Maenads and Metatheatre: Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* as Euripidean Myth

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In 1957 Tennessee Williams reworked his earlier play, *Battle of Angels*, into *Orpheus Descending*. The play was not a success; premiering on Broadway on March 21, it closed after two months of negative reviews. Already suffering from depression, Williams underwent an intense period of psychoanalysis, the results of which are often read into his subsequent (and off-Broadway) work, *Suddenly Last Summer*.[1] In a characteristic assessment, Donald Spoto argues that the play is "painfully autobiographical" and written in a "confused trance of guilt and remorse"; it is "a confessional drama that dealt with his demons not by avoiding them . . . but by asserting that guilt and working through it: confession to begin the healing process" (243–44).

The thematic implications of this apparent exercise have dominated critical discussion of *Suddenly*. According to Nancy Tischler, the play "reflects the psychic imbalance the author experienced in this period. No other play by Tennessee Williams so directly calls for the adjective *sick*" (262). Tischler believes that this sickness derives from the play's "neurotic" depiction of the consequences of repressed homosexuality, the "inevitable punishment" for one who has used "other people in violation of their human dignity" (262). Alan Sinfield similarly identifies the work as "Williams's most homophobic play," the product of his attempt to "get into the public domain an analysis of the harassment suffered by sexual dissidents in that society" (192–93). Both Ronald Hayman and Michael S. D. Hooper attempt to redress these criticisms; they align the character Sebastian with Williams, but argue for a more nuanced reading of the play's presentation of homosexuality. John Clum sees Sebastian as a "dead gay man," "another invisible homosexual" (29), but also reads, in his similarity to Doctor Sugar, Williams's suggestion that "the narrative of [Sebastian's] death keeps his vision and sexuality alive" (34). For Foster Hirsch, the play is Williams's "ultimate homophile fantasy" (53). Most readings maintain this focus on the role of Sebastian as a repressed homosexual—variously

martyr, saint, and sadist—and on the implications of that sexuality to his relationships with his cousin Catharine and his mother.

Such readings are encouraged both by Williams's overtly subjective approach toward his writing and by the play itself, with its references to Saint Sebastian; with a mother who speaks of herself as "attracting" men for her son; with Catharine's claims to have procured young men for a cousin "famished for blonds" (375); and with its final account of the pursuit, murder, and cannibalistic consumption of its hero by a "band of frightfully thin and dark naked children" (415) in Cabeza de Lobo.[2] They are further encouraged by the work's apparent resonance with Williams's 1946 short story "Desire and the Black Masseur," published in 1948.[3] In that story, the thirty-year-old Anthony Burns fulfils his desire to be "swallowed . . . up" (205), to atone "through the surrender of self to violent treatment by others" (206) by submitting himself to sexual pleasure and the pain of violence in the hands of a giant black masseur. In a parody of the Eucharist, the masseur fulfills this relationship by eating Burns's body on Easter Sunday: "Yes, it is perfect, he thought, it is now completed" (212). In its invocation of Christian mythology and symbolic cannibalism—and in its dramatization of desire as atonement and self-sacrifice, the story seems to foreground the themes of repression, homosexual desire, and sacrifice so frequently identified in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Sebastian is, "like Anthony Burns, devoured by 'the other' with whom he has been engaged in paid acts of sex" (Clum 32). He "does not seek atonement, but he gets it nonetheless" (Clum 33).

Such interpretations engage with the biographical background of the dramas and with prominent, consistent themes across the works. In so doing, however, they risk ignoring another dominant preoccupation in the play: theatre itself. Williams's crisis in 1957 was by his own account occasioned by the reception of *Orpheus Descending*: "I was terribly shocked by its reception"; "I had invested so much of myself in it. I had worked longer at it than any other play" (qtd. in Ross 51). This work, he feared, had forfeited his essential audience: "with *Orpheus* I felt I was no longer acceptable to the theatre public. Maybe, I thought, they'd had too much of a certain dish, and maybe they don't want to eat any more" (qtd. in Ross 52). As Hooper observes, "while Williams's sexual orientation may have been discussed extensively during the sessions with his psychoanalyst," it "seems likely that writing was inextricably linked with this" therapy (77).

The majority of critical receptions continue to read *Suddenly Last Summer* in psychosexual, biographical terms. This reading, however, risks overlooking the extent to which the play offers a concerted aesthetic response to the negative reception of *Orpheus Descending*. Engaging overtly with the idea of audience, dramatist, and the necessary theatricality of truthful expression, the play further enforces these themes through the overriding structure of a relatively unexplored influence: Euripides's *Bacchae*.

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As many have had occasion to observe, Williams's ideal of theatre was informed by an unabashedly Romantic sensibility, where theatre resists realist representation, encourages metaphorical readings, and aspires to the condition of myth.[4] In his foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams himself declared that "there is something much bigger in life and death than we have become aware of (or adequately recorded in our living and dying)" (7). This statement resonates with Catharine's claim in *Suddenly Last Summer*: "I DIDN'T invent it. I know it's a hideous story but it's a true story of our time and the world we live in" (382). As Gerald Berkowitz notes, Williams consequently created settings "defined, theatrically or symbolically, as being someplace else, a spot cut off from the rest of the universe." This theatre would force the audience "to accept its natives as norms, while we . . . are the outsiders and misfits" (713).

