Effeminacy in the *Kingdom*: Tennessee Williams and Stunted Spectatorship

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By many (auto)biographical accounts, Tennessee Williams was a troubled sissy. If substituting "gay man" for "sissy," the reader may recall Williams's dismissals of homosexuality as a "relevant" theme in his work[1]; or accounts of the playwright as bitterly resentful of his homosexuality[2]; or still other accounts in which Williams actively celebrates his attraction to men.[3] These inconclusive debates notwithstanding[4], I use the term "sissy" to denote the legible effeminacy that tormented Williams far more than his covert homosexuality. In a pervasive critical move, he and his chroniclers repeatedly invoke his feyness only to exorcise or explain it away as embarrassing theatricality, a failed performance, or as a collection of grating routines that clash against expected male expression. Such careless spectatorship of extratheatrical effeminacy has serious critical consequences for the responsible reading of Williams's life and work.

Consider the following quarrel between Edward and Gerry, lovers in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*. Disgusted by Edward's cloying attempts to set a regular mealtime, Gerry exhorts him, "Just be yourself," prompting the following exchange:

> Edward: I don't know what you mean. Everyone's always tried to stop me from being feminine and now you are, too.
>
> Gerry: You're putting it on.
>
> Edward: I like doing the cooking. I like being fucked. You do like me like this really.
>
> Gerry: I'm bored, Eddy. (43)

Gerry assumes that Edward's effeminacy, which the latter claims to manifest unconsciously, is both a deliberate, ill-advised simulation of wifely "femininity" and a childish ploy for attention. In "putting on" an inappropriate show, Edward unsettles and "bores" Gerry, for whom effeminacy equals unsolicited theatricality.

Even on-stage, however, effeminacy receives scant welcome outside rarefied gay vehicles. For example, John Simon, reviewing Shakespeare in the Park's 1995 production of *Troilus and Cressida*, echoes Gerry in his criticism of Stephen Spinella's Pandarus "[Director Mark Wing-Davey] has cast the terminally effeminate Stephen Spinella in the role and allowed him to indulge his stock-in-trade unrelentingly. . ." (1995:121). By equating effeminacy with "stock-in-trade" theatrics, Simon reduces it to exhausted repertoire and accuses Spinella of hack artistry. Moreover, Simon's characterization of Spinella as "terminally effeminate" certainly attempts the actor's professional murder by implying that he is unable to produce

the masculine truth required of more "serious" characterizations. Thus limited, Spinella must hope for "indulgence" from directors who will graciously allow him to amuse untutored audiences with his tired tricks.

Still, at least Spinella, unlike Edward and Williams himself, had the discretion to confine his reviled performance to a finite stage. Like Gerry and Simon, Williams and his biographers deem effeminacy a piece of affective bad luck; its associations with failed theatricality compromise the playwright's artistic and personal reputation. Nevertheless, because Williams also recognized the centrality of effeminacy to his writing, his own and critics' subsequent inability to analyze it seriously impedes our understanding of America's foremost playwright.

Kingdom of Earth (1968) has emerged as one of Williams's most roundly panned plays in large part because critics refuse to accept its treatment of effeminacy as serious dramaturgy. Precisely because effeminacy warrants constant, even fetishized, attention in both Lot Ravenstock and Tennessee Williams, it requires an on- and offstage hermeneutics permitting more sophisticated scrutiny than the flat disavowal it customarily receives. Williams attempts to provide such interpretive tools by suggesting in Lot a dramatically "worthy" effeminate ethos, one that challenges normative assumptions of male performance while offering an arresting tropology of physical deterioration and eloquent aesthetic code. Just as Williams's oft-noted effeminacy contributes significantly to his art, so too is *Kingdom of Earth* more than the sum of seemingly vacuous sissy parts. Through the play, Williams proves effeminacy to be a rich narrative and dramatic resource, far from the theatrical aberration typically reviled in mainstream spectatorship. His maligned *Kingdom*, in sum, offers a radical reconception of what is tenable in masculine representation.

