

The Queer Mockery of High Expectations: Comic Closure and the Texts of *Kingdom of Earth*

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As with *Battle of Angels* and several other plays by Williams, *Kingdom of Earth* (*The Seven Descents of Myrtle*) appeared in print and on stage before the playwright rewrote it for a revival. Like many of Williams's plays, it began as a short story. One draft of the story probably dates to the 1930s; another certainly dates to 1942. Intermediate states survive as well, as does at least one later version. The story was published in 1954. By that year, Williams had begun work on the one-act play that *Esquire* would print in 1967. In 1968 the full-length play premiered on stage and debuted in print; a minimally revised acting edition appeared in 1969. Williams overhauled the play for an abortive tryout in 1975. A new edition was issued once that year and once the next. The one-act was collected in 2011. Like the story, the play is well represented in manuscript.¹

Any work with a documentary record takes on fresh meanings when we examine that record. The history of Williams's "funny melodrama" (*Memoirs* 40) is particularly revelatory, given its duration and the heft of its manuscriptal component. Thirty-plus years of revisions record Williams's attempts to filter low-mimetic comedy through the skepticism about bourgeois heteronormativity implicit in much of his early work, evident in *Period of Adjustment*, and unmistakable in later comedies such as *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?* and *A House Not Built to Stand* (see Pettit).² More specifically, the work's history shows Williams fiddling with Myrtle's "questionable fertility" (Kalson 93) and questioning Chicken's interest in genital coitus. In this way Williams undermines the promise of genetic continuance central to comic closure. As I will suggest toward the end of this essay, a tendency to consult only the 1968 or 1975 edition has obscured the nature and extent of his experiment.

The various misrepresentations of the short story "The Kingdom of Earth" concur in dating the earliest draft to July 1942, in Macon, Georgia, where Williams was staying with his friend Paul Bigelow (see Leverich 453–57). A draft titled "Spiritchel Gates (An

Affirmation of the Purest Faith)” was indeed completed then and there. The first version of the story, however, was almost certainly written before *Battle of Angels*, the watershed play that Williams recognized as a “huge advance” over his previous work (“History of a Play” 15). Williams hints at an early draft when he reports that “the germ of *Kingdom of Earth* was perhaps fecundated in my dramatic storehouse” by a 1940 drive to Mexico with a prostitute traveling to meet the family of her unsuspecting bridegroom (*Memoirs* 58). The “germ” is preserved at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, in the first of two undated drafts entitled “Myra, My Brother’s Wife.” Myra would become Myrtle; the brothers Jack and Jeffrie would become Chicken and Lot.

The text that I call “Myra [1]” is incomplete and comprises mixed sheets; undated, it is likely to have been written in the 1930s. Williams’s promiscuous use of the adjective “swell” constitutes one datum.³ A safe reliance on autobiography (and a dose of sarcasm) accounts for the “swell job” that Jeffrie holds at a “big shoe company” in St. Louis (n. pag.), where Williams set *Fugitive Kind* and several early one-acts. The ur-Chicken Jack is an obvious transplant from the gangster films of the 1930s that Thomas Keith finds exerting “an overt influence” on Williams before 1940 and after 1970 (275–76).

“Myra [1]” is an exercise in style, similar to the apprentice plays that Williams recalled as “innocent of structure” in its lack of interest in the formal parameters of genre (“History” 15). Jack, the narrator, is a James Cagney wannabe; Jeffrie is a cipher. Myra passes out and doesn’t say much. The opening sentence—“A sensible man don’t stay in one place and do one thing for more than a year at a time” (n. pag.)—establishes Jack as the edgy, knowing drifter familiar in the films that Keith references. Dick Miles in *Spring Storm* is a fuller instance in the early plays. Canary Jim in *Not About Nightingales* and Terry Meighan in *Fugitive Kind* are rendered pathetic by their enforced distance from the lifestyle that Dick seeks and Jack embraces. More broadly, Jack’s overdone verbal swagger affiliates him with the gawky, questing man-children who would emerge from the crucible of *Battle of Angels* aglow with lyricism and sweat. His pretensions notwithstanding, Jim in “The Magic Tower” is an analog; so is Donald Fenway in “Summer at the Lake.”

Jack, the narrator, is Williams at his most juvenile. His weary bootheels and empty pockets deliver him to the home of Jamie and his “society gal” wife Myra (n. pag.). He knocks. He hears soft footsteps—a woman’s, he reckons. The door opens. *Et voilà*:

It was a woman all right. It was a girl in blue silk pyjamas. She was the swell-est looking girl I’d ever seen. In her hand she had a cigarette in a long red holder. She stood there staring at me and me at her for a moment and then she screamed and fell out flat on the floor. (n. pag.)

