibly actualized, and theatrical mimesis replaced symbolic expressionism indefinitely.

These “kinetic” interpretations of the play, then, understand Blanche’s rape as the dramatic climax to the state of southern cultural hegemony—what W. J. Cash describes as the “southern rape complex”<sup>[6]</sup>—or the ineluctable result of Blanche and Stanley’s sexual sparring. Unfortunately, they ignore (or dismiss) Williams’s plastic intentions with Blanche’s rape, intentions that had evolved over the years in other works that directly influenced *Streetcar*’s composition. Simply put, there is an enormous difference between rape as literary “sign” and rape as social “signifier” in Williams’s play and in his canon prior to 1946, and to avoid that fact mires *Streetcar* criticism unilaterally in socio-sexist polemics. This essay intends to revisit the rape in *Streetcar*—not so much to proffer a more “correct” historicized reading of the play that its feminist-informed criticism has tended to neglect since the 1980s, but rather to defend the potency of the theatrical sign on stage where an act, no matter how unsettling it might be to see performed, is multiple in its readings and in its effects.<sup>[7]</sup> To understand more fully Williams’s plastic use of rape in *Streetcar* necessitates first our understanding of the playwright’s semiotics of the drama text before it became a theatre text, and second our looking at other works by Williams that contain a rape that functions more symbolically than it does theatrically.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Semiotics and the Drama/Theatre Text of *Streetcar*

Any object or action on stage, no matter how absurd or expressionistic, is in some way mimetic and thus serves as a sign of, or for, something else. Such was the manifesto of the Prague School of the late 1930s and 1940s, whose corpus of theoretical inquiries into the nature of the drama text revolutionized theatre/drama criticism and informed much of today’s grammar of theatre semiotics.<sup>[9]</sup> To be sure, Petr Grigorjevič Bogatyrev’s 1938 theory that “on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs...acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life” (35–36), later echoed in Jiří Veltruský’s claim that “[a]ll that is on the stage is a sign” (84), so undermined Aristotle’s theory of dramatic mimesis (or what was left of it after Brecht’s epic theatre) that its transference of imitation and representation from the drama text (the written play) onto that of the theatre text (the performed play) has altered considerably how drama audiences “read” plays today.<sup>[10]</sup> In other words, the notion that everything that transports the drama text represents the larger part of the mimetic process (even if those signs are extratextual) has become so commonplace that reader/critic/audience–response interpretations of plays have severely marginalized authorial intent in favor of “the spectacle.” If theatre has become nothing less than the sum total of its interrelated signs—both in the words of the drama text and in the stage objects of the theatre text—it has done so only because the theatre text grew dependent upon the spectator to supply a meaning to those signs rather than relying upon the reader to recognize those that the playwright had inscribed there himself.<sup>[11]</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam narrows the divide separating classicist notions of mimesis and the Prague School polemic over the shifted locus of meaning by first suggesting that a play can be bifurcated between the text “produced *in* the theatre [theatre] and that composed *for* the theatre [drama].” Exploring how performance semiotics can modify textual ones without completely denuding the text of its signifying capacity, Elam writes,

The question that arises, then, is whether a semiotics of theatre *and* drama is conceivable as a bi- or multilateral but nevertheless integrated enterprise, or whether instead there are necessarily two (or more) quite separate disciplines in a play. To put the question differently: is it possible to refound in semiotic terms a full-bodied *poetics* of the Aristotelian kind, concerned with all the communicational, representational, logical, fictional, linguistic and structural principles of theatre and drama? (3)

Though Elam’s final answer to that question is only an implied “yes,” he articulates convincingly the inherent problem drama/theatre dialectics creates, while diplomatically refusing to privilege one semiotic nature over the other. As each text inevitably “bears the other’s traces” (209), any discussion of a play’s mimetic nature relies upon this *bi-directional* signification, not only in its text-to/from-performance correlation but also in its interpretant-to/from-interpreter correlation (that is, the meaning of its intended sign and the spectator’s understanding of it). In terms of Williams’s *Streetcar*, and most singularly the reading of its demeaning rape, the central question becomes not *what* the theatre sign was meant to represent but *who* author(ize)s it and *whence* it derives its theatrical meaning.

<sup>16</sup> Coming from a theatrical tradition that includes Wagner and Shaw—in which playwrights attempted to control the transference of dramatic meaning as it passed from page to stage through lengthy prefaces and explicit stage directions—Tennessee Williams’s plastic theatre both anchored the dramatic signifier by attaching it to recognizable Western signs and also liberated it by complementing those signs with a set of personal codes or symbols necessarily esoteric to our understanding of them. Specifically, in *Streetcar*, traditional linguistic and object signs of love, purity, and innocence are put through the signifying wringer. For example, Bogatyrev’s “signs of signs” (that is, anything produced in the theatre) are connotations of objects, where a costume, such as a suit of armor, “comes to signify for a particular audience ‘valour’ or ‘manliness’”—thus, second order and culturally determined units of meaning (Elam 10). Here, a costume may represent “socio-economic, psychological and even moral characteristics” (11), an obvious treatment Williams incorporates into *Streetcar* and its rape scene with Stanley’s red pajamas, green silk bowling shirt, and “grease-stained seersucker pants” (1:322), or with Blanche’s moth-white suit, red satin wrapper, and Della Robbia blue jacket. Each set of clothing functions as a social, as well as sexual, signifier. We, as readers, recognize the traditional color-coding of the object-sign inherent in the clothing (Williams makes sure of this, not only through his stage directions but also through the dialogue of the drama text) and use this knowledge to interpret the play extraliterarily.

<sup>17</sup> Yet Williams purposefully upends the object-sign encoded through the colors of the clothing by making the play’s action or moral message inconsistent with the reader’s signifying process. First, he deconstructs the Blakean binary that separates the play’s *black* “tiger” (or wolf) from its *white* “lamb” (or sheep) since nearly everyone in the play save Snow Blanche herself is associated with the lamb/sheep: Stella (1:251), the Paperboy (1:339), even Stanley (1:284 and 1:312). None is as innocent, pure, or “lily” *white* as that association would normally suggest for us. Similarly, the tiger/wolf referent both *is* and *is not* fitting for Mitch; his image as an

attempted rapist of Blanche struggles constantly with his momma's-boy nature (1:292 and 1:390). Nor is it representational of the rapist Stanley, who even implicates Blanche as the tiger/wolf (1:383 and 1:402; 1:360 and 1:398). In short, like its counterpart, true blackness in the drama text does not exist. Thus, tiger/wolf and lamb/sheep dichotomies imperative to the rape scene lose their linguistic and symbolic signification in the play, just as the object-signs of the characters' clothing used to codify them are denied any one-to-one correspondence.<sup>[12]</sup>

<sup>¶18</sup> We are not being given simple object-sign inversions, either—a wolf in sheep's clothing, so to speak—for Williams is less interested in simply inverting binaries in the play than he is in obliterating them altogether. For example, the signifying “rose” of scene five—Mitch's presentation of a bouquet and Blanche's resultant “My Rosenkavalier” (1:339)—is not just the (linguistic) “flower” rose or the (symbolic) “faded beauty” rose or the (religious) “Mystical Rose,” but also the (mythical) Rose of Dante, as well as Miss “Rose” Williams, the sister who haunts this and nearly every Williams play. Only the informed reader, however, would be able to retrace the “rose” sign back in the play to its many referents. If the drama text already poses certain signifying problems for the reader, then the theatre text can only complicate matters further. Consequently, the spectator is forced to ascertain the playwright's intended meaning—or, as is often the case, is free to supply his or her own meaning(s), informed by the visual presence of moving signs on stage that come and go too quickly to process in their multiplicity. And yet, in a play that boasts of primary colors but denounces the need to expunge society's “greyness”—be it Allan Grey's bisexuality or Blanche DuBois Grey's virgin/whore duality—readers and spectators are left wondering where Williams's sympathies lie. In other words, is his shepherd Shep Huntleigh the one who hunts or who is hunted?

<sup>¶19</sup> Once the sign leaves the page and joins the stage, how might any theatre sign of that play's performance secure any level of textual meaning? That is, could a spectator ever hope to understand *Streetcar's* performed signification if its reader is already rapt by the drama text's permutations? Admittedly, like the text's drama sign, the theatre sign in *Streetcar* imports ready-made signification to the performance—one that is rerepresented on stage in recognizable codes, such as Blanche's hand mirror and Allan's yellowing love letters, both signifying her obsession with the past. Such signifiers are consistent within the play and do maintain a certain level of bidirectional signification between drama text and theatre text. And yet, there are also some theatre signs that defy this fluid transference of meaning. It is here that the drama text and the theatre text split irreparably and where the performance of *Streetcar's* rape scene becomes problematic.

<sup>¶10</sup> If, as semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan argues, a drama sign is always potentially in cultural flux, then so too is its theatre equivalent, for a theatre sign is a drama sign one step further removed from the original linguistic referent's meaning. The theatre, Kowzan contends, is the end product of a semiotic chain wherein natural signs in a text (e.g., smoke indicating fire) are “artificialize[d]” on stage through performance and are then renaturalized by the spectator to complete the transference of meaning (60).<sup>[13]</sup> Given no other choice than to begin with an artificial sign, however, the spectator, in his or her movement back toward the object that is being imitated or represented, can never truly hope to find consensus with the playwright because the artificial sign created by the performance belies any universal object-sign signification. Consequently, the necessary bidirectional interplay of signs between spectator and text, which passes through the mediating performance that attempts to materialize the interpretant of the play's linguistic signs, unavoidably breaks down. Thus, while unidirectional signification is natural from the drama text to the theatre text, the “reverse does not hold” (Elam

109). The result is that the spectator, too, cannot claim rightful ownership of a drama text's meaning any more than the drama text can of itself. This is the essential problem with the rape in *Streetcar*.

