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Something Unspoken: Dramatizing the Lesbian Closet

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In the discussion of Tennessee Williams's treatment of male homosexuality and homoerotics, scholars have pointed out that, while his plays may seem closeted from today's perspective, his attempt to bring the subject onto the American stage at all was daring for its time. While *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in particular, has often been analyzed from this perspective, another Williams work deserves attention for its pioneering dramatization of homosexual desire: *Something Unspoken*, the neglected 1958 short play that served as a curtain opener for the better-known *Suddenly Last Summer*. While the homosexual potential of *Cat* is situated in the play's margins, it is right at the core of *Something Unspoken*.

¶2 *Something Unspoken* was originally billed together with *Suddenly Last Summer* under the title *Garden District*. Both *Garden District* plays have at their center southern matriarchs encountering homosexuality: Violet in *Suddenly* is unwilling to face the truth about her son Sebastian's sexual orientation and his violent death, and Cornelia in *Something Unspoken* struggles with the truth about her own homosexual desire. While Violet fights in every way she can to deny Sebastian's homosexuality, Cornelia is willing to confront what has been suppressed: the love between herself and her long-term companion, Grace. This character constellation constitutes a presentation not of male homosexuality, as seen in several of Williams's plays, but of female homosexual desire. Thus, *Something Unspoken* qualifies as an early lesbian, or lesbian-themed, play.[1] "[T]he subject of love between women," Terry Castle writes, has been represented in literature as "frail, marginal, strange, and hard to get a grip on" (48). Dominated by the "deadening force of taboo and fear and proscription," lesbian desire constitutes "a site of conceptual absence rather than of presence" (48). Williams's *Something Unspoken* defies these aspects of lesbian desire and their representation in literary texts: the force of taboo that characterizes same-sex love pervades the play, but the subject of lesbianism is never marginal in the protagonists' interactions.

¶3 *Something Unspoken*'s lesbian theme is defined by silence and the interruption of silence, what Tillie Olsen has described as "the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot" (6). Between Cornelia and Grace there is never an actual physical silence—i.e., no sound. Instead, different forms of sound—chat, music, a ringing telephone—attempt to silence the subject that cannot be fully addressed. In this silence-through-sound, lesbian desire establishes itself as a presence rather than an absence on the stage of *Something Unspoken*.

Anything but Nothing:[2] Breaking Silences

Eve Sedgwick defines closetedness as "a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). Cornelia and Grace's interactions in *Something Unspoken* are characterized by the twofold struggle to break out of the silence that exists between them, but also to uphold it.

¶5

It is Grace who insists on retaining secrecy, and it is she who offers *Something Unspoken*'s definition of the closet. Grace acknowledges that there exists something in her relationship with Cornelia that has been repressed. However, she prefers not to face what has been contained in silence between them for years: "You say there's something unspoken. Maybe there is. I don't know. But I do know some things are better left unspoken" (108). She believes herself to be too frail to cope with the powerful emotions that have built up: "[W]hen a silence between two people has gone on for a long time it's like a wall that's impenetrable between them! Maybe between us there is such a wall. One that is impenetrable" (108). This wall of silence constitutes the boundary of their closet. Grace has accepted this boundary and believes that she has no power to overcome it: "I know I can't. I can't even attempt to." She argues that Cornelia cannot expect her to "give bold answers to questions that make the house shake with silence! To speak out things that are fifteen years unspoken!?" (109)

¶6 Cornelia, on the other hand, actively strives to end their silence. When Grace admits that she has been unable to sleep because of muscle pain "that comes from strain," Cornelia insists: "What strain does it come from, Grace? [. . .] The strain of *what*? Would you like *me* to tell you?" Grace, however, tries to find an excuse to leave the room. Cornelia sees this as one of her attempts to flee from confrontation: "Several times lately you've rushed away from me as if I'd suddenly threatened you with a knife!" When Cornelia continues, "It's always when something is almost—*spoken*—between us!" Grace changes the subject and, despite her usual timidity, resolutely tells Cornelia, "I wish you'd dismiss it completely from your mind" (103–4).