WILLIAMS AND THE LEGACY OF EFFEMINACY

Descriptions of Williams, including his own, consistently identify his effeminacy as the impetus for much childhood abuse. Edwina Dakin Williams notes her son's solitary, non-athletic pastimes and the vicious nickname ("Miss Nancy") they earned from his father (39); consonant with Mrs. Williams's observation, Lyle Leverich reports that C.C. Williams "looked upon [his son] with a mixture of disgust and disbelief as a mother's boy" (77). According to Donald Spoto, the "squeamishness and delicacy that. . .surrounded [Williams] at home" also drew "verbal and physical abuse from the other children" (15); Dakin Williams remembers a violent attack visited upon his brother for his athletic incompetence (21). Williams himself repeatedly recounted his effeminacy and the ridicule he suffered for it.[5]

Oddly, though, Williams also seeks to discredit or deny altogether the affect to which he repeatedly returns. In doing so, he would liberate himself from a behavioral stigma that might discredit his writing as it did his spoken expression.

In his late forties, for example, he attempts to portray effeminacy as a hateful legacy over which he ultimately triumphed: "I understand that [my father] knew my mother had made me a sissy, but that I had a chance, bred in his blood and bone, to someday rise above it, as I had to and did" (1960:xiv). Speaking to Don Lee Keith ten years later, Williams faults his mother for encouraging him to befriend effeminizing girls rather than boys (153). Still troubled by his childhood effeminacy well into his sixties, Williams attempts in his *Memoirs* a wholesale disavowal of its physical manifestations "I don't think I had effeminate mannerisms but somewhere deep in my nerves there was imprisoned a young girl, a sort of blushing schoolmaiden. . ." (22).

In trying to dissociate their subject from effeminacy, Leverich and Donald Windham replicate Williams's own contradictions. Leverich, although ostensibly determined not to elucidate "something as deeply embedded as. . .psychosexuality," nonetheless remarks, "I can think of nothing that injures more the developing manhood of a young boy, nothing that can be more intensely felt, than the unrequited love of a son for his father" (xxv). Having posited Cornelius's devastating contempt for his unmasculine son, Leverich abruptly conjectures Williams *père* as "baffled" by the fact that his son "was in no manner an obvious sissy or, God forbid, a 'queer'. . . .He was. . .able to hide his sensitivity through carefully cultivated masculine attitudes" (82,83). If Williams was not an "obvious sissy," why the boyhood abuse that he, Leverich, and other biographers are careful to report in detail? Why the backpedaling attempt to invent Williams's masculinity?

While Leverich would banish effeminacy from Williams's behavior, Windham seeks to nullify its potent presence in his friend's letters. Regarding Williams's occasional self-designation as "Auntie Froufrou," for example, Windham cautions,

> The self-mockery and quick-change gender in these early [1940] letters. . .should not be misleading. They are a primitive form of dramatization and transference, a burlesque of a world we were supposed to live in and didn't. . . . [Williams] was quite inadequately flamboyant [to rank among the New Orleans "belles" he describes]. (4)

Nonetheless, Williams employs fey rhetoric well beyond the early correspondence to which Windham alludes. After 1940, he continues to name himself "Froufrou," an "adventuress," and "your mother"; he variously refers to other men as an "infernal bitch," a "charming little creature," "her," and "Mme"; and he commonly addresses Windham and Sandy Campbell, Windham's partner, as "my dear" or "darling" (11, 34, 138, 21, 30, 31, 50, 64, 69 ,74). In such tags, Williams conspicuously situates himself within a camp lexicon that predicates his public voice on effeminate expression.

To be sure, Williams's early letters to Windham also contain criticism of the "belles" whose raucous behavior he considers the bane of any gay gathering

(138-9,142,173). Leverich notes that during the same era, Williams "vowed in his journal to rid himself of his [own] bitchery" (361), and many decades later, Williams equates the "obnoxious" signs of "swish" and "camp" as unfortunate political fallout, evidence of the self-hatred socially forced on gay men (1975:63). Throughout these quibbles, Williams seems chiefly distressed by effeminacy's limited repertoire, its recreation of a narrow semiotics that grants performers very little expressive scope. More than once does he compare effeminate speech to the screeching of birds,[6] whose uniformly grating pitch Williams would eschew in his own utterance.

Speakers possessed of such restricted performance range receive instant (homo)sexual coding; presumed to be homosexuality's surest *signifiant*, effeminacy allows its speaker no control over his public reception.[7] Williams recalls feeling "mystified" when, at age seventeen, he heard a ship captain remark of him, "You know his future, don't you?" to which the captain's companion replied, "I don't think you can be sure about that at the age of seventeen" (1975:25-6). According to Leverich, this exchange provided for Williams "one of those acid remarks that burn into consciousness, lasting until its meaning finally becomes clear" (92). The playwright thus knew the horror of having, before he himself had given it much thought, his sexuality publicly announced in response to his unconscious behavior.