According to Williams, he had diverged most clearly from this aesthetic in *Orpheus Descending*. He had come closest to "writing directly" about "what goes on in certain parts of the country": "I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive; I don't want to be one of these people who hit the nail on the head all the time" (qtd. in Wager 128, 129). In his next play, however, Williams offered an implicit corrective to the previous work, promising a "nonrealistic" play (Ross 52). Objecting to the film adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer*, which had offered a literal depiction of the events narrated in the play, he declared, "the play was an *allegory*, and consisted mainly of two monologues" (Grauerholz 304). As a result, "when you began to see Mrs. Venable, and it became so realistic . . . it was a travesty. It was about how people devour each other in an *allegorical* sense" (Grauerholz 304). Similarly, he observed, "I was so offended by the literal approach because the play was metaphorical; it was a sort of poem, I thought" (Brown 27).

This emphasis on theatre as "a sort of poem" is embodied in the structure and themes of *Suddenly Last Summer*. As with *Orpheus Descending*, the play encourages a metaphorical reading. Unlike that work, however, it attempts to ensure that reading by foregrounding the thematic significance of dramatic performance and creativity.[5] As Christopher Bigsby observes, Williams tends to grant a "central significance" to "the theatricalising imagination of his characters," suggesting that "the activity of the imagination is itself evidence of a surviving vitality—nervous, neurotic, but real" (77). For Bigsby, Williams creates in Sebastian Venable a quintessential artist figure who is both "sinister" and limited, confined by a "passivity that becomes the source of evil" (101). This figure is "not an adequate image of Williams as a writer," but he embodies the playwright's essential anxiety about being consumed by that which he attempts to observe and transform into art: "metaphor collapses and becomes literal precisely because there is no longer any space between the perceiving mind and the world" (102).

Such readings, however, depend upon an acceptance of the veracity of the accounts of Mrs. Venable and Catharine. In *Suddenly Last Summer*, the "theatricalising imagination" is most manifest not in the art and life of Sebastian, but in the dramatic language of the two voices that define his life and legacy and that structure the play itself. Unlike Blanche DuBois, Laura Wingfield, or Val Xavier, these characters are not just imaginative spirits or artists but are themselves dramatists, the primary poets of the theatre through which the events of the play are to be received. Through the monologues of these characters, Sebastian becomes the subject of a performed drama. In dramatizing the effect (and potential "truth") of this performance on a staged audience, Williams offers an implicit commentary on his own aesthetic attempts to present allegorical truth on the modern stage.

This commentary is further reinforced by the play's clear allusion to central themes, events, and formal structures in the *Bacchae*. Although Clum likens "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer* to "the mad extremes of Euripides' *The Bacchae*" (34), he does not push the comparison further, and the parallels between the plays remain curiously underexplored by other critics. Janice Siegel observes that Williams "studied classical literature in at least two of the three universities he attended," and his writings indicate a "keen personal interest" in the tradition (539). Despite offering what is as of yet the only close comparison of the two works, she finds most of her critical material in the film version, whose screenwriter (Gore Vidal) she cites as having argued that "the *Bacchae* is almost the same plot as the end of *Suddenly Last Summer*" (540). Siegel focuses upon scenes added or expanded upon in the film, the very realist renderings to which Williams objected so strenuously. She also relies heavily upon the narration of Catharine and Violet—an interpretation enabled considerably by the film, which chooses to present their version of events as literal truth. As a closer consideration of the play itself reveals, however, Williams invokes the Euripides drama to underline a precedent in theatre and myth. In so doing, he suggests the universality of the themes he presents—and enforces the contemporary significance of the dramatic form through which they are articulated.

Both the *Bacchae* and *Suddenly Last Summer* are characterized by a male protagonist strongly devoted to his mother, and both protagonists share with their mother an Apollonian resistance to the truth of sensual experience.[6] In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus arrives to avenge himself on Agave and her family. Angered by the denial of his divine status and a refusal to worship his mother, Dionysus reveals that he has enchanted and compelled the women of Thebes to wander the mountains, raising the "Bacchic shout" in "fawnskin cloak" (182).[7] Despite his violent rejection of Dionysus, Pentheus is curious to witness his mother under the spell of Bacchic rites. This curiosity eventually leads to his death at the hands of Agave; despite his appeals, she is unable to recognize her

own son until he has been killed. Unlike Agave, of course, Mrs. Venable never yields to the "truth" of Dionysian experience.[8] Nonetheless, she is forced to bear witness to the destruction of her son by the very forces she has attempted to repress and deny.

Like Sebastian, Pentheus tries to indulge his voyeuristic curiosity and remain removed from the natural instincts that he awakens. When he captures the Stranger (Dionysus in human form), he is fascinated by his sensual beauty, noting "long curls" "cascading close over" cheeks, "most seductively" (195). Following a series of questions about the nature of the Bacchic rites, he recognizes that he is being "baited" to "rouse" his curiosity (195). Nonetheless, he is tempted by the Stranger's offer to let him witness the mysteries of that which he seeks to destroy:

> DIONYSUS: Would you like to see those women, sitting together, there in the mountains?
>
> PENTHEUS: Yes, indeed; I would give a large sum of gold to see them. (206)