¶7 *Something Unspoken*'s closet, then, seems to be Grace's rather than Cornelia's. The differences between the two women's approaches to the question of their relationship could not be more pronounced. Their contrasting behavior might simply be rooted in their personalities; a forceful individual like Cornelia might find the strength to address what a more anxious person like Grace might wish to leave unsaid. However, it is more insightful to take into account the societal positions in which Williams has placed his characters. Cornelia, whose name invokes ancient Roman nobility, is financially independent and an influential member of society. Grace's words reveal that Cornelia has an almost "imperial" position in Meridian: "People are nearly all somewhat—frightened of you. They feel your force and they admire you for it. They come to you here for opinions on this and that. What plays are good on Broadway this season, what books are worth reading and what books are trash and what—what records are valuable and—what is the proper attitude toward—Bills in Congress!" (109). Cornelia is also wealthy. "[Y]ou have your—*fortune*!" Grace tells her, "All of your real-estate holdings, your blue-chip stock, your—bonds, your mansion on Edgewater Drive, [. . .] your—fabulous gardens" (109). It strengthens Cornelia's role as a dominant figure that she holds this position in her own right, and that she does not depend on a husband. By presenting her as a spinster, Williams rules out the possibility that her wealth and prominence were bestowed upon her by a husband; they are entirely her own. Cornelia is the queen of her castle, so to speak; she has interpretational sovereignty in her domain, and thus can grant herself the possibility of accepting a truth that goes against what is socially accepted. Grace, on the other hand, describes herself as hardly more than Cornelia's property. She lists "your—shy little—secretary" (109) as one of Cornelia's many belongings. From this weak position, the socially unacceptable truth about their relationship is not only unspeakable, but almost unthinkable for Grace. In her denial, however, Grace acknowledges Cornelia's interpretational prerogative: "[M]aybe *you* can break [the wall of silence]" (108–9), she tells her companion.

¶8 Despite Grace's inability to face the something that has been unspoken, the "fits and starts" of their silence also, ultimately, closet Cornelia's love for Grace. Within their private sphere Cornelia may attempt to speak; in

front of the outside world, however, both women are equally silenced by the social impossibility of their love.

¶9 Throughout the play, the telephone represents the public sphere of Cornelia and Grace's life. Its ringing represents societal forces that attempt to control their privacy and render their love unspeakable; calls repeatedly end their more intimate conversations. Whenever they come close to approaching the topic that is yet unspoken, the telephone puts them back into their socially accepted positions of employer and employee. When Cornelia urges Grace to confront their relationship—"Don't you feel there's—*something unspoken*—between us?"—Grace can only avoid giving an answer because the telephone interrupts (107–8). The ringing enforces her official position as Cornelia's secretary, not her partner in private affairs. That the disruption happens in a tense moment for the two women becomes obvious in their reaction to the phone call. Grace attempts to answer the call, but Cornelia instructs her to take the telephone off the hook in order to stop the ringing. This measure, however, does not end the interruption. The voice heard from the receiver asking for Cornelia indicates that the situation is no longer private. When Grace suddenly starts to cry, it is especially clear that they now cannot continue their personal conversation: "Be STILL! *Someone can hear you*!" Cornelia tells Grace. Only when she "*slams* [the receiver] *back into the cradle*" can she re-create their privacy. Cornelia's resolute statement that she is "not going to be shut up!" makes clear that the telephone has disrupted an end-of-silence between the two women (108). When Cornelia, a while later, fully discloses her feelings for Grace by telling her, "How blind of you not to see how desperately I wanted to keep you here for ever," Grace for the first time accepts Cornelia's emotional tone. "Oh, I did see that you—," she begins with assent, but is again cut off by the phone. Cornelia answers the phone and immediately returns to her businesslike tone. "My secretary is sitting right here by me," she announces. Grace also takes on her official role at once. "Notebook and pencil?" she asks without further comment. Both women are back in their official positions; Grace's brief moment of openness is over (111–12).

¶10 The contrast between the women's private lives—in which Cornelia tirelessly attempts to address the true nature of their relationship—and their socially accepted roles as employer and employee pervades the play. In fact, Grace repeatedly employs their public roles in her evasion strategy to fend off Cornelia's attempts to break the silence. When Cornelia forces her to acknowledge the rose on the table, Grace, avoiding the meaning-laden name, refers to it simply as a flower. Cornelia immediately reemphasizes the romantic aspect of her gift: "Yes! I mean your rose!" Grace, in turn, assumes her public role—"Whom do I have to thank for this lovely rose? My gracious employer?"—and thereby reduces a lover's offering into a friendly gift from a well-meaning boss. Cornelia, however, continues to stress the gift's romantic quality. "You will find fourteen others on your desk in the library. [. . .] A total of fifteen!" Grace claims not to know why Cornelia is giving her this number of roses. "How long have you been here, dearest? How long have you made this house a house of roses?" Cornelia asks. To this openly amorous wording Grace replies with a neutral "What a nice way to put it!" The roses, Grace now knows, are a gift for their fifteen-year-anniversary. "I've been your secretary for fifteen years!" she says, again taking cover in the risk-free position of employee to a "gracious employer." Cornelia once more pushes the conversation back to the more private terrain of their relationship. Grace has not only been her secretary, but her life partner as well: "Fifteen years my companion! [. . .] A rose for every year, a year for every rose." Grace is again uncomfortable with the romantic tenor of Cornelia's words and responds very impersonally, awkwardly, as if put in the uncomfortable position of receiving an all-too-personal present from an employer she does not know well: "What a charming sort of way to—observe—the occasion. . . ." (105).