¶11 As Pamela Anne Hanks has noted in her reading of the rape, "Stanley's lie ought not to excuse the viewer; it is the viewer who sees what happens, who must interpret the act, who must *see it as*" (119). Such holistic acceptance of the theatre text as "real" breaks all barriers of the notion of dramatic mimesis (*Streetcar* was never intended as agitprop, for instance). To be sure, socio-semiotics in the theatre has become something of the standard lately, with critics and theorists alike either privileging the multiple strata of social signification that the receiver locates in the drama/theatre text or, as Fernando de Toro notes, connecting "two theoretical and epistemological levels of the theatre phenomenon: the formal and the contextual levels" (37).<sup>[14]</sup> Jean Alter even contends that theatre "manifest[s] a certain tension between a changing social reality and a lagging adjustment of ideology" and "the resulting unconscious malaise usually [testifies] to an obsolescence of the society's system of signs" (16, 19).<sup>[15]</sup> Hanks, like the feminist critics noted earlier, fulfills this agenda by implicating Stanley, Williams, and any male in the audience in the crime through their voyeuristic roles during the rape:

If we see Williams's play script not as a literary object replete with enough determinate meaning to keep literary critics in business but as a semiotic construct *designed to invoke audience response*, to call into play our own meaning-making strategies, then we are confronted with a play that is both disturbing and satisfying—disturbing and satisfying precisely because it deprecates cultural concepts for the female in a way that forces us to consider not only what those conceptions mean for us but how meaning means. (117, my emphasis)

Though such praxis strengthens most text-as-real-life literary theories, it toys dangerously with signification, since it determines "reality" a priori.

¶12 As we have already seen concerning certain drama signs in *Streetcar*, then, there are also some theatre signs in the play that deny bidirectional signification, and Blanche's rape is without doubt one of the most volatile. While we can readily progress from the linguistic sign "rape" through to its drama sign in scene ten of Williams's text to, finally, its theatre sign in Kazan's 1951 film (or any production of the play, for that matter, though Kazan's film certainly froze its performance in aspic), we cannot begin with its theatre sign and hope to return to its prelinguistic origin. The reasons for this are both simple and complex: simple in the sense that theatre requires us to pass through not one but three interpretants, and complex in the fact that the chain of interpretants that separates the linguistic sign from the spectator's understanding of it unavoidably degenerates the sign's original referent.

¶13 To be sure, despite his explicit stage directions, Williams cannot entirely control how his audience will finally interpret the play's rape. Williams *does* attempt to control the collectivist understanding of "rape" by interweaving several iconic and symbolic equivalents of the rape throughout the fabric of the play: in the double-edged meaning of the term "date"; in Stanley's rifling through Blanche's private trunk in scene two;<sup>[16]</sup> or in Mitch's exposing Blanche's face to the naked light bulb, for example. Even in the pantomime scene that parallels the actual rape in scene ten, Williams tries to signify rape symbolically, for just as Mitch had "*root[ed] in [Blanche's] purse*" (1:341) back in scene six, the Negro Woman now "*is rooting excitedly through*" the prostitute's "sequined bag" (1:399), with the sexually metonymic nature of the woman's purse/trunk being pillaged informing us that Blanche's "handbag" too will soon be violently penetrated. With each reference to rape remaining on the symbolic level, though, the spectator recognizes them only as literary analogues of the

real rape (as further signs of the drama text's literary mimesis) and not as Williams's symbolic referent of rape inscribed in that text from the start. In other words, the spectator naturally determines the meaning of the drama sign (from the play text) through its theatre sign (in the performed text) and never in the reverse order. Rape, in all these instances, is violation, pure and simple.

¶14 And yet, there can never be a "pure" and "simple" kinesic sign (such as mime or gesture) in the theatre, just as there can never be a "pure" and "simple" object-sign in drama, because "the two worlds [the real and the dramatic] are *asymmetrical*"—that is, "one world is accessible to another but not vice versa (Elam 103). As a result, all of Williams's attempts to consolidate the rape's signifier only set it further afloat—and where it will finally settle depends more upon the spectator's willingness to harness its meaning than the playwright's efforts to liberate it. As such, the performance of *Streetcar*'s rape places the onus on the director and actors *to see* and accurately *reproduce* the rape's symbolic meaning first, since even its slightest mimetic rendering will overshadow any non-realistic intent Williams may have had. Williams can never hope to claim authority for a given sign because he perpetually borrows that sign from his spectator's understanding of it, regardless of the fact that the sign might have meant something different in his time from what it means now in the spectator's. The spectator can try to contextualize that sign's meaning encountered in the theatre text, but even then, all that s/he can do is understand the given social meaning of the sign as it was understood during Williams's time.

¶15 Even if we do allow a spectator of *Streetcar* some interpretative latitude—rape in the theatre, for example, has remained consistently a heinous act since the Athenian stage—and accept that a return to the drama text's meaning of the act *is* at least plausible, there, too, we encounter problems. The complexities of the Williams "rape" contain the author's own personal inflections on the act, which do not necessarily sustain those of the signifying spectator (or even the reader, for that matter), and the audience is again hard pressed to find a path back to Williams's original (and often symbolic) meaning. If that level of meaning is lost or arbitrated differently from what the author had intended, the only fallout the spectator will experience is a lack of additional signification. But when that signifier is more socially sensitive and allows little room or tolerance for esoteric meanings, the fallout is much more explosive. In this sense, any reversal of meaning in our understanding of the rape in *Streetcar* on the realistic level of the spectator back toward the symbolic one of the playwright, despite the many prescient or contrapuntal resonances supporting the mimetic action of rape in the play, seems not only improbable but also inappropriate.

¶16 In her *Mimetic Disillusion*, Anne Fleche perhaps comes closest of Williams's critics to recognizing this bidirectional flow of the realistic/symbolic meaning of rape in his play, concentrating more on the purely abstract sign of the rape than on the realistic one, though she never forgets that the realistic is inevitably invoked by the spectator. She points out, for example, the "*troubling* 'realistic' details" (94) in the play where the "outside keeps becoming the inside, and vice versa" (95), particularly in the rape scene:

The play seems to swivel on this moment, when the logic of appearance and essence, the individual and the abstract, turns inside out, like the set, seeming to occupy for once the same space. It is either the demolition of realistic objectivity or the transition point at which realism takes over some new territory. (97)

Fleche maintains that, "underneath realistic discourse," the rape scene discloses "a static primal moment beneath the immediacy of the action":

The incestuous relation lies beyond the moral and social order of marriage and the family, adaptation and eugenics, not to mention (as Williams reminds us here) the fact that it's unmentionable.... The rape in *Streetcar* thus seems familiar and inevitable, even to its "characters," who lose the shape of characters and become violent antagonists as if on cue. (97–98)

Rape here for Fleche becomes an "allegorical landscape" with neither character realistically portraying man or woman, and it is the "impersonality of the rape that is most telling: the obliteration of individuation and the spatial distinctions that allow for 'character'" (98). She concludes that the rape scene in *Streetcar*, ending "without words, without conflict, without characters" (98), is in fact "something other than rape, and so not rape," but also "as much a rape as it is possible for it to be," for Williams simply had to deal with the "scenic limitations for dramatizing that which cannot be in the scene: namely, the act it represents" (98).

<sup>¶17</sup> In sum, the rape in *Streetcar*, be it a drama sign or a theatre sign, is one slick customer, malleable enough to fit the reductive patrimony of the male gaze, the controlled vitriol of the feminist gaze, or the amorphous signifier of the theoretician's gaze. But each of the three instructive and valid readings still underlines one essential point. The reference to rape in *Streetcar* is understood teleologically: we privilege it as an end product and not as a fluid process, unavoidably ascribing to it social meanings that are not fully nuanced in the drama text. No matter how abstractly we rationalize the rape in the play, we are still very far from Williams's own use of the word. Williams, it should be remembered, was first and foremost a symbolist, in property and in action, so why should we consider any action in *Streetcar*, including the rape, to be any different? Even those among us who would argue that rape can never enter into the symbolic realm in performance are perhaps missing the point that, at least in Williams, it repeatedly does. For good or bad, we find rape (perhaps uncomfortably so) in many of his dramatic works (and in the short fiction from which many plays evolved) throughout his career, with each encounter further solidifying our understanding of the symbolic nature of the rape in *Streetcar*.

### Williams and the Semiotics of Rape

There are, in fact, six "rapes" in the entire Williams canon published to date: Eva's in *Not About Nightingales* (1938), Flora's in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (ca. 1946), Flora's in the story "The Important Thing" (1945), Edith's in the story "The Night of the Iguana" (1946/1948), Jane's in *Vieux Carré* (1975), and Blanche's in *Streetcar*.<sup>[17]</sup> What is most telling about this fact is not the infrequency (or frequency<sup>[18]</sup>) of the use of rape in his works but rather its unsettling admixture of violence and seduction which resolves a thematic issue more than it climaxes a dramatic situation. Another relevant fact is that five of the six rapes analyzed here occur in the literature Williams wrote prior to *Streetcar*, with the sixth rape occurring in a play completed thirty years later though begun in New Orleans as early as 1939 (Bray 144; Dorff 1). In each of the plays, we find a woman physically rejecting and psychologically (or spiritually) welcoming her attacker. And yet, these rapes are not the product of a warped mind that mythologizes rape as a deep-seated female fantasy but are rather part and parcel of a writer's perpetual struggle to reconcile his own compulsions for rough sex with those of his inculcated spirituality.