For Williams, then, as for many of his later critics, effeminacy connoted a thudding causality that both robbed him of the power of self-revelation and associated him with homosexuality's dully predictable, pathologized tropes. Nonetheless, as seen in his letters to Windham and Campbell, Williams also deploys effeminate camp toward literary self-establishment. At their most outrageous, Williams's letters mock any pretense at normative masculinity in himself and his circle. He thus intensifies effeminacy's literary clout by demonstrating its emotional and critical breadth, hence its power to anchor worthy writing. Indeed, by Williams's own account, hostile naming of his effeminacy led him directly to the vocation that would secure his international reputation:

> At the age of fourteen I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat. . .my refuge. From what? From being called a sissy by the neighborhood kids, and Miss Nancy by my father, because I would rather read books in my grandfather's large and classical library than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games. (1959)

Sadly, *Kingdom of Earth*, which provides Williams's most subtle, complex treatment of effeminacy, continues to draw the most scathing critiques of his oeuvre.[8] Critics generally denounce its treatment of effeminacy as "bad" writing, flaccid characterology, or tired vaudeville pulp far beneath the talents of a major

dramatist. They fail to recognize that effeminacy may ironically engender the very subjecthood that eluded Williams whenever he opened his sissy mouth.

EFFEMINACY AND WILLIAMS'S AUDIENCES

As noted above, Windham associates Williams's penned effeminacy with "primitive" dramatization and "burlesque"—i.e., low performance modes implicitly juxtaposed against the more "evolved" writing Williams would soon produce. Semiotician Keir Elam also associates effeminacy with facile artistry by assigning it inflexible denotative limitations: "a competent actor will be able to draw upon a repertory of vocal indicators [and] crude stereotyped indices. . .[such as] 'effeminate' voice set and voice qualities [to indicate] homosexuality" (83). It is important to note, however, that effeminacy's "crudeness" seems to lie chiefly in spectators' overcoding of stock gestures, vocal pitch, or lexicon. Such markers register "crudely" when audiences consider them "too" revealing of authorial intention, i.e., painting homosexuality with too recognizable a stroke.

Effeminacy presents an epistemological and theatrical dilemma: how can a playwright represent this incendiary, albeit incessantly cited, shade of male behavior without seeming artistically slothful, sexually reductive, or politically suspect?[9] With his own history of abject expression at stake, Williams attempts in *Kingdom of Earth* to fortify effeminacy against the interpretive violence it attracts. Lot Ravenstock thus possesses an inscrutable sexuality, substantial rhetorical power, and an actualized aesthetic code. Nevertheless, critics have repeatedly declared Lot's effeminacy emblematic of the play's failure. They fault Williams for daring to represent a masculine extreme, thereby taking the dramatic easy road and sabotaging his professional credibility.

Criticisms against Lot often consign him to type and thus assail Williams for debasing his earlier work. Comparing the play to "The Kingdom of Earth," the 1942 short story upon which it is based, Kathryn Zabelle Derounian holds that

> Williams has parodied and debased [Lot and Chicken's] original roles. In Lot, Williams caricatures the impotent aesthete by exaggerating his physical characteristics (dyed blond hair and frail, exotic prettiness) and completely ignoring the aesthete's intellectual side. . . .In death [i.e., dressed as his dead mother], Lot suggests a final parody of the artist, who also dedicates his life to re-creation, often of the past. (154-5)

As discussed below, Williams, in his careful establishment of Lot's life-sustaining—and plot-sustaining—aestheticism, is far from "completely ignoring the aesthete's intellectual side." Nonetheless, for Derounian, Lot's costumed effeminacy reduces him from a character to a mannequin from which Williams self-indul-

gently dangles deviant accessories. In drag, Derounian implies, Lot underscores his unmasculine bearing and descends into parodic characterology.

Ronald Hayman levels a similar attack against Williams's movement from story to play by noting that the former

> loses much of its force when dramatized by a writer who could not stop himself from vulgarizing his material as he introduced unnecessary complications. In the play, Myrtle is a showgirl no longer able to get jobs, while Lot is a transvestite who eventually dies in his mother's white dress. (204)

Comparably, Donald Spoto indicts the play's conclusion—and, by indirection, Lot's effeminacy—as "a grotesque self-parody in a moment of gratuitous 'drag-show'. . .[that] crudely parodies everything preceding." Spoto also charges that the play's "characters are ciphers in an incomplete parable of religious inversion" (271), much as Hayman brands Lot and Chicken opposing "stereotypes" of male representation (204).