Jack figures he’s “scared her into a faint,” and the inexperienced Williams is not sorry that this should be so (n. pag.). Continuing to sidestep the challenges of dialogue,

Williams leaves Myra unconscious for a spell. Jack quashes an impulse to “take it on the lam,” then lifts Myra up and schleps her into the parlor, his body “cold all over” with desire (n. pag.), Williams’s clunky way of ducking the more clangorous clunk of “hot all over” with desire. After Myra comes to, she begins laughing wildly and is unable to drink the water that Jack brings her. Jack ponders his convulsed sister-in-law. “Well,” he reasons, “there’s only two ways of hushing a woman up when she gets hysterical. A hard slap or a kiss. She was too swell to slap so I did the other.” Myra responds to Jack’s kiss by “put[ing] her hand over her mouth and [getting] up from the sofa.” Jack offers to leave. “[]Don’t go, []” says Myra, “real quietly” (n. pag.). To paraphrase a well-known judgment by one of Williams’s teachers, we all have to paint our swell girls in blue silk pyjamas (cf. E. C. Mabie, qtd. in Williams, “The Past” 80).

Williams would again employ this dodge in *Not About Nightingales*, when Eva, another “hysterical” woman, responds to the Warden’s advances by nodding off (see 132–33). These attempts are anteceded, but their antecedents are the wrong ones for Williams’s implicitly comic purpose in “Myra [1].” The woman short-circuited by desire is a convenience in morally timid narrative forms like eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, melodrama, and post–Hays Code cinema, gangster films included. Unconsciousness, however, counters comedy’s demand for verbal mutuality, the guarantor of the vibrant commingling toward which closure points. Shakespeare’s Rosalind can’t “scream and fall out flat on the floor”; neither, in prose, can Kingsley Amis’s Christine Callaghan. By the late 1930s Star Pilcher in *Candles to the Sun* and Glory Gwendlebaum in *Fugitive Kind* demonstrate that Williams’s slower-burning women can reconcile libido with language. But dogged ratiocination (Star) and panicky hand-wringing (Glory) are easier to create than propulsive comic banter.

Williams would reimagine the artless scene from “Myra [1]” in *Kingdom of Earth*. Myrtle recalls her prototype when she is nullified verbally and readied sexually by Chicken’s coarseness. Terrified of water and evidently sensitive to symbols, she falls prey to “*hysterics*” after Chicken pretends to drown his “*pussy*” (e.g., 1975 176, 182). This prompts Chicken to tweak callow Jack’s philosophy: “They’s two ways to stop hysterics in a woman. One way is to give her a slap in the face and the other way is to lay her” (e.g., 1975 182). Among the ironies of the play, however, is Chicken’s refusal to work within the dichotomy he propounds. He neither “slaps” nor “lays” Myrtle but rather forces her to fellate him, thus momentarily ensuring her inability to speak and hinting at his eurotophobia. Williams had prefigured this development in “Myra [1].” The water Jack brings Myra returns in *Kingdom of Earth* as the booze that Chicken pours into Myrtle’s mouth (see, e.g., 1968 75; 1969 56). The liquid overflows, choking her and prefiguring Chicken’s enthusiasm for fellatio and the “greater gust” of his eventual orgasm, to borrow a memorable locution from John Dryden.

The surviving sheets of “Myra [1]” suggest that any relationship between Jack and Myra will honor Jack’s outsider status and thus thwart the conformist expectations of comedy. In an autograph addendum on the final sheet, Jack declares, “I made sixty five dollars a month and paid Jeffrie twenty for board. I gives it to him at breakfast and he hands it over to Myra and she slips ten of it back in my pocket while he’s driving out of the garage” (n. pag.). Jack and Myra will live a life of good fun at the expense of the stolid Jeffrie, insinuating themselves into the fabliau tradition that Kathryn Zabelle Derounian finds in the published story and play (see 151).⁴

Comedy more plainly declares itself in the presumed second version of “Myra, My Brother’s Wife” (“Myra [2]”). Internal evidence suggests that this draft postdates the 1940 excursion to Mexico but predates “Spiritchel Gates.” Myra is not yet Myrtle, but her past as a prostitute is implied, presumably thanks to Williams’s experience with the newlywed. With varying emphases, this backstory will remain in all later versions, eventually providing a pathological basis for Myrtle’s concerns about fertility. Stuart, formerly Jeffrie, has not become Lot but has been beset by the pulmonary disease that, aided by disinclination, will later prevent Lot from consummating his marriage. Chicken replaces Jack as narrator and brassier brother. He will sleep with Myra while Stuart coughs and hollers, as Lot will do while Myrtle fellates Chicken in *Kingdom of Earth*. The setting could be anywhere except St. Louis, which Myra, like Tom Williams, had abandoned.