<sup>¶19</sup> Though unabashedly an agitprop, *Not About Nightingales* also hints at what would later be Williams's theatrical signature: a psychological portrait of the imprisoned spirit, with the cage of the real prison cell metaphorically impeding human desire to transcend the physical world. As "Canary" Jim Allison says,

There's a wall like that around ev'ry man in here an' outside of here, Ollie.... Ev'ry man living is walking around in a cage. He carries it with him wherever he goes and don't let it go till he's dead. Then the walls come to pieces and he stops being lonesome.... Cause he's part of something bigger than him. (NN 37)

Jim here represents the spiritual longing for a life devoid of physical taint. The sensual side of human nature only really enters the play with Eva, whom Allean Hale describes as “the standard ingenue” (xx). Recalling her biblical counterpart, Eva tempts Jim into finding a way out of his prison, both his cell and his misanthropic isolationism. Apart from her role as ingenue, though, there is something disturbing about Eva’s characterization that presages Blanche: her attraction to rape.

120 Later in act one, for example, Eva is nearly seduced by the prison warden, Boss Whalen, and admits to Jim that she was *at first* terrified by the Warden’s sexual advances. However, what initially appears to be an archetypal example of the predatory male, with Eva fearing that any refusal of her boss’s advances would result in the loss of her job, quickly turns ambiguous. Jim asks her if she was scared of the Warden’s unsolicited advances, and she replies, “Terribly scared—and at the same time—something else” (NN 83). Shocked by her admission, Jim then asks if she was actually aroused by the thought of the Warden raping her, to which Eva responds, “Yes, in a way. I knew that if he touched me I wouldn’t be able to move” (NN 83). This prediction is fulfilled later in act 2, when the Warden almost does succeed in the seduction/rape:

EVA: I’m scared to death of you. You’ve got to let me go, I can’t stay with you any longer, Mr. Whalen.

WARDEN: Now, now.

EVA: No, don’t touch me! Please don’t....

WARDEN (*purring*): My wife gets spells like that, too—that “don’t touch me” stuff!

EVA (*retreating*): Yes!

WARDEN: I know a good treatment for it that always works. There, now little girl you just take it easy. Relax.

You’re all worked up over nothing. You’re stiff, see? Your nerves and your muscles are all drawn up real tight.

EVA: Yes... (*She has nearly collapsed with nervous exhaustion—his purring voice has a hypnotic effect.*) (NN 132–33)<sup>19</sup>

The Warden’s sexual advances and Eva’s affirmations help to establish the ambiguity of the sexual attraction/repulsion Williams offers here: is her initial “yes” a deterrent in its reaffirmation of the Warden’s “don’t touch me” comment, or is it her semi-unconscious desire for him to continue? Is her second “yes” a confirmation of her first refusal, or has it now too changed, given that she faints, as Blanche will do, instead of shouting for help, which Blanche at least manages to do when Mitch tries to rape her? And how are we to understand her “*collaps[ing] with nervous exhaustion*”?

121 Answers to these questions perhaps lie in Eva’s earlier explanation to Jim about her fascination with rape. In describing her “favorite nightmare,” in which she finds herself alone in a “big empty house,” knowing that “something or someone was hidden behind one of the doors, waiting to grab [her]” (NN 84), Eva recalls being frightened but enjoys the feeling because in the dream it is *she* who finally pursues the source of her sexually aggressive fears: “But instead of running out of the house I always go searching through it; opening all of the closed doors—Even when I come to the last one, I don’t stop, Jim—I open that one, too” (NN 84). We are seemingly encountering the playwright’s warped male fantasy here, for Eva awakes each time just before confronting her aggressor. And yet, such an explanation prepares us for Blanche’s semiconscious desire to enter

the Kowalski household, where she knows her executioner lies in wait for her yet still fails to leave during the time her eventual rapist takes to put on his silk pajamas. As Elia Kazan once said,

Blanche Dubois [*sic*] comes into a house where someone is going to murder her. The interesting part of it is that Blanche Dubois–Williams is *attracted* to the person who’s going to murder her. That’s what makes the play deep.... So you can understand a woman *playing* affectionately with an animal that’s going to kill her. So she at once wants him to rape her, and knows he will kill her. She protests how vulgar and corrupted he is, but she also finds that vulgarity and corruption attractive. (qtd. in *Ciment* 71)

Substitute the word “rape” for Kazan’s word “murder” and a clearer picture of Eva’s fantasy emerges, a good ten years before *Streetcar*. Reading Blanche’s rape in isolation from Williams’s earlier work fails to account for the “network of semiotic units belonging to different cooperative systems” (Elam 7) that make up Williams’s symbolically driven epistemology. Though Eva does finally give in to Boss Whalen, presumably under the impression that her sleeping with the Warden will assure Jim’s release on parole, what *Not About Nightingales* informs us is that the two major issues that complicate *Streetcar*—the spiritual/sexual nexus and the role rape plays in it for Williams—were clearly present a number of years before Blanche’s creation, a paradigm Williams would continue to explore in his work of the next decade.

<sup>¶22</sup> The first of these works is the one-act play *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, the play on which the 1956 film *Baby Doll* was mostly based.<sup>[20]</sup> Here, Flora is a young woman of uncertain age (though we imagine her to be approaching twenty, as in the film) who lives in a “*Gothic design.... doll’s house*” (6:3) and functions essentially as the sexual trophy of a fat, aging cotton ginner whose financial hardships during the New Deal lead him to burn down the local Syndicate Plantation, which has stolen away most of his and the other ginner’s work. While Jake Meighan, Flora’s sixty-year-old husband, occupies himself throughout most of the play with the ginning of the Plantation’s cotton, Flora is to enact Roosevelt’s “good-neighbor policy” (6:17) with the Plantation’s manager, the dark-skinned Silva Vicarro, till her husband has finished the job. Vicarro, too, has to finish a “job” here, and in this sense Flora becomes the currency in a form of traffic that exchanges sex for business—a role she does not entirely reject in the end.

<sup>¶23</sup> Given the sexual/economic equation in the play’s exchange of values, any reference to money becomes implicitly sexual. Therefore, when Flora announces at the beginning of the play that she has “lost [her] white kid purse” (6:3)—a symbol of her childlike innocence and financial dependence upon Jake *and* of her efflorescent sexuality—we are meant to understand her comment as a prolepsis: she will soon lose her innocence by confirming Jake’s lie about the fire and by succumbing to Vicarro’s “tit for tat” (6:22, sexual pun intended) revenge principle. Vicarro intimates this as well in his comment on Flora’s purse:

Nothing is any protection.... The goods that dress is made of—is no protection. So what do you do, Mrs. Meighan? You pick up the white kid purse. It’s solid. It’s certain. It’s something to hold *on* to.... It gives you a feeling of being attached to something. The mother protects the baby? No, no, no—the baby protects the mother! (6:18)

Though Vicarro reassures Flora that she has “no reason to keep that purse” in her hands as protection, as he is certainly not “going to snatch it!” (6:17), he soon will exact his financial revenge by snatching a “purse” of a different kind.<sup>[21]</sup>

<sup>¶24</sup> If Flora is at first frightened of Vicarro, as Eva is of the Warden, we are hard pressed to perceive their eventual coitus as rape since Williams imbues Flora’s words of repulsion with unspoken desire, echoing Eva

and the Warden's earlier conversation:

FLORA: My head is so buzzy.

VICARRO: Fuzzy?

FLORA: Fuzzy an' buzzy.... Is something on my arm?

VICARRO: No.

FLORA: Then what're you brushing?

VICARRO: Sweat off.

FLORA: Leave it alone.

VICARRO: Let me wipe it. (*He brushes her arm with a handkerchief.*)

FLORA: (*laughing weakly*) No, please, don't. It feels funny.... It tickles me. All up an' down. You cut it out now. If you don't cut it out I'm going to call.... I feel so funny. What is the matter with me? (6:28–29)

Despite Flora's flirting, her pleas that he not follow her into the house are sincere, and we are made to believe that Vicarro does not heed them: "*inside the house there is a wild and despairing cry. A door is slammed. The cry is repeated more faintly*" (6:32).<sup>[22]</sup>

<sup>¶25</sup> Vicarro has seemingly raped Flora, with Williams providing stage directions to support that conclusion:

*Her appearance is ravaged. Her eyes have a vacant limpidity in the moonlight, her lips are slightly apart. She moves with her hands stretched gropingly before her till she reached a pillar of the porch. There she stops and stands moaning a little. Her hair hangs loose and disordered. The upper part of her body is unclothed except for a torn pink band about her breasts. Dark streaks are visible on the bare shoulders and arms and there is a large discoloration along one cheek. A dark trickle, now congealed, descends from one corner of her mouth. (6:33)*

