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## “A Tenderness which was Uncommon”: Homosexuality, Narrative, and the Southern Plantation in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

FEW TEXTS FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY have sparked as much critical debate or speculation about what will happen at the end as Tennessee Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Indeed, the play’s resistance to closure is so provocative, if not downright frustrating, that Williams found himself rewriting the last act before his director, Elia Kazan, would agree to stage the thing on Broadway. Yet even with two endings to work with, we as audience and readers still find ourselves having to complete the action in our own minds and decide whether Brick will actually sleep with Maggie, whether Maggie will get pregnant, and whether Big Daddy will bequeath the plantation to them as new parents. Of course, we finally *can’t* make up our minds about the play’s conclusion because all of these questions of plot actually hinge on the deceptively simple question of whether Brick, the white male heir apparent to Big Daddy’s plantation, is really gay or straight. We don’t know whether Brick will be named heir because we don’t know whether he will sleep with Maggie and produce another heir. And we can’t decide whether he is going to sleep with Maggie because his friend Skipper’s earlier admission of his own homosexuality casts suspicion on his friendship with Brick and, consequently, on Brick’s sexual identity as well. Thus, the play teases us by suggesting that the answers to our questions about its plot are clearly within reach, if only we can uncover the indecipherable “truth” of Brick’s sexuality. And of course, we cannot. What I will attempt to do instead, then, is not to solve or resolve *Cat*’s textual indeterminacy—or, as so many critics still want to do, to prove that Brick is or isn’t “really” homosexual—so much as to elaborate on exactly how white male homosexuality works perhaps more than any other force to

create and sustain that indeterminacy. And in particular, I will show that the *way* in which homosexuality creates this narrative disruption—why Brick's homosexuality itself can't be decided in one way or another—derives specifically from the play's *setting* on the Southern plantation.

Despite all the criticism and response provoked by *Cat's* textual slipperiness, sexy content, and general popularity, no one has bothered to address the play's plantation setting in detail. I hope to fill this surprising gap by examining the way that the deployment of cultural identities traditionally associated with the plantation overwrites the characters' *individual* identities and codes the significance of their actions in ways that make sense only in that context. However, it must be stressed that discussing the role of the plantation in *Cat* does not re-situate the play in an outmoded discourse that would argue for the importance of "place" in Southern literature. Rather, I will show how Williams's play opens radical new ways for understanding the Southern plantation as a cultural and economic institution and will do so by exposing the ways in which it allows for elite white male homosexuality even when homosexuality remains ideologically inconsistent with it. While the text may never reveal the answers to the mysteries of its plot, it does offer clear examples of how white male homoeroticism and homosexuality are actually consistent with the structure of the plantation as long as the patriarchal hyper-valuation of white masculinity remains intact. At the same time, however, even while this form of homosexuality appears to fit with the deployment of planter-class masculinity, it also violates the plantation's twin requirements of creating a legacy through heterosexual reproduction and preserving that legacy through an oppressive system of heterosexualized paternalistic relations. By exploring this central paradox, I will show that the Southern plantation culture imagined in Williams's play includes homosexuality as a viable option for men of the planter class even though that option, because of its non-reproductive nature, simultaneously threatens the viability of the plantation. And it is this paradox, I argue, that generates the textual indeterminacy that ultimately makes it impossible to explain or resolve the



moment of crisis when the stability of the plantation is at greatest risk: the moment when Maggie tries to force Brick to come to bed.

### **Big Daddy's Plantation**

It is important not to mistake *Cat's* plantation setting as a nostalgic throwback to an out-of-date and even antebellum way of living. Even in the mid-1950s setting of the play, the Southern plantation was a viable economic institution that capitalized on racial segregation to promote and accommodate a maximum agricultural return. Given the centrality of the plantation big house within the vast area of land, and given the wealth of Big Daddy as the single planter of the estate—instead of just the landlord to a collection of smaller tenant farms—it may seem that Williams wanted the plantation to look like a stronghold of the past in an increasingly modern world. And, in a way, it does. But even if Big Daddy's plantation looks antebellum in its physical structure, it is definitely not out of date or out of place ideologically. As Charles S. Aiken writes, the New South tenant plantation that evolved after the Civil War had again been transformed in its geography after World War II with the increases in mechanization and herbicide treatments: "The small tenant farms within plantations vanished with the shift to wage labor. Because houses scattered across fields were obstacles to efficient use of the new machinery, those that were abandoned were razed, and the remaining ones were moved to form a line of dwellings near the plantation headquarters."<sup>1</sup> This new settlement pattern ultimately restructured the plantation in such a way that it was nearly identical to the antebellum plantation—thus the nostalgic look of Big Daddy's big house: "With the reemergence of the village, the spatial form of the neplantation of the Modern South resembles that of the Old South slave plantation more closely than that of the fragmented tenant plantation of the New South" (Aiken, p. 111). Finally, as Aiken proves, the change that increased mechanization brought to the plantation's spatial form did not correspond to a dramatic *social* change, for the neplantation still depended on a large