As the stage directions assert, "from now on Dionysus gradually establishes a complete ascendancy over Pentheus" (206). In the second lengthy monologue of the play, a messenger describes how the stranger took Pentheus first to a "grassy glade," then to a "valley full of streams, with cliffs on either side" (215), not unlike the exclusive beach from which Sebastian partially observes the young boys. Like Sebastian, Pentheus exposes himself to the destructive natural impulses he has attempted to deny: "I cannot clearly make out these pretended worshippers . . . if I climbed a towering pine-tree on the cliff-side I could have a proper view of their shameful behaviour" (215). With this admission, Pentheus discloses himself in a situation similar to that of Sebastian, whose movement into the afternoons and the "blazing white" sun (420) render him vulnerable to that which he attempts to deny and control: "the wretched man sat there trapped and helpless" (216). Summoned by Dionysus, Cadmus's daughters destroy Pentheus: "every hand was thick red with blood; and they were tossing and catching, to and fro, like a ball, the flesh of Pentheus" (217). Awakened into an awareness of what she has done, Agave mourns her son in a language not unlike that of the bereft and aged Mrs. Venable: "now I long only to compose my son's body for burial, and lament for him . . . let me touch my son, and say farewell to that dear body which I loved, and destroyed unknowing" (224).

Such echoes reinforce Williams's anthropomorphic reading of the *Bacchae*.[9] Throughout that play, Pentheus is suggested to be excessively violent in his attempts to imprison and kill the Stranger. Vowing to "punish this man who has taught" his citizens their lunacy, he orders the arrest and imminent stoning of the Stranger, "this effeminate foreigner" (192). While Cadmus and Teiresias recognize the necessity of acknowledging this god, Pentheus refuses to believe in his existence. Incapable of comprehending "some

pretence of Bacchic worship" whereby the women have left their homes to dance "on the mountain side" (188), he determines to apprehend and imprison the god's followers: "go immediately to the place of augury where Teiresias practices, smash it with crowbars, knock down the walls, turn everything upside down" (192). Teiresias, the only character to go unpunished by Dionysus, encourages a much more tolerant approach: "You rely on force; but it is not force that governs human affairs" (191); "self-control in all things depends on our own natures"; "a chaste-minded woman will come to no harm in the rites of Bacchus" (191). This representation is reinforced by the first extended monologue in the drama, in which a messenger describes to Pentheus the sensual, natural, and peaceful beauty of the women in the hills: "some rested on beds of pine-needles, some had pillows of oak-leaves . . . [they lay] with modesty in their posture"; "if you had been there and seen all this, you would have entreated with prayers this god whom you now accuse" (202–3).

In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus becomes violent only because his existence has been denied and his followers persecuted. His maenads similarly become destructive only when pursued. Thus, the more Pentheus attempts to contain the Stranger, the more vehement and destructive Dionysus becomes. Similarly, when an observer determines to win favour by attempting to imprison Agave, the maenads become wildly violent. In imagery that resonates with that of *Suddenly Last Summer*, the messenger describes the women as being "like birds, skimming the ground as they ran," bearing down "like an enemy army" on nearby villages before returning to the hills where they wash off the blood (204). As E. R. Dodds observes, "the 'moral' of the *Bacchae* is that we ignore at our peril the demand of the human spirit for Dionysiac experience" (xlv). In himself, "Dionysus is beyond good and evil; for us . . . he is what we make of him":

> But those who repress the demand in themselves or refuse its satisfaction to others transform it by their act into a power of disintegration and destruction, a blind natural force that sweeps away the innocent with the guilty. When that has happened, it is too late to reason or to plead: in man's justice there is room for pity, but there is none in the justice of Nature; to our 'Ought' its sufficient reply is the simple 'Must'; we have no choice but to accept that reply and to endure as we may. (xlv)

In the events and structure of *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams enforces and reworks a very similar reading to suggest the continuing resonance of these themes in contemporary life and art.

The superficial—if striking—similarities between the two plays only begin to underline the extent to which Williams invokes and expands upon the earlier drama in order to enforce his central thematic and structural concern with the consequences of repression in both life and art.[10] According to Catharine and Mrs. Venable, Sebastian's

life and poetry are characterized by a willed abstinence. This abstinence is marked by a confined and confining definition of poetry—and by Sebastian's dangerous refusal to acknowledge his own innate (and sexual) humanity. Throughout the play, Williams reinforces a relationship between natural instinct and dramatic poetry and performance. The play constantly qualifies the perceived artistry of Sebastian himself, establishing an implicit conflict between a contained literary art and the artistic truth, communal relevance, and spiritual urgency of the stage. Sebastian's poems are unheard, unperformed, and unread, celebrated alone by his mother: "he wrote one poem a year which he printed himself on an eighteenth-century hand press at his—atelier in the—French—Quarter—so no one but he could see it" (353). When Mrs. Venable venerates his work as evidence of "his life going *on*," the "thin gilt-edged volume" remains closed and silent (353). In the context of the play, such artistic solipsism both reflects and manifests a destructive instinct toward abstinence and self-repression.