Williams indicates the rape with the "tokens" (6:33) of her torn clothing, bodily bruises, and congealed blood. If we recall that the "blue mark" (6:27) on Flora's wrist earlier in the play was also meant to signify her desire for violent sexplay, as Vicarro believes and Flora unsatisfactorily refutes, then the apparent rape becomes yet another example of Williams's dramatization of rough sex.<sup>[23]</sup> Again, despite Flora's sardonic replies to Jake that she was not a willing sex partner but rather Vicarro's victim, there is something discomfoting about her final response to the rape, one that Williams would repeat in his one-act play *Green Eyes* (1971) several years later.<sup>[24]</sup> Though she does not blossom from the rape, as does her namesake in *Baby Doll*, Flora is curiously looking forward to Vicarro's return the following evening "with lots more cotton": "He's gonna let you do a-a-lll his ginnin'—fo' him!" (6:37). In fact, she admits, his visits could go on "fo'—th' rest of th'—summer...." (6:37). Vicarro has, in her mind, made a woman out of her, where the title "baby doll" no longer seems appropriate and where she is ready to replace the substitute "white kid purse" and its tissues-for-money stuffing with a real baby: "I'm not—Baby. Mama! Ma! That's—me..."(6:38).<sup>[25]</sup>

<sup>¶26</sup> Via the long stage direction that Williams provides as a caesura to mark Flora's violent passage into adulthood, the drama text clearly attempts to signify rape here. Perhaps the spectator of the play would reach a similar conclusion if the actress were to appear physically repulsed by the events that just took place. However, what if she were to carry a smirk on her face, which would certainly be in line with Flora's later response to the attack? The semiotics of her appearance on stage would be informed by textual information that the reader will only later discover: anything but satiated after the "rape," Flora is disconcertingly ironic in her final lines to Jake. By now, both the reader and the spectator have been made aware that Flora has not only accepted the rape

but has even appropriated it herself as a means to punish her boorish, negligent husband. When taken in isolation from Williams's other works, such a conclusion would certainly appear far-fetched and even disturbingly prejudiced. Interestingly enough, a Williams short story written around the same time also features a main character named Flora, who shares a similar attitude toward her rapist.

¶27 The title of "The Important Thing" refers to the rape/violent sex that results from an attraction between Flora and John that has been latent since their first encounter at college. Slim like a "fence-pole" and "by no means pretty," Flora still possesses for John a certain nature that "excite[s] him a little," and Williams hints that that desire is unconsciously reciprocated (CS 172–73). Self-declared intellectuals among a campus of automatons, Flora and John adhere to the credo that expressing one's self directly and honestly is the one true act of human volition. For Williams, such an expression is only partly achieved through written or oral communication; it is done mostly, if not singularly, through physical contact.

¶28 Throughout the years, Flora and John's shared interests "served to draw them closer together"—and yet for "some reason they were not altogether at ease with each other" (CS 177). The closer they become intellectually and spiritually, the farther they grow apart physically, though for Williams their physical attraction is more natural, honest, and truthful than their intellectually platonic one. Flora is the first to address the "Important Thing," though she does not know yet what it actually is: "Why do you think I'm living, except to discover what The Important Thing is?" (CS 175). Whether or not Flora shares John's feeling "that something very important was going to happen between them" (CS 177), we are never told; but Williams does show us that Flora, unwilling to consciously accept that "thing" between them as sex, is also unconsciously willing to confirm it. Their discussions, for instance, "continue unflaggingly till sundown," but once evening settles, "they would become a little nervous and constrained" (CS 180).

¶29 That *something unspoken* is sexuality, and when it finally boils to the surface of the flesh, after having simmered for years in the dark recesses of the id, it does not emerge gently:

They just fought together like two wild animals, rolling in the grass and clawing at each other. Flora clawed at John's face and John clawed at Flora's body. They accepted this thing, this desperate battle between them, as though they'd known all along it was coming, as though it had been inevitable from the start. (CS 182)

Flora is unquestionably raped in the story, but the lines between rape and passion are for Williams once again frighteningly irresolute. This "desperate battle between them" emotes the individual's futile efforts to negate the sexual imperative behind all social intercourse. If passion for Williams is akin to warfare here, it is because the soul needs to be fed through physical contact as well as through social interaction, and any attempt to thwart or stifle that communion will only seethe, percolate, and erupt in a "violence and ugliness of desire turned rage..." (CS 182). Their intercourse here means metaphysical war—plain, simple, and unequivocal—but a war not meant to conquer but to raze the self-imposed barriers we set between ourselves and another.

¶30 John Clum discusses this story in light of its coded homosexual overtones, which could also serve to shed some light on Williams's use of rape here. After the rape at the end of the story, for example, John discovers something he had "never noticed before": Flora's androgynous appearance, "how anonymous was her gender" (CS 183). Clum convincingly argues that the "important thing" which Flora discovers is that, because she "stands outside gender," thus leaving "no way for the male...to define and dominate her," she has to be "vanquished or banished to a kind of limbo" (39). In "violating the normative gender definitions," Flora's

queerness demonstrates for Clum how “Williams saw that patriarchal gender definitions, not the homophobia which results from them, are the real issues” (37, 48). What Clum does not suggest, however, is that in the rape John could also be discovering his own queerness, in the same way Williams had discovered his homosexuality during his early days at the University of Missouri. Unable to accept any inkling of same-sex desire in himself, John/Williams projects that desire onto the masculine attributes of the young woman, which essentially sanctions the heteronormality of that desire and simultaneously exploits its homoerotic nature. It is perhaps this belabored coming out that best explains Williams’s queer notions of rape as rough sex *cum* spiritual truth. Only violent rape, Williams seems to say, could fully liberate forbidden desire from its puritanical shackles. In Williams’s schema, being an unwilling “partner” in any illicit sexual act gives one free license to be a sinner without having sinned, to have tasted of the apple without actually having taken a bite. It was precisely this theme of guilt-free sin that Williams would address in another story written a few years later, “The Night of the Iguana,” where rape/violent sex precipitates a spiritual rather than a sexual deliverance.

¶31 Williams completed “The Night of the Iguana” in Rome in 1948, though he had begun writing it in New Orleans two years earlier (about the same time that he was writing *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*). Aside from the title, the setting, the roped iguana, and Miss Jelkes’s surname, the story and the 1961 play have little in common; but one important element of the story that becomes marginalized in the Shannon–Charlotte Goodall encounter of the play is its culminating rape. Unlike Hannah in *The Night of the Iguana*, whose roots are in New England, Edith Jelkes is a southerner, an erstwhile schoolteacher of art at an “Episcopalian girls’ school in Mississippi” who, like many of the early avatars of Blanche DuBois, “had suffered a sort of nervous breakdown and had given up her teaching position for a life of refined vagrancy” (CS 240). Also like Blanche, this “spinster of thirty with a wistful blond prettiness and a somewhat archaic quality of refinement” (CS 240) is a lady from

an historical Southern family of great but now moribund vitality whose latter generations had tended to split into two antithetical types, one in which the libido was pathologically distended and another in which it would seem to be all but dried up. (CS 240)

This description could apply to any of Williams’s southern families, from the DuBoises to the Pollitts, from the Torrances to the Winemillers, and from the Dakins to the Williamses, especially given the fact that the “households were turbulently split and so, fairly often, were the personalities of their inmates”:

There had been an efflorescence among them of nervous talents and sickness, of drunkards and poets, gifted artists and sexual degenerates, together with fanatically proper and squeamish old ladies of both sexes who were condemned to live beneath the same roof with the relatives whom they could only regard as monsters. (CS 240–41)

To be sure, Williams is never very far from his narrators; nor is his story’s rape entirely detached from his own sexual/spiritual dialectic.

¶32 Both a spinster and a sensualist, Edith could not “cultivate any *interior poise*” (CS 241, emphasis added) and thus brings her debilitating nature to the Costa Verde to confront and potentially end her dialectical struggle. Though she prides herself on her sexual stoicism, even to the point of being earnestly shocked by another guest’s libertine behavior in freely exposing his nakedness to her on the beach, Edith is suffocating under the heft of religious piety. Like the story’s tethered iguana, Edith is a prisoner of her passions, “outwardly such a

dainty teapot that no one would guess that she could actually boil” (CS 241). But she has been able to control that boiling point, or so she believes, because she has removed the stigma of religious guilt (as did Flora and John) from her passion: “Isn’t it awful, isn’t it really preposterous that practically all our religions should be based on the principle of atonement when there is really and truly no such thing as guilt?” (CS 248). Self-assurance in Williams is the true signifier of self-deception, and here Edith does not stray far from all of Williams’s grand deceivers who believe that they can escape the pull of the flesh indefinitely—from Amanda to Alma, from Val to Kilroy, and even perhaps Hannah. Edith acquires this self-knowledge, however, only after she is nearly raped.

¶33 Despite her protestations to the Patrona about the lewd behavior of Mike, the younger of the two men (whom we eventually learn are lovers) staying at the resort hotel with her, Edith appropriates the room next to theirs—and the men suspect a voyeuristic desire to eavesdrop on them at night. Their assumptions are not entirely wrong, for later that night Edith confronts them, insulted by the conversation that she has overheard through the wall. Angered by her intrusion into their private affairs, Mike abruptly leaves, and Edith and his older lover are left alone. With a violent storm brewing, Edith feels that she should return to her room, but “she did not want to leave. She wanted to stay” (CS 255). And like the storm that assaults the Costa Verde, the homosexual writer, who views Edith as a prisoner of her repressed guilt, “thrust at her” in an attempt to offer her release:

His one hand attempted to draw up the skirt of her robe while his other tore flimsy goods at her bosom. The upper cloth tore. She cried out with pain as the predatory fingers dug into her flesh. But she did not give in. Not she herself resisted but some demon of virginity that occupied her flesh fought off the assailant more furiously than he attacked her. (CS 256)

Though Edith manages to fight off her attacker, she does not feel entirely violated by the experience and, if anything, feels somehow delivered by it. Her “thirty years of preordained spinsterhood” (CS 256) are left virginally intact. She is free afterward to ruminate about the pleasures of sexual contact (rubbing the semen that is still warm on her belly) without having actually participated in the sexual act: “*Ah Life*, she thought to herself and was about to smile at the originality of this thought when darkness lapped over the outward gaze of her mind” (CS 257). Just like the iguana that Mike has set free during the attack, Edith is “grateful, too, for in some equally mysterious way the strangling rope of her loneliness had also been severed by what had happened tonight on this barren rock above the moaning waters” (CS 257).