¶11

Yet throughout, *Something Unspoken*'s dialoguesrevealthe two women to be more than employer and employee. When Cornelia greets Grace with the words "You see I am having to impersonate my secretary this morning!" her phrasing indicates more than a critique of Grace's tardiness. Rather than *being* Cornelia's secretary, Grace *plays the role* of secretary. The stage directions immediately stress the intimate nature of their relationship by asserting that "[*t*]*here is between the two women a mysterious tension, an atmosphere of something unspoken*" (97). The fact that their bond goes beyond a friendly work relationship is also indicated in their conversations. While they look through a catalog of records, the following exchange ensues:

> CORNELIA: I think we ought to build up *our* collection of Lieder.
>
> GRACE: You've checked a Sibelius *we* already have. (98, emphasis added)

Both women naturally use a plural pronoun, stressing that they consider the record collection their shared possession. It becomes clear that the women indeed share the records when Cornelia criticizes Grace for not putting the records back into their jackets after playing them. When Grace, looking through the catalog, exclaims: "Oh, here's the Vivaldi we wanted!" Cornelia corrects her: "Not 'we' dear. Just you." Cornelia's disinterest in this record seems to be an exception that proves the rule; it is indeed their usual custom to choose records together. This is stressed by Grace's confusion: "How strange that I should have the impression you—." Since they usually like the same music, Grace does not differentiate in her mind between her own and Cornelia's taste (99).

¶12

At the same time that their shared love of music marks Grace and Cornelia as a couple, Grace uses music to prevent Cornelia from addressing what has been unspoken; she upholds silence through musical sound. "Now would be a good time to play some records! Let me put a symphony on the machine!" she proposes eagerly, ignoring Cornelia's insistence that they discuss their relationship. Cornelia recognizes what is behind Grace's offer: "Anything to avoid a talk between us? Anything to evade a conversation—especially when the servant is not in the house?" Grace fully ignores her and pretends to be relaxing to the sound of the music: "Oh, how it smoothes things over, how sweet, and gentle, and—pure. . . ." Although she pretends to be unperturbed, her word choice reveals her wish to "smooth over" and quiet down Cornelia's attempt to instigate what might turn into a difficult conversation. Yet Cornelia is not ready to let the topic go. Redirecting her irritation, she calls the music "completely dishonest!" because "[i]t 'smoothes things over' instead of—speaking them out. . . ." Grace again does not pick up on this criticism but instead continues to act as if she does not hear Cornelia's remarks: "Oh, sublime—sublime . . . ," she praises the music. Cornelia now "*grudgingly*" allows the conversation to go in the direction Grace has been pushing and also comments on the music. For the moment, Grace's silence has prevailed over Cornelia's insistence on communication. In her evasive tactics, however, Williams has placed a marker of Grace's unconscious involvement in Cornelia's attempts at facing their relationship. "'Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,'" she comments on the record. Knowingly or not, Grace is quoting the opening line of William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride*. This linkage to Congreve's play stresses Grace's wish to uphold the pretense of formal demeanor that does not allow for the existence of anything as "savage" as sexual desire. It also indicates that Grace indeed has a "savage" side she wishes to "soothe." Cornelia, on the other hand, is fully aware that Grace is not free from such "uncivilized" emotion and responds to her quotation: "Yes, oh yes. If the savage breast permits it" (104–5).