Comic closure in “Myra [2]” is opportunistic and perfunctory; what matters is that Williams now regards comedy as a category to be addressed. Myra, Chicken reports, “kept on wondering whether or not she wanted to stay or go back to her job in St. Louis” (n. pag.). The conclusion is a marvel of pith: “In the end she decided to stay and so we got married” (n. pag.). Comic closure, just like that. But Williams may intend mockery. His flip tone recalls another early moment of caustic compression. In “Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?” the eponymous character rejects her mother’s bourgeois comic vision of her future, a run-up to Amanda Wingfield’s efforts on behalf of Laura. “Here is my body!” she imagines telling a suitor, “Take off my clothes and climb on! All I demand is a legal contract and lots of cold cash!” (49). “Myra [2]” shares this skepticism about marriage, bolstered by what hindsight suggests might be a problem with conception. “There wasn’t no hurry” to get married (n. pag.), says Chicken, indicating that Myrtle was not pregnant when they wed and giving no reason to suppose she is so at story’s end. Williams will experiment with a pregnant Myrtle in later versions of the story but will abandon the idea in the plays, much to the benefit of his assault on convention. In “Myra [2],” he is content to graft some simple generic parameters onto a plot that will someday ask more of him. Already he is floating the possibility of a Myrtle unlikely to be “fecundated.”

“Spiritchel Gates” and the published story “The Kingdom of Earth” are Williams’s attempts to work within the conventions of comic closure. Both end with marriage and pregnancy. The incidents that advance the plot, however, complicate convention, as those in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* had done and those in *A House Not Meant to Stand* and other late comedies would do. Williams’s technique is the grotesque exaggeration of convention.⁵ The unredeemed protagonist Chicken has not merely been involved with the wrong party; he has been his brother’s sexual abuser. Lot, the obstacle to the A-couple’s coalescence, is not nudged aside à la Shakespeare, Coward, or Shaw (*Candida*). He is humiliated after the fashion of Behn, Shadwell, Wycherley, and the Williams of “Green Eyes.”

Myrtle, now so designated, provides neither the incentive for nor the ideal terminus of Chicken’s desire. Chicken’s interest in her is triggered by his ogling of “her tits, the biggest that ever I seen on a young woman’s body” (“Spiritchel” n. pag.; “The Kingdom” 369); but it intensifies when he listens in on her and Lot in bed. Pulling Lot aside after he “overhear[s]” them for the first of two times, Chicken cautions him that Myrtle will “fuck the las breath from yuh body.” The prognosis angers Lot; the brothers argue; Chicken “knock[s]” Lot “off the back steps” (“Spiritchel” n. pag.; “The Kingdom” 370, see also 372). Myrtle reappears to defend her husband.

After this point “The Kingdom of Earth” and “Spiritchel Gates” differ in their emphases, the published story hinting at an unsavory past explicated in the manuscript. In “The Kingdom of Earth,” Chicken taunts his auditors by saying that “last winter . . . Lot took the sheets himself.” Myrtle’s response—“What do you mean?”—demonstrates her forgivable ignorance of a term for anal receptivity not yet in common use, although Chicken knows it well enough (370).⁶ What Chicken means is that Lot has been sodomized, facedown. What he does not say in “The Kingdom of Earth” is that he himself—with his “great big powerful body” and a “big thing like a baby’s arm hangin to [*sic*] it” (n. pag.)—has sodomized his sickly brother, repeatedly and without apparent consent. The sight of Lot “straddlin” a log had once kindled in Chicken an “unclean longin” in response to which he “done that ugly thing to him” (n. pag.). Later violations occurred in Lot’s bed upstairs, notwithstanding Chicken’s opinion that sodomy is “dirty and only fit for a nigger” (n. pag.).

Chicken is rendered ferocious by hatred of his own sexuality and contempt for his victim. During the brawl that Williams pruned for publication, Chicken turns from the pummeled Lot, rips off Myrtle’s “kimona,” and threatens to rape her. All fired up, he bellows, “Last winter . . . [Lot] took the sheets himself”:

What do you mean, [Myrtle] said. Figure it out for yourself or let him tell yuh. You son of a bitch, said Lot, you’ve got a nerve to make a remark like

that. Well, it's the truth, I told her, I used to bugger him on that bed you sleep on now. I used to turn him over an climb on him like a woman an he used to love it. He'd love it now only I won't do it no more. I got sick of it. Now you can do it. Go on. Strap on a rubber dick an let him have it in the place where he likes it. (n. pag.)

Chicken spends the night in a state of agitation, eavesdropping on the newlyweds and replaying memories of encounters with Lot and with an orally “expert” ex-girlfriend (n. pag.).

