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Gardens of Desire: Toward a Unified Vision of *Garden District*

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Garden District consists of two plays, the one-act *Something Unspoken* and the mid-length *Suddenly Last Summer*, first produced together in 1958. Each of these plays describes one of two major aspects of the behavioral dilemma facing American homosexuals in the 1950s. Furthermore, when read together, the two plays portray this dilemma in full, demonstrating the inadequacy of the resulting two paths of behavior available to homosexuals of that era. The component plays of *Garden District* are linked thematically by the presence of gardens in each play and by the metaphorical significance of these two very different gardens. Both gardens can be read as symbols of homosexual desire, and the differences between them mirror the differences between the two paths of behavior available to American homosexuals in the 1950s.

¶2 Cornelia's garden in *Something Unspoken* is orderly, disciplined, and carefully maintained. It is generally kept out of sight in private and is only shown to the general public in occasional, carefully choreographed glimpses. As such, Cornelia's garden represents the kind of closeted homosexual desire that operated safely within the societal strictures placed on such desire in 1950s America. Conversely, Sebastian Venable's garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* is, as Williams notes in his stage directions, "more like a tropical jungle or forest" (13). Sebastian's garden is wild, savage, and unruly, representing the kind of homosexual desire that refuses to be contained.

¶3 Both the component plays of *Garden District* have experienced long production histories. *Suddenly Last Summer* has been revived several times in New York and has been produced regionally. It was also adapted into a film in 1959. *Something Unspoken* has become a staple of actor showcases and student-directed one-act play festivals. Only once however, at Circle in the Square in 1995, have the two plays been staged together professionally under the title *Garden District* since the original New York and London productions of 1958 and their associated tours (Gunn 144, Canby). Scholarly criticism of *Garden District* has likewise focused almost exclusively on the component plays as individual units. Such criticism has not suggested, as I do here, that when received together, *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer* form a unified whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

¶4 Historically, any critical notice of the pairing of the *Garden District* plays has disputed rather than supported any meaningful thematic connection. For example, June Bennett Larsen contrasts what she considers to be the unconnected plays of *Garden District* to the two short plays by Williams, which she regards as "companion pieces," that make up the later theatrical compilation *Slapstick Tragedy* (418). Francis Donahue's view is that *Something Unspoken* was merely a curtain-raiser added to stretch *Suddenly Last Summer* into a theatrical evening of appropriate length: "As the new play took shape, the playwright saw that it was not enough to fill an evening's entertainment in a New York theater. So the decision was made to preface *Suddenly Last Summer* with a short one-act play which he had written earlier" (96). *Something Unspoken* had indeed been written earlier. It had been published in the 1953 edition of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other Plays* and had been

produced at New Jersey's Lakeside Summer Theatre in 1955 (Gunn 118). Yet one may wonder why this particular one-act, of the many Williams had written, was chosen to fit the bill with *Suddenly Last Summer*.

¶5 Scholars have usually resolved this question by concluding that the plays are connected by a common geographic setting. Roger Boxill writes, "*Suddenly Last Summer* was paired with *Something Unspoken* in 1958 because of the setting of both plays within the affluent Garden District of New Orleans" (126). Donald Spoto writes that the title *Garden District* described the "New Orleans setting" of the two plays (220), and Francis Donahue states that "the Garden District in New Orleans was the background against which the two separate plays took place" (96). Likewise, Vincent Canby, in his review of the 1995 Circle in the Square production of *Garden District*, writes that, like *Suddenly Last Summer*, "*Something Unspoken* is set in the Garden District" (C17).

¶6 This critical consensus that *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Something Unspoken* share a common geographic setting is troubling in light of the fact that, while *Suddenly Last Summer* is set in the Garden District of New Orleans, *Something Unspoken* most definitely is not. Cornelia, the protagonist of *Something Unspoken*, refers to the play's setting as "the city of Meridian," which has "two chapters of the Confederate Daughters" (226). A geographic search for localities named Meridian that are large enough to be called cities within the states of the Old Confederacy thereby places the action of the play in Meridian, Mississippi—a city several hundred miles from New Orleans, located west of Jackson near the Alabama border. Other references in the play also indicate that its setting is not New Orleans. For instance, residents of New Orleans would not need to order their phonograph records from a shop in Atlanta as Grace and Cornelia do. Nor would Cornelia need to take the precaution of "raking dead leaves over the rose-bushes to protect them from frost" during "the middle of autumn" in the semi-tropical climate of New Orleans (Williams, *Something* 231). There is no shortage of Tennessee Williams one-acts set in and around New Orleans. If the goal had been to pair *Suddenly Last Summer* with a New Orleans one-act of appropriate length, this could easily have been accomplished with *The Lady of the Larkspur Lotion*. A common geographic setting does not, however, unite *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Something Unspoken*.