According to Mrs. Venable, she and Sebastian constructed their lives as art, carving out a "trail of days like a gallery of sculpture" (363). That art, however, conforms to a restrictive and implicitly artificial Apollonian ideal. Violet asserts, "it takes character to refuse to grow old" (360): she and Sebastian "were young, and stayed young" (359). This phenomenon is defined by a mutual "abstention" (360) that does not just deny the effects of time; it also denies natural physical instincts. Thus, where Violet celebrates Sebastian's self-discipline in eating only "a single lean chop and lime juice on a salad" (360), Catharine decries his practice of starving himself, noting instead his reliance on pills. For Violet, such restraint ensures a "grandeur" that resists aging and ugliness; in Catharine's account, it manifests a desperate attempt to forestall the natural and inevitable: "suddenly, last summer, he wasn't young any more" (409)—"he was having a bad time with his heart and was frightened about it" (414). As the play emphasizes, such discipline can construct only an artificial, unnatural, and inevitably tenuous ideal. In two photographs taken twenty years apart, Violet sees evidence of her son's refusal to age; the Doctor, however—a relatively impartial observer—is able immediately to differentiate between the two.

This unnaturalness clearly extends beyond a willed abstinence from food and conventional social practices. Catharine observes that Sebastian "talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu. . . . I think because he was really nearly half-starved from living on pills and salads" (375). Like "Desire and the Black Masseur," the play equates consumption and hunger with desire. Unlike that story, however, it focuses on the inevitably violent consequences of an attempt to deny that instinct. Thus, although Mrs. Venable characterizes her son as an Apollonian ideal, the language in which she presents that ideal is itself highly sexualized. Such language hints at the extent to which the relationship is defined (or deformed) by the repression of fundamental instincts.

Sebastian produces a yearly poem after a nine-month period of preparation: "the length of a pregnancy, yes"; "*impossible*" to "deliver" without her (354). Abandoning her husband to assert her position as part of an ageless couple, Violet insists on her son's "c-h-a-s-t-e" and "chased" life, at the same time enforcing her identification with that "*private* life": "we had to be very fleet-footed I can tell you" (360–61).

In the dramatic expressiveness of her words and gestures, Violet further reveals a sensual instinct that she otherwise represses into the "legend" of herself and her son. The implications of this repression are also suggested in her behavior toward the Doctor, whom she hopes to bribe into performing a lobotomy on Catharine. In his cold beauty the Doctor bears a superficial resemblance to the descriptions of Sebastian himself; indeed, as Judith Thompson argues extensively, he can be read as Sebastian's alter ego. Although Violet speaks to him as a wealthy old woman to an objective specialist, the opening stage directions specify that she is also acting upon a natural, "*undeliberate response to his icy charm*" (350). Throughout her narrative, Mrs. Venable interacts physically with the doctor: "*he returns her smile*" (351); "*she staggers; he assists her toward a chair*" (354). She also becomes subtly flirtatious, confusing him by asking if his "hindlegs" are still on him as he assists her to her chair (358), and offering a "*sudden, sweet smile*" (365) as he lights her cigarette. This apparent attraction is articulated subtly and indirectly. Nonetheless, it grants an extra resonance to Violet's query, "aren't we always more interested in a thing that concerns us personally, Doctor?" (367). The relationship between the two is motivated by Violet's violent need to repress and excise the story of Catharine. This relationship elides the professional and personal both in terms of Violet's hatred of the story—and in terms of her own implicit, repressed desire. This desire manifests itself indirectly in her sexualized assertions about the chastity of her son, in her flirtations with the doctor who resembles that son, and in the half-acknowledged power Violet maintains over the Doctor's marriage and professional future.

In both accounts, Sebastian similarly represses an elemental sensual instinct. His initial response to the Encantadas, for example, is to impose even more restrictions upon himself: "he'd promised those sly Buddhist monks that he would give up the world and himself and all his worldly possessions" (358). Nonetheless, Sebastian slowly reveals and indulges a fundamental curiosity about that which he would ignore. Lured from the monks back into a Jungian "world of light and shadow" by his mother, he surrounds himself with an "entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young" (359). As subsequent events suggest, Sebastian both acts upon and denies the full implications of a half-acknowledged sensual instinct. This response becomes more apparent in his relationship with Catharine, following the "smashing" of the illusion of ageless, transcendent beauty maintained with (or by) his mother. Catharine declares that she loved him in "the only way he'd accept:—a sort of motherly way" (397). The term "motherly"

has been rendered ambiguous by the nature of Violet's account; Catharine—perhaps like Violet herself—represses her desire in order to enable the relationship. Catharine had initially responded to Sebastian's "kindness" by "holding onto his arm and leaning on his shoulder," "appreciating his kindness more than he wanted me to" (406). Although Sebastian rejects this interest, he is implicitly forced into a greater awareness of the instincts it represents, just as Catharine's scandal implicitly draws him to choose her as his next companion.

In Catharine's account, Sebastian diverges even further from his mother by beginning to act upon these instincts. In the Encantadas, Sebastian had "spent that whole blazing equatorial day in the crow's nest of the schooner" (357) watching a "sand all alive" with birds "tearing the undersides [of sea turtles] open and rending and eating their flesh" (356). He indulges a similar voyeuristic instinct during his last summer, simultaneously awakening and attempting to repress his sensual instincts. He "suddenly switched from the evenings to the beach" (409); as Violet's shocked reaction suggests, this decision reveals a willingness to both engage and expose himself in an uncharacteristic manner. At the same time, however, Sebastian attempts to control and limit this engagement; he uses Catharine to "procure" (412) for him. Although the beach is public, it is not free; "there was a fence between the free beach and the one that we went to" (411). In using Catharine, and in indulging his curiosity only to a certain extent, Sebastian constructs a similar "fence" between himself and what that free beach represents. Eventually, however, he steps further into the sun; he no longer relies upon Catharine, and "the ones on the free beach [begin] to climb over the fence or swim around it" (413).