¶13

Grace's momentary success in avoiding the "something" that has been "unspoken" is undermined by other markers of homoerotic desire Williams plants in her words. To stop Cornelia from talking, Grace suggests they listen to the record "we received for Christmas from Jessie and Gay" (104). It seems that these names were not picked at random. The female name Jessie is homophonic with the male name Jesse. If performed on stage, it is impossible to tell if the person mentioned is a man or a woman. Similarly, the name Gay is used for both boys and girls (cf. Hanks and Hodges 129). More obviously of course, even in 1958, it is a synonym for homosexuality in the gay community. From this perspective, Jessie and Gay may both be women, a lesbian couple. Grace's mention of them in the middle of an escapist tirade belies her stance of ignorance: female-female couples do exist in her life. In fact, Jessie and Gay are such close friends to Grace and Cornelia that they give them Christmas gifts—from *couple* to *couple*. Reading Jessie and Gay as a lesbian couple, then, complements the homoerotic overtones of Grace and Cornelia's relationship. It also undercuts Grace's attempts at silencing the subject. Even if these friends are interpreted as female (Jessie) and male (Gay) and they are seen as a heterosexual couple, the ambiguity of their genderless names remains, and so does the clearly homosexual connotation of the name Gay, at least for parts of Williams's audience.

¶14 The fact that Grace picks a Landowska record brings further allusions to lesbian relationships into the play: escaping a conversation that may reveal the homoerotic nature of her bond with Cornelia, Grace finds refuge in the music of lesbian artist Wanda Landowska. Interestingly, Grace praises not only the harpsichord player's music, but also her looks: "[S]uch a noble face, a profile as fine and strong as Edith Sitwell's." This makes clear that she is very much aware of Landowska as a person: that she not only enjoys her music but is attracted to her *as a woman*. Grace does not seem to be aware of Landowska's sexual preference; Williams, on the other hand, is. He has Grace select a record by a lesbian artist as a clear pointer to the lesbian character of the couple's relationship. He further exposes Grace's unconscious complicity by having her recite from Sitwell's "Aubade": "Jane, Jane, tall as a crane, the morning light creaks down again. . . ." Grace quotes from a poem by a female writer about a female character; this intensifies the exclusively feminine atmosphere that she unknowingly creates in her attempted denial of female-female attraction. The poem's title, "Aubade," adds yet another hint at the subject Grace is trying to avoid. Aubades, after all, traditionally deal with love affairs that have to be kept a secret (cf. Sigal 4f). A similar indicator is planted in Grace's words: "After this [record] we'll play Edith Sitwell's *Façade*,"[3] she exclaims. The title of this work is an unmistakable hint at the nature of Grace's speech: it, too, is nothing but a front (105).

¶15 Despite Grace's attempts at denial and evasion, Cornelia does not give up. She unwaveringly continues to address her feelings and slowly brings Grace closer to accepting more openness. When she tells Cornelia "[Y]ou know how I am! I'm always a little embarrassed by sentiment, aren't I?" it is Grace's first honest self-assessment. Cornelia agrees with her: "Yes. Frightened of anything that betrays some feeling!" Projecting her own denial onto Cornelia, Grace demands that Cornelia "admit that sentiment isn't like you [either]!" and triggers what can be seen as the play's most direct comment on closeted lesbian desire. "*Is nothing like me but silence?*" Cornelia demands to know. "*Am I sentenced to silence for a lifetime?*" Grace, however, cannot end Cornelia's dilemma. When she tries to touch her hand, Cornelia "*snatched her own hand away as though the touch had burned her*." Instead of an apology or thanks, she explains to Grace, she needs "a little return of affection—not much, but sometimes a little! [. . .] And one thing more: a little outspokenness, too." She needs Grace to finally find a way out of her silence (106–7).

¶16 A change in Grace's behavior comes about after Cornelia has lost the United Daughters of the Confederacy elections. When she looks at Cornelia in the moment of her defeat, she gives a quick "*equivocal smile* [. . .] *not quite malicious, but not really sympathetic*" (112). This ambiguous reaction to Cornelia's loss of societal power is as difficult to decipher as Grace's overall attitude toward her companion. She does not share Cornelia's disappointment, but is also not pleased by her rejection. Grace does not consider the UDC a serious matter; she is not caught up in a net of societal obligations like Cornelia is. Throughout the play, she reacts indifferently or even bemusedly to Cornelia's ploy to win what she calls a "silly club-woman's election!" (104). Once Cornelia's plan has failed, it seems that the power balance between the two women is shaken up. Grace is superior to Cornelia for the first time. During this moment, Grace can address in positive terms what she normally fears: she thanks Cornelia for her anniversary gift. However, her final acknowledgment of that something unspoken is limited by the fact that she addresses it not onstage, in Cornelia's—and the audience's—presence, but in the offstage area. From the safety of the hidden—quasi-closeted—office, she declares: "*What lovely roses! One for every year!*" (112). The silence between Grace and Cornelia is not fully resolved, but the something unspoken has finally developed into something almost spoken.