Chicken's recollection that he would “turn [Lot] over an climb on him like a woman” says plenty about his inclinations and his motivation: he needs Myrtle for “queer” sex and straight cover. His imaginative frenzy finds release in his bedding of Myrtle, whose role becomes the unwitting reenactment of Chicken's sexual memories, their transgressiveness softened by the circumambience of comedy. She initiates oral sex on Chicken, unaware that she is rectifying his memory of the girlfriend who had calumniated him for being (as she thought) half-black. The penis that the racist woman had pleased and metonymically denigrated seems to Myrtle “like somethin holy,” at least in Chicken's formulation (“Spiritchel” n. pag.; “The Kingdom” 377). When Myrtle rises and joins Chicken in bed, Williams's ambiguous portrayal of their coupling recalls Chicken's enmeshments with Lot. “I felt of her body,” Chicken relates, “So big an hot like a mountain that had a furnace in it. I wanted to get inside that wonderful mountain. I ripped the little lacey drawers off her bottom. She pushed it up off the cot. Then I climbed on” (“Spiritchel” n. pag.; cf. “The Kingdom” 377: “the drawers”). One may read this according to the tendencies of one's imagination, but perhaps the tendency of Williams's should be considered. At the very least we should note that Chicken is drawn to the dorsal view of coitus, another expression of his wish that the breasts and face of a female partner be no more visible to him than the chest and face of his male partner had been.⁷

Williams penciled “tone down a little” next to his description of the fight in “Spiritchel Gates,” and much of the later textual history of *Kingdom of Earth* finds him trying to ungild a lily that was never short on luster. The “toning down” of “Spiritchel Gates” in “The Kingdom of Earth,” however, temporarily obscures Williams's interest in complicating comic formulae. In these stories, Chicken gets the goods, sexually and economically: he will inherit Lot's property along with a wife who will continue “his” line. But in “The Kingdom of Earth” the more distressing markers of misspent youth all but disappear. Chicken's infelicities are no more hostile to amendment than young Marlow's fondness for laboring-class women in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* or Richard Miller's attraction to decadent poetry in O'Neill's *Ab, Wilderness!* When read with “Spiritchel Gates” in mind, “The Kingdom of Earth” becomes a narrative of

maturation, based on the recantation, redemption, and elevation of a parvenu bourgeois who “got sick” of sodomy; the destruction of a pretender who “used to love it”; and the effacement of their common past. The reformed homosexual Chicken, like the reformed prostitute Myrtle, means to fake his way to closure’s bounty. In the stories they succeed.

Not so in the plays. There is no record of Williams having worked on *Kingdom of Earth* between 1954 and 1965, the initial year recorded on a typescript of the one-act (see Keith 280). Given the shift in genre and the gap in time—“the longest among the story-play pairs” (Derounian 151)—it is not surprising to find lacunae in the plays. In the one-act, Chicken says that Lot’s hospitalization, following his own breakup with a girlfriend, made him feel “pretty lonesome” (195). Why, given Chicken’s disdain for his brother? And why, in the long versions, is Lot surprised that Chicken’s obscene wood carving depicts both a man and a woman? Why does he respond with macabre laughter when Myrtle, no puritan regarding the straighter sort of sex, reveals that the hewn couple is doing something consistent with Chicken’s “dirty mind” (e.g., 1975 166)? Chicken is “strange by nature, and not accepted around here” in the 1968 and 1969 editions and two prior drafts (e.g., 1968 12); this doesn’t sound like a reference to his biracial background. Chicken’s declaration that he and Lot are “bachelors” appears in all editions of the long play (e.g., 1975 141), and it is hard to imagine that Williams used this coded term unselfconsciously. “If beds could talk what stories they could tell,” says Lot (e.g., 1975 135), seeming to gesture wistfully at his inability to satisfy Myrtle. But there is no bed in the parlor where he and she are speaking. Williams remembers another upstairs bed, in the room to which Lot will soon ascend. Knowing this as Williams did helps us understand Lot’s and Myrtle’s terror of Chicken.⁸ No wonder Clive Barnes complained that Williams had taken to writing “characters” instead of “plays” (313): Williams withholds information necessary for the coalescence of character.⁹

The conversion of a pornographic story into a Broadway play requires a certain measure of discretion and plenty of red ink. Williams’s gambit in the plays is to hint, nod, wink, and symbolize in order to convey his unwillingness to endorse the comic ending that he now allows his characters only to imagine. Conscious of the play’s past, we may suspect that the Chickens of 1968 and 1975 still adhere to the “ugly” predilections of their original. We remain mindful of Myrtle’s passion for genital intercourse—uncomfortably, she has “loved it” since being raped at fifteen (“The Kingdom” 375; cf. “Spiritchel”: “liked it” [n. pag.])—but we begin more seriously to question her ability to conceive.¹⁰ The possibility of marriage vanishes.

The first thing we learn about the dramatized Chicken is that his name is “Chicken.” He earned the designation by having “set on the roof with the chickens one time this place was flooded” (e.g., 1975 126). One connotation suits Williams’s purposes. As Williams would have known, a “chicken” (or simply “chicken”) is slang for a gay youth

or a youth attractive to homosexuals. Williams assumes the auditor's complicity in a joke that would otherwise be inert. After the newlyweds enter the house, Lot tells Myrtle that Chicken has sequestered himself in the kitchen. She misunderstands: "A chicken, you say, is hiding in the kitchen?" (e.g., 1975 132). Well, no, twice, then yes. This *rare bird* is human; and although Chicken may be "young," at "thirty or thirty-five" he is not young enough to be chicken (e.g., 1975 125). But he was chicken once, and his name opens up a humiliating past not clearly discernible in the published editions. Chicken has always lived in his small Delta town; and his "nature," to borrow Lot's expression, would long have been familiar to his neighbors. His first entry announces his status as an aging predator. In a dark visual joke, Chicken appears onstage "covered with river slick" (e.g., 1975 125), the substance he used to "grease his peter" before his first rape of Lot in "Spiritchel Gates" (n. pag.).