"Cipher" and "stereotype" connote a dramaturgical laziness that Spoto and Hayman regret to find in Williams's later work. Spoto also shares with Derounian the conviction that Williams unwisely burlesques his own work by bringing effeminacy centerstage; both critics cry "parody," further barbed in their critiques by "grotesque" and "debased," to condemn a played-out writer who, in Hayman's terms, "could not stop himself" from groping after cheap effect. Finally, all three critics lament Williams's "gratuitous" decision to accentuate Lot's effeminacy through costume and thus fix their reluctant attention on the character's anti-masculinity. By dressing in women's clothes, Lot forces them into spectatorship of abjection and its relatively limited critical vocabulary. Permitted little descriptive latitude with Lot, they quickly relegate him to the analytical barrenness of freakdom and dismiss the play along with its enervated and enervating anti-hero.

In Philip C. Kolin's analysis, Lot is a literal oppressor, "the epitome of a debauched colonial master whose perverse pleasures—dressing in his mother's clothes—are kept hidden within the sanctuary of the white-only parlor." Living in the rural South of the late 1950s, Lot and Miss Lottie exercise a vicious, if unsurprising, "white sexual and legal duplicity" (157) that renders Chicken a helpless, homeless agent unable to argue his right to inheritance.

Though undeniably unjust, their treatment of Chicken resonates throughout their society; note, for example, Myrtle's "typical Southern lower-class dread and awe of Negroes" (86), and the racist rejection Chicken receives from nyphomaniacal "Desperate Dotty" Bows (88).[10] Although Lot might merit substantial analysis as the corrupt product of a racist culture, Kolin disenfranchises him less by citing his racism than by branding him sexually "perverse" and denying him the "full subjecthood" that Chicken enjoys in his "forthright and generative" sexuality (160). The equation of transvestism with "perversion" bespeaks a need to strip Lot of the discursive sway he holds over audiences; hence Kolin's elevation of the

character to "debauched colonial master," surely a higher power-seat than he actually enjoys, in order to suggest through him a teleology of lost unnatural might.

Equally eager to neutralize Lot, spectators of the 1968 Broadway production actively read against the text in order to "expose" the character's homosexuality. Brendan Gill, for example, scoffs that Lot is a "homosexual. . .a little dandy of a man, with hair bleached like [Myrtle's]" (109). Like Derounian and Spoto, Wilfrid Sheed accuses Williams of creating a "sad parody," describes Lot as "a fag," and poisonously relegates the entire play to the "tradition of neo-homosexual theater" (18). John Simon, though more restrained in his derision, also undermines Lot by characterizing him as "impotent and homosexual as well as tubercular" (1968:208).[11]

Impotent and tubercular, to be sure, but homosexual? Nowhere does Lot refer to himself as such; in fact, he pre-emptively denies the possibility before his effeminacy raises it. Moreover, by 1968, staged effeminacy had long since begun to function as other than homosexuality's noisy herald. As early as 1927, Mae West enjoyed infamy in Connecticut and New Jersey for her play *The Drag*, which does not distribute effeminacy among all its gay characters. In 1953, Robert Anderson famously detached effeminacy from homosexuality by opposing heterosexual, feminine Tom Lee against butch, closeted Bill Reynolds in *Tea and Sympathy*. Williams himself followed this lead in 1955 by rendering masculine Brick's sexuality the season's greatest mystery in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Importantly, during *Kingdom of Earth*'s brief Broadway run[12], Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* debuted just eight blocks uptown[13] to tremendous critical and public reception for its open treatment of gay characters, only one-third of whom are noticeably effeminate. With so many precedents, including his own, Williams had no need to render homosexuality through effeminate shorthand. Indeed, by subverting this exhausted construct, he demonstrates effeminacy's dramatic efficacy.