Through the accounts of Catharine and Mrs. Venable, Williams dramatizes the consequences of violent repression: the more Sebastian indulges but attempts to restrain his instincts, the more violent the boys became. He allows the wild, "homeless, hungry young people" to follow him (413), but he also tries to restrain their energy by imposing social boundaries: "he'd pass out tips among them as if they'd all—shined his shoes" (413). In the context of a drama focused so consistently on abstinence, self-denial, and sensuality, the "hungry" figures awakened by Sebastian suggest a manifestation of his own repressed sensual instincts and knowledge. Catharine observes that "Sebastian began to be frightened": once aroused and rejected, the children become increasingly wild in appearance ("naked," "frightfully thin and dark" [415]) and primal in their behavior. Instead of appeasing these demands by "feeding" the children, Sebastian pops his pills and attempts to reassert social hierarchies ("beggars are a social disease in this country" [415]), ordering the waiters to remove the children. The more these increasingly allegorical children are denied, however, the more violent they become. Reinforcing a Dionysian significance to the encounter, their cries of "*pan, pan, pan*" underline the

play's equation of abstinence and hunger with an elemental sensuality: "they made gobbling noises with their little black mouths, stuffing their little black firsts to their mouths and making those gobbling noises, with frightful grins!" (415).

Catharine's account enforces a thematic emphasis on the dangers of unnatural, violent repression. It also encourages a reading of this theme in aesthetic terms, a recognition of the forcefulness of the dramatic language through which such inherent truths can be revealed. Williams encourages this interpretation from the start of the play, as Mrs. Venable recognizes the danger of Catharine's story in similarly aesthetic terms: she is a "*vandal*": "with her tongue for a hatchet she's gone about smashing our legend" (363). In her violent attempt to repress this implicitly more natural (because truthful) art, Mrs. Venable only succeeds in ensuring the full destruction of her constructed legend. This destruction is manifest in the consumption of Sebastian's legend within Catharine's story and in its final acceptance by her audience. It is also manifest in the extent to which the chaste literary legend enforced by Mrs. Venable has been superseded by an equally aestheticized but implicitly more resonant mythology. In a language that evokes pagan ritual and sacrifice, Catharine recounts the pursuit of Sebastian "up the blazing white street" (421) to the percussive sound of "tin cans strung together" and "bits of metal that had been flattened out, made into—. . . . *cymbals!*" (417). He screams "just once before this flock of black plucked little birds" overtakes and devours him, tearing and cutting "parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with":

> There wasn't a sound any more, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been *torn, thrown, crushed!*—against that blazing white wall. (421–22)

These final events and images resonate forcefully with the themes and narrative of the *Bacchae*. As such, they reinforce the mythical and artistic status of Catharine's account and further qualify the truth and art of Mrs. Venable's constructed legend. Furthermore, in establishing a thematic and narrative similarity between the two plays, Williams simultaneously suggests the archetypal significance of his own themes and offers an implicit validation of the dramatic form in which they are expressed. He further underlines this emphasis by alluding to other myths. According to Linda Dorff, *Suddenly Last Summer* marks a distinct movement away from Williams's previous "use of mythic structure" and the moment when he "questions the viability of mythic strategies to present 'a true story of our time and the world we live in'" (157). The play is less obvious and literal in its allusions than *Orpheus Descending*.[11] Nonetheless, as Thompson notes, it offers echoes and permutations of the myths of Saint Sebastian, Saint Catherine of Bologna, and Attis and Cybele—not to mention Freud's discussion of the Oedipus

complex in relation to male homosexuality.[12] Identifying in Dr. Cukrowicz the "role of ironic Savior" (123), Thompson also recognizes in the play a continuation of Williams's frequent fascination with Christian mythology.

This latter, more developed allusion focuses most consistently around a nebulous ideal of transcendence and salvation. Holding her son's "Poem of Summer" as if she were "*elevating the Host before the altar*," Violet takes on the "*look of a visionary, an exalted* religieuse" (353). Violet enforces the transcendent and implicitly redemptive power both of her son's poetry and of the "art" that they forge of their lives: Sebastian "did want to offer his work to the world" after his death; "here is my son's work . . . here's his life going *on!*" (353). In contrast, Catharine's account offers a grotesque parody of Eucharistic consumption. Sebastian succumbs to a different definition of life-as-art, one characterized by a sensuality, violence, and destruction that vandalizes and "smash[es]" the "c-h-a-s-t-e" legend proclaimed by Mrs. Venable (361). Despite its violence, this rewriting of Christian mythology implicitly saves Sebastian himself, enabling his rebirth into a dramatic "poem" recognized by Catharine's audience and reinforced by the play as a whole.

The allusions to the *Bacchae,* however, allow Williams to invoke and rework myth into a larger discourse about dramatic art itself. Throughout *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams associates repressive tendencies not just with the artistic ideal celebrated by Mrs. Venable but with any form of written expression removed from performance or audience. According to Violet, Sebastian visits the Galapagos Islands on the basis of a description by Herman Melville: "extinct volcanos, looking much as the world at large might look—after a last conflagration—end quote. He read me that description and said that we had to go there" (355). Instead of encountering an absolute, inscribed truth about the end of the world, however, they witness the violence of an incomprehensible natural order in the maternal abandonment, hatching, and destruction of baby sea turtles by "flesh-eating birds that made the sky almost as black as the beach" (356). In his mother's account, Sebastian is traumatized: he "was looking for God" (357), but encountered a very different reality from that described by Melville. The play invites its audience to contemplate the extent to which Sebastian's subsequent crisis is influenced by the contrast between his acceptance of a written "truth" and his lived experience. As presented in Violet's narrative, this experience demands recognition of a natural savagery, disorder, and mystery that is artificially contained, if not excised, from the published testimony.