Williams sees Chicken as Chicken's neighbors do: queer, incongruous, and, as we learn when an unseen local family taunts him in the first scene, despised. After the family drives away to escape the flood, Chicken putters around the house. Momentarily "distracted by a nude girl's body in a calendar picture," he feels a twinge of desire, "one hand . . . falling involuntarily down his body." The "twinge" is fugitive; Chicken "mutters sharply" the monosyllable "Nah!" and decides to make some coffee (e.g., 1975 126). Duly caffeinated, he is primed to reboot his heterosexuality for the first time since having endured the racist rebuff of a barfly who "put out for men right and left" (e.g., 1975 206). Opportunity arrives in the form of Myrtle.

Lot's wife enters "affabl[y]" complaining that her new husband has "take[n her] in the back door" (1968? 1.5; 1968 4; 1969 9). Myrtle's deafness to the resonance of her own words tells us something about her beyond what she means to convey. The buoyantly straight Myrtle is in the grip of a heteronormative comic fantasy. "A parlor with gold chairs is—like a dream," she effuses upon entering her new home (e.g., 1975 129), recalling *Period of Adjustment's* Isabel Haverstick in her enthusiasm for domestic accessories (see Pettit 109). Myrtle represents her and Lot's TV marriage as a high-tech orgy of low-mimetic beneficence. She wore "a lace bride's gown with a bouquet of lilies," she tells Chicken, for a ceremony beamed into a huge community and capped off by her receipt of "a small fortune in electric household equipment" (e.g., 1975 149; see also 151). The "happy rustle of bridal gowns and banknotes" that Northrop Frye associates with low-mimetic closure (42) has never been audible to a wider audience. But the giddy Myrtle finds no meaning in Lot's and Chicken's refusal to carry her goods into the house. Most of these remain outside, to be washed away in the flood, along with any hope of domestic normalcy. Myrtle's remark that "I had my heart set on a quiet, happy married life" is among the saddest and funniest lines in the play (e.g., 1975 189).

Myrtle undergoes a morphological change after 1954, or maybe Chicken just starts looking at her differently. Artistically, “Myra [2],” “Spiritchel Gates,” and “The Kingdom of Earth” are weakened by their strained mammophilia. References to Myrtle’s “tits,” “titties,” and “knockers” lard these versions; modifiers denoting extraordinary size appear in “Spiritchel Gates” (n. pag.) and “The Kingdom of Earth” (369, 370). The late Myra and the early Myrtle are cartoonishly contoured: they are Blondies meant to telegraph a familiar version of heterosexual allure, the more pertinent for its implication of maternity.¹¹ In the one-act, Myrtle is “*ample of hips and bosom*” (188); in 1968 and 1969 she is “*rather fleshy*” (4; 9). Thereafter, Chicken will show no interest in her “bosom”—an impressive achievement, given the frequency with which he volunteers rude comments about her body. His attention drifts to Myrtle’s hips and buttocks. The sight of her “*back*” occasions a lecherous whistle (e.g., 1975 182), and Chicken relishes his own trashy witticism about the “*three cushions*” on which Myrtle sits after he lugs a car seat into the kitchen for her (e.g., 1975 184). And the play briefly titled *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* is more interested in the three ascents that Chicken droolingly observes (see, e.g., 1975 152, 165, 194).¹² Myrtle is discomfited by Chicken’s “watching” of her backside as she climbs the stairs (e.g., 1975 165); during a later ascent Chicken speaks “*to her back*” (e.g., 1975 194).

Williams’s stage directions play to Chicken’s preferences in other ways, too. Myrtle wears a “*sheer blouse*” for her first tête-à-tête with Chicken, but she might as well be wearing coveralls for the attention it gets her. More significant is her “*velveteen skirt*” of “almost ankle-length” (e.g., 1975 156–57). Williams first conceived this garment as a “velveteen blue dress” of unspecified length (1967 2.4). He perhaps decided to stipulate a length out of concern that the wrong cut would expose Chicken to Myrtle’s crotch and thus suggest at least muted interest in that part of her body. Anyone staging the play would have to confront this problem; and at least by the time he wrote *A House Not Meant to Stand*, Williams was willing to employ such a scenario humorously. The sight of the toweled Stacey atop a staircase inspires in the decrepit Emerson Sykes first intense desire and then, deliciously, “*a slight cardiac attack*” (46). Williams could afford no such distraction in *Kingdom of Earth*. Long stretchy velveteen does the job just fine.