¶7 It is more appropriate to consider that the two plays comprising *Garden District* are linked not by geography but by the presence of gardens in each play and by the function of both of these gardens as metaphors for homosexual desire. Steven Bruhm notes that an alarmist homophobic book from 1951 used the phrase "A Garden of Pansies" to describe what the authors, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, perceived as homosexual infiltration of the United States government ("Blackmailed" 528). This same homophobic tome, entitled *Washington Confidential*, contains another quote that may be particularly relevant to *Something Unspoken*: "No one knows how many lesbians there are, because the female . . . of the pervert species is seldom spoken about and is much less obvious" (qtd. in Katz 100).

¶8 America has historically perceived lesbianism as being different from male homosexuality. Lesbianism has often been seen as less offensive by mainstream heterosexual culture and, if discreet, has more often and more easily been allowed to flourish at the periphery of society than has male homosexuality. Possible rationales are reflected in Hemingway's reiteration of Gertrude Stein's belief that "the act male homosexuals commit is ugly and repugnant" while "in women it is the opposite" and Paul Monette's assertion that sex between men challenges the power structure of a patriarchal society (Hemingway 20, Monette 144). Although this paper does not attempt to quantify the difference between American perceptions of lesbianism and of male homosexuality,

both in the 1950s and today, it is clear that a difference exists. Thus a comparison between Cornelia's situation in *Something Unspoken* and Sebastian's in *Suddenly Last Summer*, while central to my argument, is not strictly a comparison of apples to apples. Yet if the two plays of *Garden District*, as I suggest, contrast one kind of homosexual desire, the kind that "passes" within the strictures placed on it by 1950s America, with another kind that cannot and will not be contained within these strictures, then the choice of a lesbian relationship as the setting for the former, societally acceptable, kind of homosexual desire makes sense.

¶9 Cornelia's garden in *Something Unspoken*, like her homosexual desire, is "less obvious" than that of Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer*. For one thing, Cornelia's garden is off-stage. The audience does not see it, but only hears it spoken of in passing. The most extensive reference to the garden comes from Cornelia herself, who gives her rationale for not admitting visitors: "I'm afraid that my garden will not be open to the Pilgrims this spring. I think the cultivation of gardens is an esthetic hobby and not a competitive sport. Individual visitors will be welcome if they call in advance so that I can arrange for my gardener to show them around, but no bands of Pilgrims" (225). Cornelia's protection of her garden echoes the manner in which upscale homosexuals used wealth, privilege, and exclusivity to shelter their life-styles from the general public in 1950s America. The steps Cornelia takes to protect her garden are not dissimilar to those taken by Violet Venable to protect her homosexual son by creating a protected atmosphere of "grandeur" around him (Williams, *Suddenly* 26). It is ironic that Violet does not acknowledge her son's homosexuality, but she nonetheless provides him with a social mask or "beard" under which his homosexuality can covertly flourish.

¶10 While the audience never sees Cornelia's garden, they do see one of this garden's products. As part of an awkward attempt to proclaim her romantic affection for her secretary Grace, Cornelia gives her fifteen red roses to celebrate the fifteen years that the two women have lived together. Although their anniversary is in November, and perhaps beyond the typical growing season, one might nevertheless speculate that these roses came from those same rose bushes that Cornelia rakes "dead leaves over . . . to protect . . . from frost" (Williams, *Something* 231). If Cornelia's garden does represent homosexual desire and if the roses represent the love that grows from that desire, then it is fitting that, in this understated play, fourteen of the fifteen roses remain offstage, out of sight. Tantalizingly, the audience is allowed to see only one rose onstage, in the same way that only a small portion of the romantic relationship between the women in *Something Unspoken* is communicated verbally.

¶11 Thomas J. Richardson's essay "The City of Day and the City of Night: New Orleans and the Exotic Unreality of Tennessee Williams" may be helpful in understanding the relationship between *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. In this essay, Richardson argues that much of Tennessee Williams's work deals with the tension between two metaphorical "cities": a "City of Night" that represents sexual freedom and a "City of Day" that represents the playwright's puritan heritage of guilt (635). This notion is particularly compelling when related to *Suddenly Last Summer*. Sebastian is able to practice homosexuality with impunity as long as he does so at night. It is only when he attempts to merge the City of Day and the City of Night—when, as Catherine says, "he suddenly switched from evenings to the beach"—that Sebastian's activities provoke a violent response (74). Richardson points out that New Orleans often serves for Williams as "an appropriate symbol for the city of night" (637). While Richardson does not mention the book directly, his essay easily evokes John Rechy's groundbreaking 1963 novel about gay life in America, *City of Night*, in which the climactic action takes place in New Orleans. If Richardson reads New Orleans, the setting of *Suddenly Last*

Summer, as the City of Night, then perhaps the setting of *Something Unspoken*, Meridian (a city whose name, according to Webster, archaically means "the hour of noon: MIDDAY"), can be read as the City of Day.