¶34 What Edith learns about herself from the rape remains as ambiguous as what the homosexual writer learns, sobbing uncontrollably as he does when Edith refuses to accept her predicament. To a certain extent, the answer lies at the metaphysical crossroads of the flesh and spirit, for as Edith muses, “Was it an act of God that effected this deliverance? Or was it not more reasonable to suppose that only Mike, the beautiful and helpless and cruel” (CS 257), had set her and the iguana free? The rape, then, this bringing together of two “sterile” entities (the virginal and the homosexual), bears the fruit of spirituality. It is not meant to be understood realistically, and Williams insists on the point by describing it more in symbolic terms. With the “sudden thrusts and withdrawals” over the Costa Verde “like a giant bird lunging up and down on its terrestrial quarry, a bird with immense white wings and beak of godlike fury” (CS 255–56), the storm outside becomes a pathetic fallacy to externalize Edith’s internal war. Edith is the Costa Verde, and the homosexual writer is the dialectical bird that

ravages her, “thrust[ing] at her like the bird of blind white fury” (CS 256). Yet, in signifying the rape as a storm, Williams demonstrates once again how he views sexual transgression in essentially metaphysical terms.

¶35 In these two stories, rape becomes perhaps less problematic in semiotic terms than in the plays because they are narrated and not performed. In other words, if a story’s narrator can reinforce the dissociation between what the woman cries out against realistically and what she interprets on a symbolic level, a play cannot. As John Searle notes, “A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play performed, is not a pretended *representation* of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself” (328). Once we move “rape” from diegesis toward mimesis, the sign becomes “radically conditioned by its performability”: “the written text, in other words, is determined by its very need for stage contextualization, and indicates throughout its allegiance to the physical conditions of performance, above all to the actor’s body and its ability to materialize discourse with the space of the stage” (Elam 209). This is precisely what distinguishes the narrated rapes in these stories from those acted out on stage. Blanche’s rape in *Streetcar* is the perfect example—more so than Eva’s in *Not About Nightingales* or Flora’s in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, since they are never actually *seen* by the audience. Williams would return later to this concept in *Vieux Carré*, where dramatic symbolism once again struggles with performative mimesis.

¶36 Perhaps the most telling example of how Williams uses rape thematically to dramatize a character’s internal war can be found in *Vieux Carré*. Here, Jane Sparks—an avatar of Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* (1941), another *Streetcar* precursor—suffers from an unnamed disease (probably leukemia) that has been in remission ever since her first meeting with Tye McCool. She often wonders why an educated, well-bred woman from the North stays with Tye, a Bourbon Street strip-joint barker. Williams suggests that the answer lies in her dual nature: like the game of chess she plays with herself, Jane is trapped in fighting a battle where victory would simultaneously announce her defeat. As such, she purposely avoids the endgame in the chess match and accepts the gradual loss of chess pieces as the necessary prolongation of the inevitable. Her daily clashes with Tye push Jane to leave him, but her sensual desires to remain alive forbid it: “I’ve been betrayed by a—sensual streak in my nature” (8:82). That “sensual streak” of hers is more than pure lust, however: to keep her disease in remission, Jane needs Tye’s life-supporting sexuality. Upon raping her, as we will see, Tye forces the play’s endgame, and we are led to believe that Jane is now preparing to die.

¶37 The rape, as ambiguous as Flora’s, Edith’s, or Blanche’s, occurs in scene nine of the play. After Jane tells Tye that the “bed bit is finished” (8:85) and that she is leaving him, he “*grasps her arm and draws her to bed*” (8:86). Despite Jane’s pleading “No, no, no, no, no, no!,” Tye violently insists: “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! [*He throws her onto the bed and starts to strip her; she resists; he prevails.*]” (8:86).<sup>26</sup> Rape, again, is only implicit at first, both in the drama text and in the theatre text. Jane screams “Ohhh!” and “*utters a wild cry,*” and our reader/spectator instinct is to believe that she is being attacked. To be sure, Williams confirms this observation when Tye says, “Babe, I don’t wanna force you...,” to which Jane immediately replies: “Plee-ase! I’m not a thing, I’m not—a—thing!” (8:86). And yet, her cries confuse both the reader and the spectator, for what begins as rape ends in sexual satiety, just as it does for Girl in *Green Eyes*. Whether it is her desire for Tye—after all, the landlady says, “that woman’s moanin’ in there don’t mean she’s in pain” (8:86)—or her intuition that her very existence is *tied* to him through their sexual contact, Jane does not attempt to fight off her attacker. If anything, the opposite is true. When “*Tye starts to rise from the bed*” to answer the calls of the landlady responding to Jane’s cries, “*Jane clings desperately to him*” (8:87).

In an earlier play, *Period of Adjustment* (1960), Ralph describes George's idea of love-making in terms similar to many of male protagonists in Williams's plays discussed in this article:

Not every Tom, Dick or Harry knows how to use it [e.g., his penis during love-making]. It's not a—offensive weapon. It shouldn't be used like one. Too many guys, they use it like a offensive weapon to beat down a woman with. All right. That rouses resistance. Because a woman has pride, even a woman has pride and resents being raped, and most love-making is rape with these self-regarded—experts!...You got to use—TENDERNESS!—with it, not roughness like raping, snatch-and-grab roughness but true tenderness with it or—.... Lacking confidence with it, 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 ever was! Sexual violence, that's what gives you the shakes, that's what makes you unstable. (4:210–1)

Sex, gay and straight alike, is rarely a moment of tenderness in Williams, however. It is informed either by the “rape-lusty” (*SL* 1:326) violence Williams had frequently encountered with rough trade or had grown up with at home: “...she resisted Cornelius's sexual advances more and more. What began as Edwina's crying protests, Tennessee remembered, now became screams emanating from the bedroom; the impression he had was that of rape” (Leverich 61). At its worst, rough sex is dirty, vile, and unbearable, as with Candy Delaney and Karl in *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens...*; at its best, it is invigorating, pleasurable, and life-affirming, as with Stella and Stanley or Jane and Tye.<sup>[27]</sup> For Jane to view the sex act/rape here as repugnant (for it is surely not the first time this has happened between them, as the landlady's comment suggests), she would have to reject Tye and accept her imminent death.

If we understood Jane's rape teleologically—that is, solely as a violent means to a dramatic end—we would be missing Williams's greater point: that it is Jane who must decide *how* she is going to perceive the act this time. In signifying it, Jane authorizes the attack for herself. The reader and the spectator are left only with the choice of whether or not to accept her decision, not with the power to make the decision for her. The semiotic process for the reader/spectator needs to be bidirectional, not only in regarding the “macro-sign” (Elam 7) of rape in Williams's previous works but also in accepting Jane's decision to finally signify the act as rape. Upon reflection, then, Jane chooses not to find pleasure again in Tye's violent sex and, consequently, delivers herself spiritually in preparation for her death. The start of scene eleven, later that afternoon, finds them still in bed, though Jane is now crying:

TYE: Christ, what are you crying about. Didn't I just give you one helluva Sunday afternoon ball, and you're cryin' about it like your mother died.

JANE: You forced me, you little pig, you did, you forced me.

TYE: You wanted it.

JANE: I didn't.

TYE: Sure you did. (8:96)

The realistic dialogue here, which we could imagine between Blanche and Stanley had there been a scene ten-and-a-half in *Streetcar*, belies Williams's intentions with the play. Since *Vieux Carré* is itself the playwright's nostalgic look back to the early days of his own writing career (and his coming out), it is unavoidably symbolic. And just as he had used rape back then to connote the metaphysical agon he felt embattled with all his life, he

returns again to it, resignifying this liberation of Jane not only from her selfish and destructive lover but also from her debilitating body.

### A Streetcar Named *Dies Irae*

There is, of course, one final “rape” to consider before turning again to *Streetcar*, which is not a rape at all but rather the fabrication of a rape by a desperate woman who is Blanche DuBois’s closest literary predecessor.<sup>28</sup> Lucretia Collins, the faded southern belle of *Portrait of a Madonna*, maintains that she was raped repeatedly by Richard Martin, a “boyfriend” from her younger days. But when her landlord suggests that she go to the authorities, Lucretia refuses, not wanting to publicize the crime out of fear for her reputation and, curiously, for Richard’s as well. Bit by bit, it becomes apparent that Richard is not the sexual monster Lucretia portrays him to be but rather a projection of her wild and unbalanced mind: first, she decides “not to prosecute” him (6:124) because she claims he has become her live-in lover; then, she keeps Richard’s picture on the mantle and even fantasizes that the building Porter is Richard. When her charade is finally unmasked, she is led away to an asylum.