By making Chicken unmindful of Myrtle’s breasts, fascinated by her hips and buttocks, and shielded from her vagina, Williams bolsters a character who is sexually interested in women only insofar as he can submit them to behaviors he has practiced on a man, the merits of which do not include an ability to advance comedy’s reproductive agenda.¹³ Williams complements the queer Chicken by questioning Myrtle’s ability to conceive. In an April 1967 draft the playwright is already plucking Myrtle from the propagative mainstream that ferries comic heroines to the neatly appointed nurseries

just beyond the final curtain. Myrtle tries to cheer Lot by talking about the bourgeois comic future she imagines for them, unaware that he is even less interested in her sort of sex than Chicken will turn out to be. Pretty much out of nowhere, Myrtle tells Lot that she has “lost one ovary” due to an inflammation. Her doctor, she hastens to add, “swore to Jesus that I could still have babies” (1967 1.14). Myrtle’s chances are not as rosy as she makes them out to be. A former prostitute, aging and presumably suffering from pelvic inflammatory disease wrought by frequent venereal infection, is not a sufficiently good bet to prompt a competent obstetrician to make his case as emphatically as Myrtle claims her doctor has done.¹⁴

Myrtle, however, desperately wants to prolong the comic plot initiated by her televised coronation as the ironically bourgeois “Take-Life-Easy Queen.” Her preference for this title over the tonally flatter designation “Hollywood Queen for a Day” tells us as much (e.g., 1975 149), and Lot had manipulated this inclination when he enticed her to the home he thought was his to bestow. But Myrtle’s body keeps finding ways to deny her the comic “dream” promised by television. The oophorectomy will not survive the 1967 draft, but Myrtle’s symbolic relationship with the golden chairs of Raven Roost endures into the final version. A winter of eating fried food in Memphis has spiked her weight, and Lot judges her too heavy for chairs once graced by the former Mrs. Ravenstock (see, e.g., 1975 130, 162). Like the “Queen’s” appliances, these domestic accoutrements beckon only to mock.

Chicken and Myrtle do not discuss reproduction in the one-act or the 1967 or presumed 1968 drafts. Among the achievements of the published 1968 text is Williams’s reintroduction of the signature effect of comic closure that he had allowed in “Spiritchel Gates” and “The Kingdom of Earth.” Derounian (see 154) and Thomas P. Adler (see *American Drama* 165) note that Chicken’s desire for reproduction with an “all-white woman” is inseparable from his race-based desire for revenge. But Myrtle isn’t playing square either, and her fight for a berth on the roof only works if we recognize the urgency of her attempt to persuade Chicken that she is reproductive, in the teeth of evidence if necessary. She sidles up to the truth, trying neither to perjure herself nor to discourage Chicken from saving her. “I don’t reckon that, no, I reckon you couldn’t,” says Chicken, before pausing to ponder the fitness of Myrtle’s reproductive system. “Couldn’t what?” asks Myrtle. “Produce a child for me,” he replies (e.g., 1975 214). In the 1968 and 1969 texts, Myrtle guts it up. Asserting that she “want[s] t’ be perfectly frank with you on that subject,” she reveals that she has had five kids, all put up for adoption (1968 110–11; 1969 81). The confession conveys Myrtle’s anxiety about her fertility, keyed by concerns that Chicken evidently shares. Myrtle might produce the child that Chicken supposes will salve his wounded honor; but comedy demands certainty in this matter, hedging its bets by insisting on the youth, health, and virginity of its heroines.

Williams had trimmed the play by September 1974, the date recorded on the manuscript designated “Revised Acting Edition.”¹⁵ His cuts make the play “straighter” and gently encourage an optimism about genetic continuance against which the work’s earlier history pushes. Myrtle’s fellating of Chicken remains, but its queer circumambience is softened, in effect localizing the act that ensures the central couple’s lurching progress toward some semblance of comic closure. Fellatio is stripped of the wadding of motif when Williams cuts the scene in which Myrtle dribbles the alcohol that Chicken pours into her mouth—“it’s stainin’ my dress,” she had complained (1968 75; 1969 56)—and deletes Chicken’s observation that “if I had married a woman with a loose mouth, I’d put a stopper in it” (1968 81; 1969 60). The crass joke about the “back door” vanishes, and the excision of Lot’s remark about his being “strange by nature” attenuates Chicken’s outsider status.

Of greater moment is Williams’s decision not to retain Myrtle’s revelation about her reproductive past. Chicken’s truncated “I don’t reckon that, no, I reckon you couldn’t” remains to convey doubt (214); but Myrtle now responds to Chicken’s implied demand by changing the subject, leaping over the disclosure that provides the transition in the 1968 text. “The deepest chord in me is the—,” she begins (214), dropping the “maternal” that had completed this sentiment earlier in the play (see, e.g., 1975 135).¹⁶ Then: “don’t that river sound louder? Or am I just more scared to death of it?” (214). Chicken is left to calculate the odds, driven by a desire to advertise his transcendence of “that ugly thing.”