This suggestion of the repressive potential of written expression is reinforced in Catharine's account. Attracted to a man at a Mardi Gras ball, she follows him outside, where they are drawn "through the wet grass to the great misty oaks as if somebody was calling us for help there!" (398). Despite the naturalness of this sexual encounter, she

learns that her lover is married, and she confronts him angrily and publicly. It is after this public event, she declares, that she started to write her diary "in the third person, singular, such as 'She's still living this morning'" (399). This activity is an attempt at self-control and repression, an effort to distance herself from an experience she can barely define: "WHAT'S NEXT FOR HER? GOD KNOWS!" (399). Catharine uses her journal to distance herself from the truth, uncertainty, and apparent scandal of her own experience and self. In so doing, she attempts to conform to the conventional social values and standards embodied by her family and initially by the Doctor, whose ideal of female expression exists in a lobotomy patient who no longer babbles obscenities.[13]

The play condemns such efforts, valuing instead the necessary bravery of truthful and *public* self-expression. Although she has tried to confine herself in a third-person journal, Catharine is constantly compelled into an implicitly more natural, instinctive form of narrative. The doctor gives her an injection after her expostulation, suggesting a social intolerance of such narratives. That injection (of truth serum), however, only validates the truth of Catharine's subsequent violent account—an account that again recognizes in written expression a repressive, socially sanctioned form of self-control. According to Catharine, as Sebastian begins to act upon his loneliness and sexual curiosity, his "empty Blue Jay notebook" gets "bigger and bigger" (412). In the first printing of the play (April 1958), the Doctor had earlier recounted his pride and relief at hearing his lobotomy patient whisper: "'Oh, how blue the sky is!'" (107).[14] In language that echoes this account, Catharine notes that the notebook got "so big it was big and empty as that big empty blue sea and sky" (412–13). Where the doctor's patient has had her brain "cut" to whisper about a blue sky in conventional clichés, Sebastian has rejected such expectations. This transformation is signified most prominently in his abandonment of writing as his life and occupation—and in his pursuit of the very natural elements he perceives as absent from Melville's written accounts. Thus, where Violet describes turtles destroyed by "flesh-eating birds" (356), Catharine witnesses Sebastian's fascination with and eventual consumption by "a band of frightfully thin and dark naked children that looked like a flock of plucked birds" (415).

Catharine characterizes her own fear of this violent, more mysterious, but inevitably more truthful reality: no longer needed to procure for her cousin, she would go "to a faraway empty end of the beach, write postcards and letters and keep up [her]—third-person journal" (413). Although she can write her journal in the third person, however, she is unable to restrain herself within the implicitly more truthful mode of dramatic declaration: "WHEN CAN I STOP RUNNING DOWN THAT STEEP WHITE STREET IN CABEZA DE LOBO?" (374); "Somebody said once or wrote, once: 'We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks!'" (375). Once she is injected with the truth serum, Catharine's language

becomes even more passionate and metaphorical. In dramatizing the inevitable truth to such unrestrained, performed modes of self-expression, Williams both reinforces his thematic preoccupation with the dangers of unnatural repression and aligns that theme with the overarching aesthetic of the play itself.

For Williams, the truth of dramatic art lies in its challenge to repressive conventions and its articulation of universal themes. This expression is necessarily artistic, unrestrained by the chaste Apollonian ideal celebrated by Mrs. Venable and her son. Indeed, in Violet's dramatic account, Williams suggests an inherent conflict between her assertion of an ordered and controlled reality and her awareness of a fundamentally unknowable violence and natural savagery. Enforcing a contrast between Violet's narrative and the violent, expressive and disordered language of her monologue, Williams offers a dramatization of the necessary honesty compelled (or revealed) by dramatic expression. Violet's account breaks from conventional modes of discourse, suggesting an intuitive awareness of the language through which an audience must be moved and persuaded into an appreciation of truth. This language is characterized by poetic extremes, incomplete or extended sentences, and melodramatic declarations:

> No, you *don't* see, yet, but before I'm through, you will.—Sebastian was a poet! That's what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet and—vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can't separate them, I mean—well, for instance, a salesman's work is one thing and his life is another—or can be. The same thing's true of—doctor, lawyer, merchant, *thief*! (351–52)

Violet's expressive language and gestures contrast with the artistic ideal she celebrates; by dramatizing this conflict, Williams implicitly validates his own more overtly Dionysian, dramatic aesthetic.