¶12 The garden of homosexual desire in *Something Unspoken* survives in the City of Day because it is restrained, disciplined, and largely kept out of sight. Sebastian's garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* refuses to conform to these same strictures. Just as Sebastian transgresses the norms of acceptable homosexual behavior by moving from "evenings to the beach," his garden transgresses the norms of appearance for a residential garden. According to the stage directions, Sebastian's garden, unlike Cornelia's, is very much in plain sight: "The interior is blended with a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle. . . . The colors of this jungle-garden are violent. . . . There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood" (13). This garden apparently is not only meant to be seen but also to be heard: "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. . . . The jungle tumult continues a few moments after the curtain rises; then subsides into relative quiet, which is occasionally broken by a new outburst" (13). Lest this strange garden on-stage be overlooked by the audience, the first line of the play draws attention to it. "Yes," Violet says, "this was Sebastian's garden" (14). After the first two pages in which Violet and Doctor Sugar discuss the ferocity of the garden, little more is said about it in *Suddenly Last Summer*. However, the garden remains on-stage throughout the play. It is when she first looks at the garden that Catherine weeps for her departed cousin, and it is into the garden that she twice attempts to escape in order to avoid telling the horrible tale of Sebastian's death (38, 58, 69).

¶13 The advantage of reading *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Something Unspoken* as companion pieces rather than as individual works can perhaps best be measured by how such a reading might alter the reader's perception of the character of Sebastian Venable. Sebastian has often been interpreted unsympathetically by critics who, as Marilyn Claire Ford summarizes, "consider *Suddenly Last Summer* exclusively as a confessional drama in which Williams condemns his own sexual proclivities in the exploitive character of Sebastian Venable" (132). Indeed, there is much in Sebastian's behavior that does not engender sympathy. He deceives his mother into acting as an unwitting procurer for his homosexual liaisons and then abandons her when she becomes too old and unattractive to fulfill this function. He then uses his cousin Catherine for the same purpose, rejecting her love and affection while pursuing sexual affairs with anonymous young men that he treats like "items on a menu" (Williams, *Suddenly* 40).

¶14 Yet a more sympathetic reading of Sebastian is possible, of the kind articulated by Steven Bruhm in his essay "Blond Ambition." Bruhm notes of Sebastian that "homosexual desire . . . engages him, for the first time, in the love of another, and the maintenance of the erotic life depends here on the maintenance of homosexual desire, the cessation of which means death" (100). If homosexual desire is literally essential for Sebastian's survival, if the absence of such desire would mean the end of Sebastian's life, is he not then justified in pursuing any ends, short of the taking of another person's life, to realize this desire? Also, the deceit and callousness that mark Sebastian's behavior might be related more to the societal strictures placed on homosexual desire than to some inherent evilness in his character. If he had lived in a society that allowed for the open expression of homosexual desire, might not Sebastian have been able to achieve a healthier sex life—one that, if not monogamous, might at least have allowed him to experience emotional as well as physical intimacy with his partners? Sebastian is an enigmatic figure and doubtless embodies the theatrical ambiguity of which Tennessee

Williams was so fond. Yet it is possible to see Sebastian as more sinned against than sinning and to see *Suddenly Last Summer* as a play that indicts not homosexuality but rather "the social strictures that regulate homosexual behavior" (Bruhm, "Blackmailed" 537). In such a reading, Sebastian can be seen not as an exploiter but rather, like his namesake Saint Sebastian, as a martyr.

¶15 A unified reading of *Suddenly Last Summer* together with *Something Unspoken* leads the reader to adopt a sympathetic rather than an unsympathetic interpretation of Sebastian because, in such a reading, Sebastian's plight is seen alongside that of Cornelia. One can then see how little choice Sebastian really has and how grim is the alternative to Sebastian's transgression of society's behavioral norms for homosexuals. Cornelia abides by these norms and as a result lives a life of sleepless nights and frustrated passion, a kind of living death, "sentenced," in her own words, "to silence for a life time" (Williams, *Something* 232). Sebastian refuses to stifle his homosexual desire. He will not hide in darkness but instead moves "from evenings to the beach" and consequently dies a martyr's death, torn apart and destroyed by an angry society. These are the two choices available to homosexuals in the world of *Garden District*, choices which may be very similar to those that Tennessee Williams himself faced as a gay man in 1950s America. The playwright's refusal to renounce homosexual desire and live in the closet was perhaps analogous to that of Sebastian. Likewise, the savage attacks visited on Tennessee Williams by mainstream critics after he "came out" as a homosexual were only slightly less violent than the treatment Sebastian received at the hands of the street urchins in Cabeza de Lobo. Seen in this light, Sebastian's behavior, like Williams's writing, might constitute political and even revolutionary action of the kind articulated by David Savran (88, 144).

¶16 *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer* explore the imperfect nature of the two major paths of behavior available to American homosexuals in the 1950s. When *Garden District* is read as a unified whole, it provides a comprehensive vision of the behavioral dilemma that confronted homosexuals then and that, unfortunately, continues to confront many gay and lesbian people in America today, particularly those that live in politically and culturally conservative areas. The choice of whether to try to "pass" like Cornelia by containing their homosexual desires within the limits established by heterosexual society, or to challenge these limits as Sebastian does and risk being ostracized, assaulted, or even killed like Matthew Shepard, remains a very real dilemma for thousands if not millions of gay and lesbian Americans. By reading *Garden District* as a unified whole and by producing *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer* once again in tandem as a single evening of theatre, scholars and theatre practitioners can help all Americans, gay and straight, to better understand and address this issue.

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