<sup>28</sup> For someone like Lucretia, and for many of Williams’s fugitive kind, contact with the spiritual is made only through the physical—and when the physical is unconditionally rejected, any spiritual longings appear artificial, affected, or even dangerous. Lucretia does not create an imaginary lover to actualize her desire, however, but rather a rapist, and the reasons for this are as revealing about this play’s message as they are about Williams’s insight into human nature in general. Lucretia “is preoccupied with sex,” but her religious education and her “paralyzing fear of human contact” (O’Connor, *Dementia* 38–39) forbid it, so she must create a lover in her mind. As long as she has been forced to submit to intercourse, she believes, God and the church cannot reproach her. To further remove any stigma of the (desired) sexual contact, Lucretia creates something “innocent and pure” (6:123) out of the rape—a pregnancy. This child, she says, will cleanse her of the impure act. In order to protect the child from falling under “the evil influence of the Christian church” and growing up “in the shadow of the cross” (6:123), she will educate it privately. In sum, the baby represents both Lucretia’s renewed faith in the flesh and her repudiation of the doctrinal religion that has required her to despise her sexuality.

<sup>29</sup> And therein lies the crux of all of the rapes discussed here: the potentiality in Williams’s plays of renewed life erupting out of the violence, suffering, hate, and bigotry of our world. Though none of the rapes, as far as we know, actually produces a child (Flora’s rape produces only a symbolic transformation into motherhood, and Lucretia’s, a counterfeit maternity), there is no reason to think that they *couldn’t*. This metaphorical “birth,” where progress is achieved only through the turbulent clashing of opposing worlds, be they social, sexual or both, is Williams’s signature answer to palliate human suffering. Perhaps the best expression of this reasoning is found in the Beauty and the Beast pantomime in *Stairs to the Roof* (1941). The Beast stalks the Beauty, “treading on the grass / So lightly that his victim heard no sound / Until he *plunged*—and pressed her to the ground!”:

How long she lay with cold, averted face,  
 Beneath the Beast, enduring his embrace,  
 I cannot say—but when his lust was spent  
 And from his veins the scorching fever went—  
 . . . . .

He rose above her and was cold as she.  
 Then, shivering in equal nudity,  
 One faced the other with a speechless look,  
 The sky had darkened, now the branches shook—  
 .....  
 She took his hand and whispered—  
 .....  
 Do not grieve—  
 I owned no beauty till it felt thy need,  
 Which, being answered, makes thee no more Beast,  
 But One with Beauty! (*SR* 72–73)

The “rape” here, in many ways identical to the one that Lucretia invents, does not debase Beauty at all, whose face remains as “holy as a nun’s at church” (*SR* 73), and instead removes all evil taint from the Beast: together, they have produced a “child” of sorts—“One” who is their union of opposites.

<sup>¶43</sup> Williams’s version of the pantomime is similar to Jean Cocteau’s in *Beauty and the Beast* (1946),<sup>[29]</sup> which he describes in his essay “A Movie by Cocteau”: “Beauty, who represents purity of heart, releases the Beast from his evil enchantment: the brutal and arrogant forces are brought to shame: the Beast, resuming his original form of Prince Charming, ascends to some unearthly kingdom with the lovely instrument of his release” (3). As is typical in Williams’s work, the stronger, more violent of these forces remains ignorant of its contribution to the divine project, while the weak interprets the collision as part of God’s greater plan. Whereas healthy, consensual (though often violent) sex is Williams’s truest expression of God’s plan, the forced, stolen, or misappropriated sexuality of rape systematically “corrects” (and I use this term theoretically) that plan’s celibate aberration, which in Williams is inevitably the result of a puritanical Christian doctrine. As Hertha Neilson tells Arthur Shannon in *Spring Storm* (1937) before he molests her, “fornication was the straight line upwards...” (*SS* 31; cf. *SS* 116).<sup>[30]</sup> Williams thus employs rape neither to demean women nor to abase masculine desire; he uses it instead to excoriate religious dogma for having appropriated human spirituality and sequestered it from various worldly appetites.<sup>[31]</sup>

<sup>¶44</sup> As a result, those who perpetrate rape in Williams tend to be the representatives of various dominant social, economic, religious, psychological, or sexual entities that degrade and dehumanize women: Boss Whalen, the corrupt prison warden; Silva Vicarro, the enterprising capitalist; John, the religious hypocrite; Mike’s lover, the blind analyst; and Tye, the egocentric lover. And yet, each woman invariably acknowledges her rape as having been a liberating experience in that it forced her finally to accept her long-denied sexual longings or it facilitated her efforts to achieve a desired transcendental state. In short, her assailants’ intentions notwithstanding, each victim is rendered more human after the rape because she is more complete, and it is here that rape in Williams becomes its most polemic. Eva, in her desire to free Jim physically, frees herself sexually; Flora Meighan, in her passage out of a sterile marriage, discovers motherhood; Flora, in her materialization of suppressed desires, discovers the “important thing”; Edith, in her sexual exorcism, preserves her virginity; Jane, in her rejection of sensuality, accepts her impending death; and Lucretia, in her Christian apostasy, awakens her secular spirituality. Given all of this, rape in Tennessee Williams, be it considered by critics as a projection of

the warped male fantasy about feminine sexuality, a retrospective understanding of the homosexual's coming out, the final solution to reach unattained spirituality, or even a modernist's ontology of the human condition, cannot, or simply should not, be understood singularly or realistically.

¶145 In *Streetcar*, once Williams's symbolic rape was pushed along the mimetic spectrum toward realistic representation, the signifier and the signified became irreparably joined. Yet Blanche's rape, like the others discussed here, should be understood as a sexual means to a spiritual end. When Mitch fails her, Blanche turns to the one element in her world who will not—Stanley. His potent sexuality will destroy a desire for the flesh that has completely consumed her life (and those of her ancestors) and placed her on a one-way, nonstop streetcar toward death. If she learns to associate her desire with Stanley's simian kind—the antithesis of the gentle breeding she perceives in the higher species to which she aspires—then she could be freed from her family curse and reactualize the dream of the Old South before her ancestor's "epic fornications" had destroyed it.<sup>[32]</sup> In other words, if she can use Stanley to help her derail the streetcar of desire, she might have a chance to continue existing, if only in her imagination, in that now-moribund Old South. With the birth of Stella's baby on the night of Blanche's rape, Williams confirms that Blanche's violent passage has proved salubrious.<sup>[33]</sup> If Blanche is broken in the end, as Williams specifically claimed to Cecil Brown that she is, it is a necessary fracturing, and one that is not altogether undesirable for her, for Williams or, ultimately, for us.

¶146 In his thoughtful essay "Blanche DuBois and the Kindness of Endings," George Toles revisits the *teleos* of *Streetcar*'s rape, positing that

demanding narratives manage to find adequate closure, causing us willingly to halt at the place where the stories terminate and, from that privileged vantage point, to try to see the *final sense* of things. Somehow we are persuaded that the vanquished alternative plots, which have been the source of so much frustration, curiosity, or distress during our reading (in the case of theatre and movies, our viewing) of the narrative, have lost their power to effect further *meaningful* changes. They are held in check by the ending's capacity to seal everything in. Endings confer a kind of liberty that life stubbornly denies us: to come to a full stop that is *not* death and discover exactly where we are in relation to the events leading up to a conclusion (a conclusion free of time). (116)

He later adds: "I find it disheartening that so much recent commentary on closure programmatically insists that 'strong' endings are reductive and reifying in their implied teleology and naïve faith in a higher order" (122). Unlike the many critics before and after him, Toles does not question the need for the rape to precipitate Blanche's departure from the Kowalski's apartment but rather how Blanche's parting line has necessitated the rape so as to provide "a final effect that is densely intermingled *and* cathartic" (130). In other words, given all that she and Stanley say and do, what other possible ending could there have been for Blanche? As Toles writes,

My aim is not to oppose traditional readings of Blanche's significance as the play's "difficult" protagonist, but to show more fully than has been previously attempted how Williams's ending, through a complex series of perceptual/emotional revisions, constructs our final sense of her.... My contention is that the ending takes a number of competing values into simultaneous account and then, in a manner of plotting Blanche's exit, gives her unexpected authority where she previously had none. (125, 130)

While I still differ with Toles's (and others') conclusion that Blanche is Stanley's "defeated adversary" (126), I do find value in his argument that the play's primary concern is to render for the reader/spectator how Blanche's end is to emerge as "something distinct from the pathos of her final infirmity" (129). Through its insistence on

the employment of bidirectional signification in both the drama text and theatre text of *Streetcar*, this essay has, like Toles's, argued for a nonteleological reading of the play's rape. What is more valuable in our analysis of *Streetcar* is the widening of our critical nets to recognize that, in Williams's epistemology at least, rape is even less a signifier of violent sexism than it is a shibboleth among tortured sensualists.