Like the *Bacchae*, *Suddenly Last Summer* is dominated by two key monologues: neither stages the violent action that forms the thematic focus of the drama. As Dodds has argued, "this severity of form seems to be deliberate" (xx) and ensures a powerful "tension between the classical formality of its style and structure and the strange religious experiences which it depicts" (xv).[15] Throughout the play, Williams similarly creates clear thematic parallels between the apparent fate of Sebastian, the performative instincts of the staged characters, and the formal devices of his own play to dramatize the potential consequences of unnatural self-repression in both life and art. Sebastian himself, of course, exists only within the competing dramatic accounts of Catharine and Violet. These expressions are themselves contained within a work that calls continuous attention to itself as drama, vehemently anti-realist and self-consciously subjective. The play refrains from staging or confirming the violence of Sebastian's demise; even more so than the *Bacchae*, it contains its narrative at the level of language rather than action.

Furthermore, it underlines this containment by restricting that narrative to two dramatic monologues. Ultimately, these monologues refuse to concede the drama's narrative conceit; their stylistic similarities challenge any absolute conflict between Mrs. Venable and Catharine. Thus, when Violet asserts the importance of silencing Catharine, she articulates that anxiety in a language characterized by desperate repetition not unlike the "babbling" she condemns:

> She *babbles*! . . . She babbled, babbled!—smashing my son's reputation.—On the *Berengaria* bringing her back to the States she broke out of the stateroom and babbled, babbled; even at the airport when she was flown down here, she babbled. (364)

Furthermore, although Mrs. Venable wants to "*cut this hideous story out of* [*Catharine's*] *brain*" (423), the origins and imagery of that story already exist within her own earlier account about the Encantadas. Both accounts detail a violent and destructive natural event in language that describes black birds, elemental noise, rapid movement and flight, and searing white heat. In the context of a drama that structures itself as an absolute conflict between two narratives, this resonance hints at the ultimate falsity of such oppositions. It also underlines the presence of a playwright who accepts and unites disparate elements to present an overarching truth within his own creative voice.

Such stylistic elisions between the two accounts draw inevitable attention to the creative voice of a playwright unwilling to enforce "artificial" divisions either between his characters or between himself and his art. Throughout the play, Williams subverts his own structural conceit to emphasize the sympathetic, commenting, and creative presence of the playwright himself within the drama. As Violet speaks of the "flesh-eating birds," for example, "*we hear the wild, ravenous, harsh cries of the birds. The sound comes in rhythmic waves like a savage chant*" (356). Similarly, toward the end of Catharine's recitation, "*there are various sound effects. The percussive sounds described are very softly employed*" (420). Like many of Williams's works, the play's stage directions immediately declare the subjective presence and thematic sympathies of the playwright himself. Calling for an unrealistic set, they detail a jungle-garden whose colors "*are violent*": "*massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature. . . .*" (349). These directions resonate with the fate of Sebastian recounted at the end of the play: in their emphasis on the primeval, they hint at the elemental and ritualistic nature of that fate—and the veracity of Catharine's account. In so doing, they subjectively endorse the conclusion of the Doctor that "we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true" (423).

For Williams, self-expression is essential to dramatic truth: he enforces this preoccupation through both Violet and Catharine, who are implicitly compelled (despite

themselves) into dramatic revelations. These revelations are themselves necessarily informed by the subjective instincts of both dramatists. Where Violet is compelled by her desperate attempt to maintain the legend of herself and Sebastian, Catharine is compelled not just by a truth serum, but by her innate sexual instincts. Catharine becomes aware of the Doctor as the "young blond man" watching her through the window, "staring" at her in a manner that resonates with Sebastian's restrained voyeurism (373). This reading is further encouraged in Catharine's instinctive response to the truth serum, which is to press "*her lips to his fiercely, clutching his body against her*" (403). The play suggests that this response is occasioned not just by the serum, but by the implicit "truth" of the Doctor's request as he administers the injection: "Give me all your resistance. See. I'm holding my hand out. I want you to put yours in mine and give me all your resistance" (402). When Catharine recovers from her "violent" embrace of the Doctor, he has obtained an implicit mastery over her: she asks him, "where do I start the story?" (405), and he guides her through the initial structuring of the tale.

By the end of the play, of course, the Doctor's control has been challenged by the reality and drama of Catharine's tale: he is unable to "[*break*] *his concentration on Catharine*" (410); he demands that Mrs. Venable not interrupt the account, and he saves Catharine from Mrs. Venable's assault. In these encounters, Williams reinforces the intuitive, natural instincts that inform both the dramatic presentations and their reception by their audience. He also reinforces the role of the Doctor as a representative audience-figure—one who becomes increasingly susceptible to the dramatic narratives with which he is confronted. "*Young*," "*blond*," characterized by an "*icy charm*" (350), he bears a superficial resemblance to Violet's description of a chaste and removed Sebastian. When Mrs. Venable asserts an "attitude toward life that's hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes were crowded out of their palaces and gardens by successful shopkeepers!" (362), he listens patiently in a spirit of implicit acceptance. He responds very differently, however, to her story of the Encantadas. Throughout that account, he interrupts incredulously: "The sky was in motion, too?" (355) "Race to the sea?" (356). These queries suggest a simultaneous fascination and wariness, hinting at the influence of the narrative on his own sensibilities. The Doctor surpasses his pretense to be making notes or clarifying events in these interjections. Instead, he begins to participate in the drama, helping to create and embellish the narrative by providing the term "carnivorous birds" (356).