THE EFFEMINATE *KINGDOM*

Of Lot's initial appearance with Myrtle, Williams wryly remarks, "[neither] is a person that could avoid curious attention," Myrtle for her failed "imitation of a Hollywood glamor girl," and Lot for being a "frail, delicately—you might say exotically—pretty youth of about twenty." Subsequent directions describe his head as being "delicately pretty as a girl's," and Myrtle states that he has "[s]kin, eyes, hair any girl would be jealous of. A mouth like a flower" (9,36,17). For their various deployments of feminine iconography, Lot and Myrtle attract considerable scrutiny. Although an outlaw courter of the Gaze by profession, Myrtle is a feminine, heterosexual woman whose outfits and mannerisms register as merely tacky, not the abomination that critics have considered Lot's transvestism and effeminacy. Against this brand of disengagement, Williams attempts to render Lot more immune than most effeminate males to interpretive oblivion. The playwright's

efforts fail less because of faulty dramaturgy than because American culture still does not grant effeminacy presentational credibility.

If read or watched responsibly, Lot deflects reductive assessment. His frequent refusals to speak, for example, do not permit the facile readings typically assigned to effeminate expression for its inflection and enunciation.[14] Myrtle thus finds him impossible to decipher and remarks, "I wish I knew what was going on back of that long ivory cigarette holder and that Mona Lisa smile . . . they baffle me," as do his "long-drawn silences" (36). Williams exoticizes Lot further in the following act by making his silent smile "more sardonic" and the "violet shadows about his eyes. . .deeper" (59). Still later, Lot is likened to an inscrutable "Far Eastern idol" (76). Separated from the increasingly sexual interplay between Myrtle and Chicken, Lot sits alone for much of the play and renders his own motivations and expression ever more illegible. By resisting easy interpretation, he widens effeminacy's connotative parameters.

From experience, however, Williams knew that effeminacy does not receive the courtesy of studied public reading; Lot, in his refinement and his mother's wardrobe, is indeed presumed homosexual and thus incurs dismissal. Unable to risk wholesale rejection of even one character in the play's trio, Williams employs

[illegible]

nate performance. Adapting from Umberto Eco's "Model Reader," Marco de Marinis explains "Spectators" as dramatic devices that are "quite [physically] distinct from the empirical extratextual spectator, and understood, by contrast, as a strategy of interpretive cooperation foreseen by, and variously inscribed in, the performance text. . ." (166-67). In *Kingdom of Earth*, Model Spectator tactics allow Myrtle and Chicken to stand in for a suspicious audience forbidden by theatrical decorum to voice their sexual suppositions. By invoking familiar gender markers, Myrtle and Chicken's comments tacitly ensure that audiences feel necessary cooperation from, and their own interpretive competence in, Williams's outré landscape.

Before their first confrontation, Lot admits that "Chicken calls [him] a sissy," and Chicken soon after tells Myrtle, in unsubtle innuendo, "Your baby's more of a bachelor than me" (19,23).[15] Myrtle, terrified over the prospect of drowning, later counts on Chicken's unsubstantiated interpretation in order to win his favor. Of her marriage to Lot, she babbles, "That poor boy bleaches his hair, not only has TB but bleaches his hair. Look, do you imagine that I'd give up a career in show business to marry a, a, to marry a, to, to, to marry a—" (74). In her terror, Myrtle distorts her actual feelings about Lot's sexuality; she is clearly attracted to him and convinced that he will make a good lover when his health improves (18). Nonetheless, in desperation she wisely parrots Chicken's and the audience's suspicions in order to allay his property fears and secure her salvation from the impending flood.

A cursory reading of Myrtle's utterance might presume that she stammers because effeminacy is sufficient in a pre-Stonewall play to communicate homosexuality without specifying something so potentially unsettling. However,

Chicken's "bachelor" comment and Lot's free use of the words "sissy" and "fairy" demonstrate that mention of homosexuality is not *verboten* within the play, as it was not in earlier and contemporary drama. Furthermore, Myrtle, with a bluntness that belies her would-be gentility, readily enumerates the unappetizing destinies of the other Mobile "Hot Shots" deaths by slashing, botched abortion, overdose, and drug addiction. In listing these grisly fates, she hedges slightly only on the abortion (27). Certainly by 1968—or even 1960, the year of the play's setting—homosexuality, particularly if raised derisively, would not have been too taboo a subject for Myrtle to name with the same gusto she does the other "unmentionables."