The ghosts of early versions swarm and jabber in the later texts of *Kingdom of Earth*, where, I have argued, they testify to the plasticity of Williams’s conceptualizations of theme, more specifically his skepticism about heteronormative comic closure. Of course, I have been arguing about method as well as meaning. Even the best commentary has been limited by the practice of consulting only one of Williams’s “final” versions. The manuscript record has heretofore been ignored. A short review of the critical tradition with the updated textual data in mind should help make the case for the broader consideration of texts.

Critics who prefer the 1968 edition tend to find attitudes in the ending for which they cannot account, likely due to that version’s welter of references to discarded readings. Craig D. Clinton senses that the ending is “deeply nihilistic” (26) but must make Chicken into Orpheus in order to declare that “the feeling instantly conveyed [by the ending] is that there’s no hope” (35). “The flood will get them both,” he decides (35). Albert E. Kalson is subtler and more rigorous. He recognizes the play as “a curious comedy”; but he overstates the “seeming optimism of the ending” in order to regard closure, disjunctively, as “a falsification of Williams’ theme” and the conveyer of his “bleakest vision to date” (90). But the play’s history indicates ample coherency of plot

and theme; its defining disjunction comes from Williams's rending of character from convention—a move that finds Williams trying to do something new, not failing to do something familiar. The flood's "subsiding waters," Kalson argues, "must inevitably reveal not the hoped-for fertile soil on which to rebuild, but this kingdom of earth as wasteland" (90). This makes a fancy metaphor of a simple symbol. The flood, being a flood, will enrich the land, as Chicken says (see, e.g., 1975 183). Here is the play's real "bleakness": the couple's unseemly sexual past and uncertain reproductive future will isolate them in the teeming "green world" of comedy that Williams, characteristically, makes the purview of nattering choric goobers, prodigious of offspring.¹⁷ (Maggie the Cat outmaneuvers this bunch; Valentine Xavier does not.)

Analysts of the 1975 edition are confident about the couple's fertility, as well they might be, given that text's obfuscation of its past. Derounian sees Myrtle as "a procreative female," albeit lacking the "positive aspects" associated with this status (154). Jerrold A. Phillips declares that Myrtle "will bear Chicken's child" and "begin to populate a Kingdom of Earth" (353). Philip C. Kolin's muscular postcolonial reading argues that the "new society" founded by Chicken and Myrtle will be "blessed . . . with children," as a society founded by Myrtle and Lot could not be. "Paradoxically," he writes, "the whore for Chicken will become the new Eve, the mother of succeeding generations of Ravenstocks who will own property as men and women of color" (159–60). Kolin has discovered a truth about *Kingdom of Earth*: it is a radical work with a postcolonial sensibility. Further, he has rescued Williams's characters from their careless denigration by previous critics. But his optimistic forecast is redolent of the propagative and proprietary assumptions of comedy that I find Williams questioning, particularly in the 1968 edition.¹⁸ In this version, at least, we are assured that Williams knew that pregnancy demanded more than seething vengefulness and a coerced commitment. Williams did not characteristically pump up his plays with backstory and exposition. But in the case of *Kingdom of Earth*, he spent roughly four decades ascribing motivation to his characters, and surely there is benefit in consulting the bounty that testifies to his effort. Williams has given us characters too rough for comedy per se but has placed them just outside its charmed circle, there to mock the genre's prejudices and there to remake the genre in their own fallen and sullied images. This forward-looking experiment draws on a long and diverse textual past, a parade of sundry "fugitive kinds" stretching back to the author's apprenticeship.

Notes

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¹ For English editions, see Crandell A13.1.b, A30, A33, A54, AA13.V, C162. Williams considered working on the play in June 1953; in July 1954, he was "assembling [the] first draft" (*Notebooks* 569, 643). John S. Bak has Williams beginning his work in the summer of 1953 and completing a draft in September 1954 (see 143, 147). Williams made "minor revisions" for the 1969 acting edition (Gussow and Holditch 987). The 1967 *Esquire* and 2011 New Directions texts are substantively identical; Thomas Keith seems to imply that they were set from the same typescript (280). In this essay, the following sigla identify versions of the full-length play: "1967" for the first draft, dated April of that year (Harry Ransom Center, Tennessee Williams Collection 22.7); "1968?" for the version presumed to precede the first edition directly (HRC/TWC 22.9); "1968" for the first edition; "1969" for the second (acting) edition; "1974" for the manuscript titled "Revised Acting Edition," dated September of that year (HRC/TWC 22.8); and "1975" for the third edition, issued by Dramatists Play Service that year and New Directions the next (*The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. 5). The accessibility of *Theatre* has prompted me to record page numbers from that edition, which is identical to the 1975 issue in all respects save pagination. In the interest of readability, I will sometimes reference only the final edition in which a reading appears, indicating it as exemplary. Quotations referenced to more than one manuscript or edition replicate readings from the first source cited; minor variants are not recorded. My investigation has been limited by geography. I particularly regret that I have not had the opportunity to examine two potentially useful texts from the Tennessee Williams Papers at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University: a 1948 carbon of the short story (22.4) and a mimeograph of a version of the play dated June 1967 (10.12).