Something Almost Spoken

A cultural product of the McCarthy era, *Something Unspoken* cannot fully overcome the closet. The play's achievement lies in the fact that lesbian love *is* its central theme. Even though lesbianism, to borrow Monique Wittig's famous phrase, "has no name as yet" (qtd. in Lauretis 28),[4] *Something Unspoken* succeeds in negating the primacy of the heterosexual relationship and opens a space for female homoerotic desire. Even if Grace and Cornelia do not share a fully realized lesbian love, their relationship creates "a genuine bond of meaning between women" (Bredbeck 420)[5] that goes far beyond friendship. By dramatizing the silence that defines the play's female-female relationship, Williams stages closeted female-female desire.

¶18 In *Something Unspoken*, no male characters appear on stage, and the only man mentioned is Grace's dead husband. Indeed, the unseen character who dies an untimely death before the play's action is not a gay figure—as in such better-known works as *Streetcar*, *Suddenly*, or *Cat*—but the quintessential heterosexual man. This constitutes a reversal of conventional dramatic practice: the death does not end or obscure homosexuality, as the deaths of Allan, Sebastian, or Skipper arguably do, but instead opens the door for Cornelia and Grace's same-sex relationship. The homoerotic bond between the two women stands, uncontested, at the very center of the play. Assigning Cornelia a socially powerful position, Williams puts her in stark contrast to the southern spinsters in his other plays: she is not humiliated because she lacks a husband; she is not a poor, "barely tolerated" (*Menagerie* 16) houseguest forced to live with a male relative; she is not an outsider. Similarly, Williams situates lesbian desire not on the margins, but at the very center of society.

¶19 Cornelia, too, is caught up in the predicament that silence creates for Grace. This is most apparent in her failure to become her UDC chapter's regent. Instead of declaring her desire to run (which contradicts the outspokenness she exercises in her own home), she attempts to influence the election results secretly (mirroring Grace's insistence on remaining silent). Her strategy to win the election through secrecy is ultimately another form of silence—and she is defeated precisely because she does not expose her desire to run, and to win. This failure, along with Cornelia's inability to overcome the dilemma of silence, only makes more urgent the play's call for openness—even if it may only be realized in the most private sphere.

¶20 After all, revealing the truth of their relationship to the outside world is never suggested: the play instead focuses on the struggle to pry open a private closet. A societal coming-out remains unspeakable within *Something Unspoken*. However, the dramatization of the closet is in itself a challenge to the culture of silence in the 1950s. *Something Unspoken* may thus be seen an early precursor to lesbian drama or lesbian-themed drama, in the same category as Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934). While Martha's suicide in Hellman's text eliminates the option of a realized lesbian relationship, the possibility in *Something Unspoken* persists (even if perhaps ironically) when the curtain closes: the play's last words, after all, are Grace's praise of Cornelia's romantic gift. Through its intricate network of references, this play goes beyond implicitness and yet refrains from being fully explicit in its presentation of lesbian desire.

¶21 Cornelia and Grace cannot entirely end their silence, but their acute awareness of the something that has remained unspoken puts lesbian desire in the center of the play. Tennessee Williams's *Something Unspoken* upholds the silence of the closet, but it speaks volumes at the same time.

Notes

[1] Taking a nonessentialist perspective, this study subscribes to Terry Castle's definition, from her anthology *The Literature of Lesbianism*, of what makes a text a lesbian text: Castle proposes "to shift attention *away* from lesbianism-as-lived-experience (however narrowly or loosely defined) toward lesbianism-as-theme" (6). A lesbian play is defined by "the presence of female homoerotic feeling" (41) within the text rather than by the gender or sexual orientation of the author. See also Farwell.

[2] Headline borrowed from Gilani et al.'s study on silence: "Every silence is full of information. The information in the silence is not auditory and thereby easily ignored. . . . But if we shift modalities . . . , we discover that silence is anything but nothing: Silence speaks" (99).

[3] "Aubade" is part of Sitwell's poem series *Façade*; performances of the series of poems—read by Sitwell and others, and backed by an orchestra—were available on record. See Sitwell 110ff.

[4] This is Teresa de Lauretis's modification of David Le Vay's translation. See also Wittig 15.

[5] Bredbeck is not discussing Williams's play but lesbian literature in general.

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