Homosexuality, therefore, may not be the secret struggling to burst through the play's conspicuous silences.[16] Indeed, Lot himself convincingly argues against such interpretation. While he refers to himself as "an impotent one-lung sissy," he also resolves to "satisfy" Myrtle sexually when he regains his health (38,18). Furthermore, he explicitly tells her—and the suspicious audience she represents—not to mistake his hair-dyeing effeminacy for homosexuality: "Don't let it throw you, and don't imagine you've married a fairy" (42). Skeptical spectators who think that the lady doth protest too much would do well to consult Williams's original short story, which constructs Lot as actively heterosexual. In the ten-page sketch, Chicken twice notes in animalistic detail the newlyweds' intercourse: "The bedroom door was open and they was in there grunting like two hound-dogs"; "I could hear them grunting together like a pair of pigs in a sty. . ." (370,372). Nowhere between 1942 and 1975, therefore, did Williams employ Lot's effeminacy as an epistemological safety valve for homosexuality.

In fact, by distributing Chicken's narrative privileges among all three characters in the play, Williams gives considerable voice to the aesthetic, implicitly effeminate concerns that for Lot have come to supersede sexual interests of any orientation. As he tells Myrtle, "You've married someone for whom no kind of sex relation was ever as important. . .as trying with his mother to make, to create, a little elegance in a corner of the earth we lived in that wasn't favorable to it" (42). Williams is thus determined to stage effeminacy on its own representational terms. By leading a consciously aestheticized life, Lot speaks a critical language that marks effeminacy less a sexual signifier than an effect of cultivated critical interests. Through his language, in fact, Lot claims the discursive authority that his unmasculine affect otherwise nullifies.

Lot details with elevated vision the painstaking process he and his mother undertook to clean each pendant of a crystal chandelier; the maintenance of the fragile gold chairs and velvet drapes in the parlor, which Lot describes as "neglected lately" (11), must also have required substantial study and thus merits the audience's scrutiny. Lot demands further focused attention for his glib critique, as derived from his and Miss Lottie's sartorial tenets, of Myrtle's gaudy wardrobe (39). Hyper-precise in his codification of material surroundings, Lot insists on an equally meticulous linguistic atmosphere. Disproving Derounian's claim that Wil-

liams in *Kingdom* "completely [ignores] the aesthete's intellectual side," Lot displays a narrative authority that also serves a necessary dramaturgical function: specifically, he protects the spectator from Myrtle's overblown methods of self-description. At various points, for example, Lot attempts to curtail Myrtle's "uncontrollable" voice (12,15,19) in order to subdue what rapidly becomes oppressive spectacle. In an effort to stem her protracted exposition, he requests that she "condense" one tale and, in another, directs her to "skip to [the main theme of] show business." He also assails Myrtle's repetitiveness by commenting that a forthcoming reminiscence will prove interesting only "[if he hasn't] heard it already" (25,31). Irked by her tendency to relate life in predictably pat chapters, Lot interrupts one anecdote to remind her of domestic duties; he chokes off another by dismissively labeling it a "pitiful confession" (25,60). Lot is thus discursively defined via a range of aesthetic observations for which healthier and/or more masculine men don't have the need, time, or isolated training. However overbearing Myrtle finds Lot's criticisms, they reveal in effeminacy an intellectual vivacity for more complex—and far more dramatically serviceable—than what *Kingdom*'s spectatorship and scholarship generally recognize.

Effeminacy in *Kingdom of Earth* also yields a highly visual drama of disintegration. In contrast with his masturbating, phallicized brother, Lot is configured almost entirely as anti-body. For instance, while Chicken's entrance finds him in physical ecstasy, Lot's has him gasping for breath, a one-man war with physicality (9). With his ubiquitous ivory cigarette holder, Lot keeps substance at a safe and aestheticized remove, as if contact would violate further his frailty. Costumed in his mother's white silk wrapper, he is rendered an unearthly sorcerer wielding a fuming magic wand that defies substance by transforming it to air. When he finally loses his bodily battle, Lot executes a Mary Tyronesque *coup d'théâtre* by staggering downstairs in his mother's dress and collapsing in her parlor while seeming to bow "to an applauding audience" (94).

Lot's metatheatrical death, coupled with Myrtle's description of her doomed co-workers, indicates that the gaze galvanized by self-framing femininity almost invariably turns violent. As coded throughout Myrtle's tales, women who dare to theatricalize their gender hazard fatal assault. Effeminate males, however, run such risks regardless of professional venue. Perpetually vulnerable to public scrutiny, Lot's incongruous body weakens from within to the point of the permeability forced upon Myrtle's friends.