² "Low mimetic comedy" is Frye's term, indicating the folksier branch of the line initiated by the Aristophanic New Comedy. The mode emphasizes terminal marriage and social elevation and is hospitable to "clever and ruthless scoundrel[s]" (42). As in other modes of comedy, the expectation of genetic continuance is usually explicit and its success is assumed.

³ An electronic search of Williams's plays and fiction published by New Directions yields thirty-seven uses of adjectival forms of "swell" prior to and including 1940, four thereafter.

⁴ Derounian's interest in Williams's use of the story and play to "mock established genres" (151) does not extend to comedy. My argument is sympathetic to her claim that "the short story and play are linked by their common use of parody" (151) and, in the main, her suggestive if perhaps immoderate remark that the play "can be seen as a supreme parody of drama itself" (156).

⁵ In Bray, ed., "Williams and the Grotesque," see Brian Parker, referencing Susan Sontag, on "camp as protest by way of exaggeration . . . a way of coping with something that is unbearably painful by exaggeration, by sending it up" (188). Linda Dorff notes "the shift toward grotesque parody in some of Williams's later plays" and finds "a voice of outrage, or violent critique" in Williams's "notion of the outrageous" (13).

⁶ Writing in 1987, Eva Bornemann cites this passage in noting that "to take the sheets" is "an expression dating back from the early fifties and long since *obs[olete]*" (101).

⁷ In the full-length plays, Chicken tells the kneeling Myrtle, "you don't have to look in my face, my face ain't all they is to me" (e.g., 1975 202).

⁸ In 1968 Walter Kerr could not comprehend the "terror" that Estelle Parsons conveyed as

Myrtle when she realizes her dependency on Chicken (315).

⁹ Derounian, working with the 1975 text, is similarly puzzled: “Presumably, Williams hoped that the threat of flood was sufficient cause for his characters’ actions” (156).

¹⁰ Williams was working on both *Kingdom of Earth* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in July 1954. “Although totally different in background,” he wrote to Audrey Wood, “the plays are complementary in theme” (*Notebooks* 644n937).

¹¹ “A lot of the grotesque comedy” in *Camino Real*, Williams wrote in 1953, “is traceable to the spirit of the American comic strip and the animated cartoons” (“To Atkinson” 469). See also Dorff on Williams’s “parodic” adaptation of the “aesthetics of the cartoon” (16).

¹² Dakin Williams asserts that his brother “hated” the title that producer David Merrick used for the 1968 production (273); the playwright distanced himself from the title in a 1981 interview with Dotson Rader (see 335–36). Cf. Wood: “It was Tennessee who retitled the play” (193).

¹³ Williams withdrew Chicken’s attempt to make Lot a fellator, in which capacity Lot had means of retaliation. A crossed-out passage in “Spiritchel Gates” reads: “Lot wouldn do it excep one time I held his nose an made him an then he bit me an I had to give him a lickin” (n. pag.). Chicken is fascinated by Myrtle’s description of her televised coronation as a “Queen,” which he calls “a bitch of a story” (e.g., 1975 149). Thomas P. Adler implies the nature of Chicken’s attraction to Myrtle when he observes that Lot “bestow[s] his wife on Chicken . . . just as the Biblical Lot offers his virgin daughters to the sodomites” (“Two Plays” 6; Adler’s lowercasing). My best guess is that Williams intends a joke about Lot’s wife and Chicken’s “pillar of salt.”

¹⁴ This presumptive diagnosis benefited from the commentary of two M.D.s who prefer to remain anonymous. Myrtle is roughly thirty years old (see, e.g., 1967 1.4).

¹⁵ Williams was evidently inspired by a director’s edited script for a ca. 1974 revival at a “small, remote house on the [West] Coast” (*Memoirs* 212; see also “Let Me Hang” 173).

¹⁶ Myrtle has already shown herself unable to speak the word “maternal” in Chicken’s presence (see, e.g., 1975 184). Williams retained a version of the fuller passage, mentioning an unspecified number of adoptions, as late as September 1974 (see 1974 2.3.42).

¹⁷ The “Man’s Voice” in the first scene sarcastically tells Chicken, “Sorry we don’t have room fo’ *you* in the car” (e.g. 1975 126). The presence of children in the car is more clearly established in several early versions, where the woman calls the man “Daddy” (e.g., 1968 2).

¹⁸ Michael S. D. Hooper’s response to Kolin’s racialized reading, based like that argument on the 1975 text, also assumes Myrtle’s fertility (see 143, 147).

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