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<sup>1</sup>*The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 110.

black working population, and the Civil Rights Movement was only gathering steam.<sup>2</sup> This trend justifies Williams's depiction of Big Daddy's plantation as large, spatially centralized, and still containing a large black population subordinated to the whim of the wealthy planter. Though it may look antebellum, Big Daddy's plantation is remarkably contemporary to its times, and should by no means be mistaken as a historical or ideological anachronism.

What is unusual about Big Daddy's plantation, however, is the open and unabashed centrality of the homosexual couple who originally built the plantation. As the stage directions introducing the play make clear, homosexuality is preeminent because the entire play is set in the bedroom of the homosexual couple from whom Big Daddy inherited the plantation, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. And, as the directions also make clear, Williams wanted the design of the set to convey the "tenderness" of their relationship throughout the action of the play:

[The room] hasn't changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon.<sup>3</sup>

This passage establishes homosexuality not only as the physical origin of the plantation but also as its *metaphysical* origin in the loving relationship that "haunts" the room so "gently and poetically." As much as the house and its original bedroom constitute the physical focus for the plantation's fields and grounds, the ghostly, lingering presence of Straw and Ochello's relationship continues to define the shape and significance of every other relationship on the plantation. Above all, the influence that their haunting relationship exerts is most visible in the ambiguity it gives to Brick's relationship with Skipper. As Judith J. Thompson notes, "[I]n distinct

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<sup>2</sup>"Because large labor forces were still required for weeding or weeding and harvesting, from the 1930s through 1960s some planters saw little need to purchase tractors or mechanical harvesters even though the machines were readily available" (Aiken, p. 109).

<sup>3</sup>Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: Signet, 1955), p. xiii.

contrast to Brick's betrayal of Skipper's friendship, the Straw-Ochello relationship is invested with the mythic love, loyalty, and brotherly devotion embodied by Castor and Pollux." In this way, Thompson continues, "the fully realized homosexual relationship exemplified by Straw and Ochello represents the only alternative in the play to either loveless heterosexual couplings or tragically suppressed homosexual longings."<sup>4</sup> As the definitional center, the loving relationship between these two men reveals the various emotional defects of every straight relationship in the play, including Brick and Maggie's, Big Daddy and Big Mama's, and Gooper and Mae's. More importantly, it directly determines how Brick's attachment to Skipper must be read, for his and Maggie's occupation of their room forces the suggestion that Brick's feelings for Skipper might indeed be homosexual—even though Brick thought they were just platonic—and that his marriage to Maggie might be a sham.

Strangely, Brick is the only person in the play who is afraid of that identification between himself and the room's original inhabitants, for as the play makes clear, Big Daddy and the others are completely at ease with Straw and Ochello's open homosexuality. Brick voices what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has identified as "homosexual panic"—the rupture point at which men try to "regulate . . . the amorphous territory of 'the sexual'" by violently repudiating the possibility that homosexuality might constitute a part of their sexual identities and of the entire homosocial continuum.<sup>5</sup> But, as Williams's play makes clear, Brick is the only person who expresses this homosexual panic. Every other character seems impatient and critical of Brick's panic and treats Straw and Ochello's love with respect. The play assigns a positive value to their relationship through the admiration of them that Maggie and Big Daddy express in the first two acts, and through

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<sup>4</sup>*Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup>Homosexual panic works to control and limit the border of the sexual through the intimidation and blackmail of supposed homosexuals, such as in the way that Brick lashes out violently against Skipper and any others who are homosexual, and even in the way that he withdraws from the world around him out of the apparent fear that he might be homosexual himself. As Sedgwick's theory shows, the absence of this terroristic method of control demonstrates "the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], p. 89). See Sedgwick pp. 1-2 and 83-96.



the way that Williams himself describes the relationship as “a tenderness which was uncommon.” Instead of “unnatural” or “un-normal” or even “unexpected,” the relationship is simply rare. A homosexual relationship between white men exists within the realm of possibility in the plantation as Williams represents it, but it just doesn’t happen very often. Indeed, as Mark Royden Winchell remarks, Straw and Ochello clearly enjoyed an openly homosexual life in their rural part of northern Mississippi without any sign of social isolation, disapproval, or retaliation: “Straw and Ochello did not run away from home, or try to escape petticoat government, but lived totally within the confines of civilization.”<sup>6</sup> The only negative value attached to their love comes from the man who hates them because he fears that he might actually be like them.