Cogently generalizing about Arthur Miller's female characters, David Savran comments, ". . .the female body is constantly in danger of overflowing its limits. It is unstable and unfixed, its boundaries always in dispute. . . .[masculinity] is the power. . .that enables men. . .to keep the female body from spilling over. . ." (38,39). Prone to different kinds of "overflow," Myrtle, the Hot Shots, and the effeminate Lot all have bodies that betray constitutional fragility and dependence on masculine men who may choose, instead of helping them, to abuse their susceptibility. Myrtle's "uncontrollable" voice, for example, connotes an hysteria that renders

her unable to govern what leaves her mouth—or what enters, as demonstrated when Chicken seduces her, against her aspirations to "ladyhood," into fellating him.[17] Indeed, her capitulation in accepting into her body a foreign, masculine element is all that keeps her safe from the fatal invasion of water soon to arrive.

Lot and the other Hot Shots, however, lack the masculine favor to keep their scrutinized bodies whole. The women, who "overflowed" the boundaries of feminine representation by exposing their bodies to commercial inspection, all died under exterior assault. The Statuesque Beauty became "a mutilated corpse"; The Gulf Coast Blaze died the "victim of a [sic] illegal operation"; The Texas Explosion "devoured a full bottle of sleeping pills"; and The Midnight Stawm, by smoking marijuana, "took the first step to what she finally came to," a fate that remains ominously unspecified in Myrtle's account (27,28). By explicitly staging their bodies, these women revealed their susceptibility and suffered deadly rending by knives, surgical tools, and drugs.

While Lot does not overtly theatricalize his body until the play's conclusion, he does make himself an unwelcome public spectacle by mixing even infrequently in society. In the 1968 text, Lot hesitantly informs Chicken that he auditioned to be the emcee of a Memphis talk show; to Chicken's deadpan question, "Did the public respond to you. . .?", Lot stammers an inconclusive answer and "shrugs slightly" (1-28), thus indicating the gulf that separates his effeminacy from popular taste. Even on his own turf, however, Lot's self-expression prompts disgust: Myrtle shows herself to be both "shocked" and "aghast" over Lot's nuanced knowledge of hair-dyeing (41,42), while Chicken voices revulsion for his brother's transvestism (85). Perforated by disapproving gazes, Lot, unlike the Hot Shots, needs no explicit assault to prompt destruction. His tuberculosis simply provides a medical excuse for the bodily dissolution that began the moment he dared to venture outside his mother's womb, much less parlor, swathed in feminine semiotics. In his collapse, Lot finally brings effeminacy full presentational circle. By staging an effeminate character's unique subjugation to the social gaze, his subsequent bids to secure authority via aesthetic code, and his spectacular battle with physicality, Williams paints effeminacy's infinite watchability—and its theatrical worth.

CONCLUSIONS

Williams traces through Lot a complex effeminate trajectory—one that encompasses considerable rhetorical verve and violent vulnerability. In *Kingdom of Earth*, effeminacy bespeaks an integrated subjecthood that far transcends lazy or parodic writing. Lot's expressivity, wholly a function of his effeminacy, provides the spectator with visual and aural abundance. Williams's own discomfort with effeminacy notwithstanding, he manages to channel the demon of his youthful self-presentation into worthy art by suggesting the presentational value of an affect almost always reduced to spoof or pat interpretation. His creation of full-

scale effeminate consciousness suggests the need for a wider theoretical language and semiotic vocabulary to analyze responsibly all degrees of masculinity. As such critical tools are discovered, let us welcome resurrections of Williams's leveled *Kingdom*.

Notes

[1]In 1976, Williams famously asserted to Dotson Rader, "I never found it necessary to deal with [homosexuality] in my work" (344). (See also George Whitmore, "Interview: Tennessee Williams," *Gay Sunshine* 33/34 (1977), 1-4, for related comments.) By this point, however, Williams had already given the world Quentin and Bobby in *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), and would soon offer significant treatments of homosexuality in *Vieux Carré* (1979), *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981).

[2]See, for example, Donald Spoto, 320.

[3]See Tom Buckley, 170, and Donald Windham's interview in *Tennessee Williams; Orpheus of the American Stage* (TWOAS).

[4]David Savran effectively summarizes Williams's equivocal attitudes toward homosexuality: see *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, 83.