In the April 1958 printing of the play, as if responding to a revealed susceptibility, the Doctor immediately changes the subject to tell his own story, the account of a "successful" lobotomy. As positioned within the play, this conversation interrupts Mrs. Venable's account; it "cuts" into her story in a manner that resonates with the images and threat of lobotomy—and that reinforces Violet's own emphasis on cutting

Catharine's story from her brain. As such, it hints at the Doctor's own susceptibility to the drama of Violet's account of natural disorder and violence and his instinct to repress that susceptibility through clinical narrative and medical intervention. This reaction is very different from that which characterizes the Doctor's response to Catharine's final narrative. During a story whose imagery and violence both invoke and surpass that of Mrs. Venable's account, he again constantly interrupts: "What did something in him direct him to do?" (419) "It looked as if?" (420). The Doctor develops through the course of the play to acknowledge and accept of the truth of Catharine's "babbling." The extent of this acceptance is suggested by the ambiguity of his final statement that "the girl's story could be true": the reference could be as much to the story of "the girl" he had earlier invoked to silence Mrs. Venable as it could be to that of Catharine. As a representative audience-figure the Doctor also serves to reinforce the transformative power of drama itself, encouraging the play's implied audience to recognize the truth that has been revealed.

This truth, Williams implies, is manifest in both the content and form of a drama that ultimately celebrates performed expression as a necessary and natural liberation from repressive conventions in the self, society, and art. Where the monologues in the *Bacchae* are spoken by messenger figures, Williams develops this role through Mrs. Venable and Catharine to underline the subjective tensions and conflicts that define dramatic art. This association is further suggested in his similar foregrounding of a controlling, subjective author. Throughout the *Bacchae*, Dionysus acts effectively as a stage manager, casting spells over characters, costuming Pentheus in a grotesque parody of the attire of the maenads, and manipulating events to conform to his own declared plan. Adopting the costume of a stranger, he is also an actor within his own drama, an inevitable participant within the events he constructs and stages. Like *Suddenly Last Summer*, the *Bacchae* elides the divide between dramatist and subject, reinforcing the subjective instincts that can inform staged events. Where Euripides stages this awareness through the character of Dionysus, Williams expands upon the implications of such representations both through his characters and through the staging of his own subjective, authorial presence.

Ultimately, Williams enforces a fundamental sympathy between myth, classical drama, and a story, like Catharine's, that might be "hideous" but cannot be invented. As Bigsby observes, "in some sense his subject was always the writer, who, by definition, offers his fictions as a paradigm of order while doubting their ability to survive the onslaught of the real" (98). The content and the form of *Suddenly Last Summer* underline a central preoccupation with the conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian in both the individual and in art itself. In his dramatization of competing subjectivities and dramatic instincts, in his celebration of melodrama and metaphor within the structural

confines of an exclusively spoken theatre, Williams presents and embodies this conflict in the play. In so doing, he insists upon a greater, more poetic reality characterized by necessarily elemental "truths"—and on the revelatory possibilities and universal themes of his own self-consciously truthful, dramatic art.

Notes

[1] *Suddenly Last Summer* was staged along with the earlier one-act play *Something Unspoken* as *Garden District*, at the York Playhouse, off-Broadway, on January 7, 1958.

[2] Brian Parker ("Stemma") documents substantial differences between various versions of the text. Unless otherwise indicated, I quote here from the edition favoured by this journal (*The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*).

[3] As Parker observes, the story is referenced by Williams himself in early drafts of the play ("Stemma" 304). Clum and Annette Saddik offer substantial comparisons of the play to the short story, as do David Savran and John Bak ("Suddenly") in their focus on themes of homosexuality, othering, and consumption.

[4] See, for example, Bak "*Where I* 'Love.'"

[5] David C. C. Matthew identifies in the allusions and themes of *Orpheus Descending* "a dramatization or ritual celebration of the immolation of the artist-god on the altar of his own awareness of the nature of being" (191). This reading gives considerable support to the possibility that *Suddenly Last Summer*—with its many similar allusions—manifests another attempt to address this theme more directly and more specifically in relation to drama.

[6] Siegel sees Violet both as Agave and as "the manipulating god-figure" akin to Dionysus; like Dionysus, Violet aims "to salvage the sexual reputation of a dead family member" (541). This reading, however, is problematized both by Violet's consistent resistance to any Dionysian ideal and by the play's dramatization of the vulnerability of her position.

[7] It is impossible to know which edition Williams would have read, so I quote from a prominent and relatively contemporaneous translation.

[8] Instead, it is Catharine who is drugged into enabling a performance of "the truth."

[9] As Conacher argues, with the Euripides play, "for the first time" Dionysianism "is seen not as the cult of a specific deity but as a universal phenomenon: man's periodic need of release from the rational and the commonplace, and of return to the elemental springs of life by means of his emotions" (58).

[10] As Hooper observes, Williams's own notebooks "frequently alternate between the compulsiveness he felt for work and the obsessive, inexhaustible pursuit of desire that usually followed his working routine in the evenings" (79).

[11] See Egan for a particularly detailed reading.

[12] In "Tennessee," Parker offers a close reading of the play in relation to the myth of Saint Sebastian and to Williams's earlier reworking of that myth in his 1949 poem "San Sebastiano de Sodoma."

[13] The first printed version of the play in April 1958 (New Directions) featured a long description by the Doctor about his "success" in treating a female patient with a lobotomy. For a full discussion of these variants, see Parker "Stemma."

[14] I quote here from the Literary Classics printing, which reprints the April 1958 version (as opposed to the New Directions reprint of the August 1958 version).

[15] See also Conacher 56–72.

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