## Conclusion

In all, there are three "types" of rapes that appear in the Williams canon—those that are attempted or actualized, reported though dubious, or troped and absurd. As we have seen, all of the rapes that actually *do* take place (or are at least attempted) in Williams are never referred to in the text as rape but instead through some semantic deferral, as in Stanley's "date" (1:405). Rape is seemingly a word that dare not utter its name in a Williams play, story, or novel. In the rare instance that the word "rape" *does* appear, it is more often than not used as a fabrication to impugn others or to exact some personal sense of justice.<sup>34</sup> For instance, in *Fugitive Kind* (1937), the drifters Carl and Olsen are arrested on suspicion of rape but then let go when it is determined that the "bim[bo]" had been lying: "Had a corner on the beef-trust, that baby. Got hysterics. Ev'ry poor stiff they brung in, she says, Yeah, that's him, that's him! ...Turns out later that she hadn't been raped at all" (*FK* 9). Similarly, Mrs. Regan in *Battle of Angels* accuses Val of rape, but it is likely that she is seeking revenge on him as a jilted lover (1:101).<sup>35</sup> Jessie Sykes in *A House Not Meant to Stand* (1981–82) also talks about a rapist who has been terrorizing her Pascagoula neighborhood, though she admits that "Mary Louis [*sic*] likes to embellish a story, and as for the niece, a bleached blond from Tuscaloosa, well, there's contradictory rumors" (*H* 73). And finally, the spinster Judith Fellows accuses Shannon of "statutory rape" (4:267, 4:330) in *The Night of the Iguana* in order to get him fired from Blake Tours (perhaps as much out of jealousy as out of anger), though the young Charlotte is more than willing to enter into sexual relations with him. When the word "rape" appears in a Williams text, then, it is fairly certain that a rape never occurred.

<sup>148</sup> There are others rapes that are hinted at in the text but never proven. In Williams's verse play *The Purification* (1940), charges of rape appear fabricated since the Rancher was "never allowed...freely the right of marriage" (6:63). In fact, sexual relations occurred not only "never freely"—which would imply rape—but "never otherwise" (6:63); the Rancher's young bride, Elena, found sexual pleasure instead in incestuous liaison with her brother. The denial of sexual rights through marriage would, of course, become the dominating theme of Williams's *Baby Doll*, where Archie Meighan is legally bound not to consummate his marriage until his wife's twentieth birthday. Heavenly Finley is gang-raped in an early version of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (maintained in the April 1959 *Esquire* and 1962 Dramatist Play Services editions) when she goes out to California to see Chance, but Williams was required to cut it from the final version of the play (Murphy 149).

<sup>149</sup> In addition to the rare times that the word "rape" does appear in the Williams canon, there are moments when it is merely an analog for violence in general or even used in jest. In *Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?* (ca. 1935), Lily sexually inverts the act of aggression: "But I won't get married, mother! Nobody's asked me! What do you expect me to do? Club some innocent male and drag him into my boudoir? It isn't legal mother! There's a law against rape in Missouri!" (*MP* 48). In *Adam and Eve on a Ferry* (ca. 1939), an equally brash and convalescing D. H. Lawrence tells a spinsterish visitor, Miss Ariadne Peabody, to approach him so that he can fix her hair: "*Vite, vite!* You can certainly see that I'm not in condition to rape you, even in case I had that inclination" (*MP* 172). And "Hotsy," the 99-year-old Fraülein Haussmitzenschlogger in *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*

(1979), claims rather fantastically that she is pregnant, “[k]nocked up” by the Lutheran Minister “who rapes me before and after church service and at choir practice back of the organ” (*TC* 122).

150

What this all amounts to in Williams is the fact that when a rape does occur, it can only be alluded to or inferred through the obscure language of Derridean *différance*. Like all of Williams’s signature words, including “death” and “desire,” “rape” should be handled in a similar manner; that is, in understanding how it *differs* and *defers* meaning simultaneously when read, in isolation, as the word “rape” repeatedly has been in Williams. In his 1951 film adaptation of *Streetcar*, Elia Kazan did use the language of *différance* to render the rape scene in symbolic *and* in mimetic terms (as much for the Breen office and the Production Code as for his personal vision of the play): the cracked mirror during their struggle portends the sexual violence that ensues; the gushing firehose immediately following the fade-out in which the rape actually occurs announces Stanley’s resultant climax. It is unfortunate that the play’s many critics have been preoccupied with essentially the mimetic element of that rape. Fittingly, Kazan provided his own analysis that directly or indirectly responds to this mimetically driven criticism: “There *is* a streetcar named Daisy Rae—‘desire’—but it has more symbolic reality than actual reality...” (qtd. in *Ciment* 67). In employing the Creole pronunciation of the word “desire,” Kazan echoes that of the Latin *Dies Irae*, widening the signifying possibilities of Williams’s loaded word. To be sure, the streetcar she rides on to the Elysian Fields is not only the streetcar named “Desire” but also one named “*Dies Irae*”—“the Day of Wrath,” the first words of the medieval hymn describing Judgment Day and frequently sung at the requiem masses for the dead.<sup>36</sup> With death being the play’s dominant leitmotif and desire its literary, iconographic, and symbolic counterpoint, Blanche rides both the streetcar “Desire” and “*Dies Irae*” toward her own day of spiritual reckoning, and those streetcars cross tracks in the play’s rape.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though Lant later qualifies this misogyny as “unacknowledged” and “unconscious” (233), she maintains that Williams abuses Blanche by using her rape—which Lant herself sees finally as being “insignificant” (235) to the play’s message—as a punishment for her denouncing Allan’s homosexuality.

<sup>2</sup> Complicating the semiotic question of the play even further is the fact that the action on stage became even more fluid on screen:

In directing the film Kazan was able to deal with a psychological dimension of the rape that did not come out as clearly on the stage: to what extent does Blanche share some of the guilt for her rape? Because the camera brings the audience closer to the action than was possible in the theater, moviegoers sense that to some extent at least Blanche subtly encourages Stanley’s sexual interest in her throughout the film. (81)

<sup>3</sup> While numerous Williams scholars not cited here have rightly attacked *the character* Stanley for his “‘feral machismo and misogyny’” (Guilbert 102), I am concerned only with those critics (recent or not) who have channeled their anger toward the play or the playwright in general.

<sup>4</sup> I say “necessarily” here because less ink has been spilt on denouncing the narrative rapes that appear in Williams’s short fiction. Assuaged by the presence of an intervening narrator who helps objectify the attacks in symbolic terms, these narrated rapes (discussed later in this article) are undeniably less disturbing than the performed ones.

<sup>5</sup> Employing Iser’s theory of the implied reader, Schlueter examines how the text, the author, and the reader of *Streetcar* work together to produce the play’s rape. Schlueter argues in fact that the rape occurs when “the two narrative of Blanche’s past”—her genteel life at Belle Reve and her more violently sexual one at the Flamingo Hotel—“come face to face” in scene ten and “compete not only for priority but also for closure.... [T]he rape, however repugnant, is the inescapable end of Stanley’s narrative” (75–76).

<sup>6</sup> Southern historian W. J. Cash writes that rape to a Southerner like Williams was imbedded within a cultural psyche that equated it not only with miscegenation but also with the North’s unfettered transgressions over the South: “To get at the ultimate secret of the

Southern rape complex, we need to turn back and recall the central status that Southern women had long ago taken up in Southern emotion—her identification with the very notion of the South itself” (118).

<sup>7</sup> One of the overarching concerns in theatre criticism here, of which the rape in *Streetcar* is just one example among many, is why certain violent acts enacted on stage have produced the kinds of criticism that they have, and how the contention over appropriate and inappropriate performance reveals the politics of the moment. This issue, however, remains beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> While I hope that such a reading, in conjunction with my previous work on how the rape evolved symbolically toward the dramatic in the manuscripts of *Streetcar*, will shed new light on the ending chosen by Williams for his “problem play” and perhaps even influence how directors and actors might perform the rape in future productions, at no point do I wish or expect to alter public or critical condemnation of Stanley’s crime.

<sup>9</sup> And that grammar is increasing exponentially. See, for instance, Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991); Thomas John Donahue, *Structures of Meaning: A Semiotic Approach to the Play Text* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1993); Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Michael L. Quinn, *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theatre Theory* (New York: Lang, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Though Aristotle never completely divorced performance from the imitative process of the text, since “the Spectacle (or stage-appearance of the actors) must be some part of the whole,” he never wholly accorded it much importance either:

The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet.

See Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics*, trans. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 230, 232–33.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Ubersfeld, a leading French critic/theorist of theatre semiotics, has devoted considerable attention to the idea that it is “le spectateur, bien plus que le metteur en scène, qui fabrique le spectacle”:

Le spectateur est obligé, non seulement de suivre une histoire, une fable (axe horizontal), mais de recomposer à chaque instant la figure totale de tous les signes concourant à la représentation. Il est contraint en même temps de s’investir dans le spectacle (identification) et de s’en retirer (distance). (I:34)

See her *Lire le théâtre (I, II, and III)* (1977, 1981; Paris: Belin, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> That “wolf” and “lamb” are also gay code words for older pederasts and their youthful partners adds a further dimension to the semiotic play here. On wolves and lambs, see George Chauncey, 88–89.

<sup>13</sup> See also Tadeusz Kowzan, “The Semiology of the Theatre: Twenty-Three Centuries or Twenty-Two Years,” 84–104.

<sup>14</sup> See also his “Toward a Specification of Theatre Discourse,” *Versus: Quaderni di Studi Semiotici* 54 (Sept.–Dec. 1989): 3–20, and de Toro et al., *Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995); Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982); Marvin A. Carlson, ed., *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); and André Helbo et al., *Approaching Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> For Alter, as for most of the socio-semioticians working in theatre, the central purpose remains “to show how all these manifestations of malaise are either generated or influenced by unconscious social tensions” (29).

<sup>16</sup> In “Sabbatha and Solitude” (1973), Sabbatha screams “Don’t” at Giovanni “as if threatened by gang rape” (*CS* 536) when he, Stanley-like, grabs her letters. As with the letters in the play, “rape” here is merely analogistic, if not hyperbolic, since she is not actually raped like Blanche.