[5]In a letter to Kenneth Tynan, for example, Williams confesses that his father "thought me, which I certainly was, a terrible sissy" (Windham 302). To Buckley, Williams remembers being accurately labeled a "sissy boy" by University of Missouri fraternity brothers (170);in a 1976 interview included in TWOAS, he ruefully recalls seeming "rather sissified" to hostile neighborhood children.

[6]See, for example, Windham, 139, and *Small Craft Warnings* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 50.

[7]Effeminate men commonly note the sexual slurs that long precede their initial articulation of sexuality. See, for example, Bradley Boney, "The Lavender Brick Road: Paul Bonin-Rodriguez and the Sissy Bo(d)y," *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996), 35; Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968; New York: Plume, 1983), 6; Frank De Caro, *A Boy Named Phyllis; A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Viking, 1996), 4-5; Richard Green, The *"Sissy Boy" Syndrome and the Development of Homosexuality* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), 22; RuPaul, *Lettin It all Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion,1995), 20; Marlene Fanta Shyer and Christopher Shyer, *Not Like Other Boys;Growing Up Gay: A Mother and Son Look Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 28, 38-9.

[8]To my knowledge, Dakin Williams and Shepherd Mead stand alone in calling the work the "most underestimated of all [Williams's] plays"(272); as discussed below, *Kingdom*'s criticism generally ranges from dismissive to vitriolic.

[9]See John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), xi, 91, 246, 247, for an attack against the representation of effeminacy in contemporary gay theatre.

[10]Unless otherwise noted, I refer to Williams's 1975 revision of the play. Changes made between 1968 and 1975 are chiefly editorial rather than substantive; a few remarkable exceptions are discussed below.

[11]In June 1996, nearly thirty years after the play's debut, Drama Dept. mounted an off-Broadway revival of *Kingdom of Earth*. Still, critical response continued to dub the work a bizarre exercise in Southern commedia dell'arte. Ressurecting earlier reviews, Ben Brantley brands the play a "flashy, grotesque self-parody" featuring a "trinity of types" rather than characters, among whom Lot emerges as an "ethereal, mama-fixated" closet case. Nevertheless, unlike his predecessors, Brantley also demonstrates an ability to look past the characters' oft-noted "cartoon personae" when he praises the actors for articulating the "grimmer, more authentic emotions that inform their roles." Brantley's review ultimately shows a means by which to evaluate, rather than simply savage, effeminate spectacle.

[12]At the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, March 27-April 20, 1968.

[13]At Theatre Four, April 14, 1968.

[14]Effeminate males face frequent hostility for their telltale consonants, which observers tend to find overly precise. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Prior chides Louis for abbreviating his name to "Lou" among heterosexual relatives: "You get butch. . . [and call yourself] Lou, not Louis, because if you say Louis they'll hear the sibilant S"(19-20). In *Boys in the Band*, Alan murderously asks Emory, "How many esses are there in the word pronoun?"(45) before assaulting him. In an unstaged echo, Christopher Shyer remembers the outrage that his seemingly affected enunciation of consonants produced in his father: "'Your esses. Why do you say your esses that way?'...And then the *t*. It was too loud, or too sharp, or too something. . ."(32).

In his frequent hush, therefore, Lot eludes the hyper-vigilance that detects and menaces effeminate expression.

[15]In the 1968 script, Chicken sardonically cracks, upon Lot's arrival, "Him and a woman!"(1-4). Williams later shortened this exclamation simply to "Him!" (9), thereby permitting Lot's sexuality greater interpretive breadth than it was accorded at the play's debut.

[16]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes: "In such texts as *Billy Budd* and [*The Picture of*] *Dorian Gray*, and through their influence, the subject—the thematics—of knowledge and ignorance themselves. . .of secrecy and disclosure, became. . . integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole but even more specifically, now, the homosexual topic" (74).

Kingdom of Earth's audiences proved more likely to force homosexuality *into* a text that, far from burying the topic in discursive silence, explicitly insists on its absence. Their readiness to infer Lot's homosexuality signals a desperation to overcode—and thus dispel—anarchic male behavior by linking it causally with sexual abjection.

[17]In the 1968 script, moreover, Myrtle reveals near the play's end that she has borne five children whom she, in her destitution, had to sacrifice to adoptive

parents. Five such accidents would suggest further evidence that she can control neither her body's receptivity nor its productivity.

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