<sup>17</sup> A bizarre homosexual rape—notably the only one in the Williams canon—does occur in *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde* (1982), but at no point does Williams tell us that Mint, the apparent “victim” of Mme. Le Monde’s son, Boy, ever perceives of it as such, given his bent for sadomasochism: “Oh, no, no, no! Well, maybe, since you’ve come with—lubricant, is it? (*TC* 102; see also Philip C. Kolin). Another strange “rape” takes place in his play *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (1979), where Woman’s father uses an umbrella to sodomize the 99-year-old Fraülein Haussmitzenschlogger. It, too, however, has little in common with Williams’s dialectical rapes discussed here.

<sup>18</sup> I do not want to suggest here that there should have been more, far from it; but with a playwright whose use of extreme violence—from immolation to castration to cannibalism—became his literary and dramatic signature, the six rapes appear anything but excessive in a corpus of over 70 plays, 50 stories, and 2 novels.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Bernard chooses to see this encounter more in lyrical/romantic terms than I do, neglecting to comment upon Eva's comments earlier to Jim about her dream/rape fantasy:

As the play progresses, Eva's love for Jim continues to blossom while she begins to see Whalen as a brute and a monster. Just as he does with the prisoners, Whalen attempts to control Eva's body with force, constantly imposing himself upon her so aggressively that, in one scene, he leaves a "blue mark" (47) on her arm from grasping her. Again, Whalen marks the body but cannot touch the soul. Even when he finally coerces Eva to sleep with him, he succeeds only because he promises her that he will grant Jim his much sought-after parole. (par. 7)

<sup>20</sup> Both the one-act play and the full-length film emerged from a 1935–36 short story, "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton," where Mrs. Jake Meighan (she is not given a first name) is at first "shocked...a little," but "not unpleasantly" (CS 46) when the unnamed syndicate manager sexually devours her with his eyes. The rape in the story, however, is pure mutual seduction turned violent sexplay: "The little man had started twisting her wrist. Now he laughed and struck her smartly with the riding crop. 'You play too rough,' she groaned.... His hands cascaded leisurely down the front of her dress and came to rest on her lap" (CS 48). Considering hollering toward the fields to draw attention, she instead goes inside the house where she knows that the little man "would give her a terrible beating..." (CS 49). And yet, once inside the house, "[a]ll the resistance flowed out of her flesh like water and she allowed herself to be propelled by the tip of the riding crop through the door and into the darkness of the hall" (CS 50).

<sup>21</sup> Since this play was written around the same time that Williams was experimenting with his ending to *Streetcar*, the sexual metonymy of Flora's purse should be read in parallel with that of Blanche's in scene six and the prostitute's in scene ten. Williams was simply preoccupied around this time with the idea that the woman's purse represented her financial and sexual dependency.

<sup>22</sup> Influenced by the 1931 Scottsboro case, Williams had earlier experimented with the notion of rape and miscegenation in the story "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" (1931–32), written just a few years before the story "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton." In it, Big Black sees a white girl swimming in a nearby river and so much "felt sick with the desire of her" (CS 33) that he grabbed her with the intention of raping her. Disgusted by the sight of his hand on her "white face" like a "hideous huge, black spider" (CS 33), he throws the girl into the water and runs away without having raped her. In another manuscript version of the story, "The Bottle of Brass," the black protagonist actually does rape a white woman (NB 19–20).

<sup>23</sup> Though this bruise was actually caused by Jake's twisting of her arm in scene one (6:7) and not by violent sexplay, as Vicarro imagines, Williams does not rule out that possibility either, for as he writes in the stage direction just afterwards: "*He releases her. She whimpers and rubs her wrist but the impression is that the experience was not without pleasure for both parties. She groans and whimpers. He grips her loose curls in his hand and bends her head back. He plants a long wet kiss on her mouth*" (6:8). Her response to this violent show of affection is unequivocal: "Mmmm! Hurt!" (6:8).

<sup>24</sup> Honeymooning in the French Quarter, Girl and Boy are in their hotel room when the play opens, with Boy inquiring how Girl got her "*conspicuous abrasions on her body*" like "tooth an' claw marks on yuh like yuh been t' bed with a wildcat" (TC 151). After much arguing and accusations, Girl admits to the truth about the bruises:

A man did follow me here and I never known or will ever know another man like him. We done it five times together. He had green eyes.... Said a hello to me when I turned off Bourbon to the hotel. Caught hold of my wrist, drug me between two buildings, befor' I could holler, put his hands on me. Then it was too late to holler. The hugest hands a man has ever put on me an' hot as blazes. They practicy burnt through my clothes before he got my clothes off me, and there was the first time we done it. And he wasn't ready to quit and neither was I, me neither.... To be in deeper, he put the flats of his feet on the wall and I swear that I bit the pillow not to scream. (TC 162, all *sic*)

Girl sneaks him into her hotel room, where they continue their sexual marathon. Rape, which may have begun the encounter, is certainly not present by the end, and her bruises are more the testament to their violent sex than her defensive struggle. Ironically, her husband now becomes aroused by her story, pins her down and "*tears open her flimsy wrapper*" to her protestations (TC 164).

<sup>25</sup> Just as Jake's gin seeds the cotton, Vicarro "seeds" Flora, whom he describes as "soft" and "[f]ine fibered" and who makes him "think of cotton" (6:27). In the story version, she says she feels "like a big lump of cotton m'self!" (CS 46).

<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that Robert Bray, Jacqueline O'Connor, Annette Saddik, and Linda Dorff, all of whom have written excellent criticism on this play, do not even mention the rape scene. Most criticism of the play focuses on the relationship between the play and its ur-texts—*The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, “The Angel in the Alcove” (1943), and *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), for example—or on the Williams character, Writer. The critic who comes closest to even addressing the idea of rape, without still mentioning it, is Michael Paller: “The sex between men and women, however, as shown and described in *Vieux Carré*, is a brutal expression of power” (224).

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly enough, Williams wrote to Kazan in February 1950 about the censorship problems concerning the rape. In his letter, he suggests that Stanley “suddenly smash the light-bulbs with the heel of a slipper” (*SL* 2:290) to announce the impending rape. The same act appears earlier in the play to signify Stella and his violent yet passionate love-making.

<sup>28</sup> The play was first written in January 1941 for John Gassner at the New School for Social Research and entitled *Port Mad*, then revised three years later in 1944, around the time of the writing of the other works discussed here. “Collins” was even one of Blanche’s early surnames in the manuscripts.

<sup>29</sup> Allean Hale notes that Williams’s pantomime resembles Cocteau’s film *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), “which Williams, the movie-goer, probably saw, with its surreal ending of the lovers floating into space” (*SR* xiv). Williams did, in fact, see Cocteau’s film and even wrote a critique of Cocteau’s book about its production for *The New York Times*, but it was produced five years *after* Williams wrote *Stairs to the Roof*.

<sup>30</sup> Appropriately, Hertha *at first* resists Arthur with phrases such as “No, no, please let me go” (*SS* 122)—phrases that Glory utters in *Fugitive Kind* when the fugitive bank-robber Terry grabs and “kisses her violently” (*FK* 104, 106). After he succeeds in kissing her, however, she “*is limp in his arms*” and “*touches her lips wonderingly*” (*SS* 122), wishing, as Gloria does, for him to continue. Arthur repeats his aggressive act on Heavenly. Heavenly responds in like kind, at first repulsing Arthur’s brutal advances, then moments later pleading with him not to stop.

<sup>31</sup> Or as Clum writes, “In Williams’s church, the body is the temple and sex is the communion. Sainthood comes to those who understand and live this” (41).

<sup>32</sup> For more on this point, see my essay “*Tennessee v. John T. Scopes: ‘Blanche’ Jennings Bryan and Antievolutionism.*” *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 8 (2006): 73–94.

<sup>33</sup> I have already described Blanche’s rejuvenating phantasm in giving birth to her “Fils de Soleil”—the “angelic monster” born from her and Stanley’s “unholy reunion”—in my article “‘Stanley made love to her!—by force!’: Blanche and the Evolution of a Rape.” In a note on Stella’s baby, Bert Cardullo argues this same interpretation but for different reasons. Born on the night of Stanley’s rape of Blanche, the baby will be a constant reminder to Stella of Stanley’s violent act: “That Stella does not once speak to her husband in the last scene of *Streetcar* (even when addressed by him one time) is indicative of the essential silence which will permeate the rest of their lives together” (4).

<sup>34</sup> One example to the contrary appears in the story “The Mysteries of the Joy Rio” (1941), where the movie theatre was notorious for there “had been many fights, there had even been rape and murder in those ancient boxes...” (*CS* 107).

<sup>35</sup> Williams wrote to Audrey Wood in March 1941 that Mrs. Regan, the Woman from Waco, “fastened an accusation of rape upon him...” (*SL* 1:309).

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly enough, one of the stanzas describes the speaker’s pleading with God to place him/her among the sheep and not the goats, which recalls Stanley’s sign as Capricorn the Goat, and Shep the Sheep: “Inter oves locum praeta, / et ab hoedis me sequestra, / statuens in parte dextra” (Give me a place among the sheep, / separate me from the goats / by placing me at your right).

<sup>37</sup> For example, she arrives at Elysian Fields; her old high school superintendent was called Mr. Graves; she describes to Stella how “the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep” (1:262); she saves the poems “a dead boy wrote” to her (1:282); her favorite sonnet by Elizabeth Browning ends, “I shall but love thee better—after—death!” (1:297); and she is frightened by the blind Mexican lady selling “Flores para los muertos” (1:387 ff.).

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