However, just as the truth of Brick’s sexuality remains unstated, the reasons for everyone else’s approval of Straw and Ochello go more or less unexplained. Most critics move in the direction of answering this question by taking Big Daddy at his word when he calls himself “tolerant.” In the second act, Big Daddy, trying to convince Brick that he shouldn’t be so quick to judge and despise homosexuals, describes his own reason for accepting them: “Always, anyhow, lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!—is *tolerance!*—I grown it” (p. 89). In his brilliant assessment of Williams’s work, David Savran praises Big Daddy for this statement and writes that he evidently occupies “an antihomophobic position from which to preach *‘tolerance!’* in an attempt to neutralize Brick’s self-hatred and forfend his ‘queer’ bashing.”<sup>7</sup> Dean Shackelford echoes this idea in his explanation of the ways that Brick’s homophobia remains out of place with the culture that the Pollitt family represents:

None of Brick’s hostile, homophobic rhetoric comes from Big Daddy, whose attitude toward society is fundamentally critical, for he has learned “tolerance.” Williams clearly indicates that Big Daddy, perhaps the most likable character in

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<sup>6</sup>“Come Back to the Locker Room Ag’in, Brick Honey!” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 48 (Fall 1995), 711.

<sup>7</sup>*Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 101.

the play, is both tolerant (but not of Big Mama or his grandchildren) and pro-gay.<sup>8</sup>

But both Savran and Shackelford are perhaps too quick to praise Big Daddy and his "tolerance" and fail to search the text for any reason why we should accept his association of tolerance with something as decidedly oppressive and intolerant as the Southern plantation. After all, as Shackelford himself can't help referring to in his parenthetical list of those to whom Big Daddy is deliberately *not* tolerant, the plantation is hardly so liberated and free for every member of the complex, multiracial household who lives and works there.

In citing Big Daddy's claim of tolerance, Savran and others have missed his association of it with the plantation, as well as the way that the play itself undercuts the arrogance of Big Daddy's statement. Woven subtly throughout the play, evidence of the oppressive deployment of racial and gender identities within the framework of paternalistic patriarchy reveals that Big Daddy's claim to tolerance is wrongheaded to the point that it is either naive or hypocritical. He claims to be the voice of tolerance, yet the black servants persistently interrupt the play to punctuate his and the other characters' speeches and actions, forcing the plantation's deployment of race squarely into the frame of representation. In Act One, when Brick is on the gallery, his reverie is broken by the disembodied voice of one of the black servants, as the stage directions specify: "*Brick is still on the gallery. Someone below calls up to him in a warm Negro voice, 'Hiya, Mistuh Brick, how yuh feelin'?' Brick raises his liquor glass as if that answered the question*" (p. 42). Later, at the celebration of Big Daddy's birthday, the black servants again interrupt the action of the play by forcing the white family to suspend their engagement in the conflict at hand and proceed with celebrating Big Daddy's life on the brink of his untimely death from cancer: "*One of the Negroes, Lacy or Sookey, peeks in, cackling. They are waiting for a sign to bring in the cake and champagne . . . Negroes in white jackets enter with an enormous birthday cake ablaze with candles and carrying buckets of champagne with satin ribbons about the bottle necks*" (p. 51). The spectacle of a parade of black servants whitewashed by the uniform of their servitude intrudes on the family scene

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<sup>8</sup>"The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*," *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 1 (1998), 113.



and noisily calls attention to the unspoken privilege that the Pollitts possess simply because they are white.

The most telling racial intrusion in the play comes at the end of Act Two, when Brick tells Big Daddy that the doctor has lied and that he really does have an incurable case of cancer. Brick is frustrated and infuriated by Big Daddy's attempts to make him face his own fears about his role in Skipper's death and, it can be argued, about the fragility of his own masculinity and sexuality. Lashing out to get revenge, Brick turns the tables and forces Big Daddy to face his own painful reality. At that precise moment, Big Daddy "*swings out onto the gallery*" and the black servants again offer their disembodied voices in a song that undeniably evokes the sentiment of the Old South: "Pick a Bale of Cotton." Simultaneously, Mae comes rushing into the room shouting, "Oh, Big Daddy, the field-hands are singin' fo' you!" (p. 94). Big Daddy has tried to depict himself as the voice of tolerance, but the play contradicts him with a dose of reality by revealing the continued subordination of African Americans on his own plantation—a dose of reality especially poignant at the moment when Big Daddy also has to confront the reality of his own death. The simultaneity of these two revelations suggests that this hypocritical attitude about the rigid deployment of racial identities works as the symbolic cause of Big Daddy's cancer, that the cause is not, as Savran argues, his youthful homosexual affairs.<sup>9</sup> But the revelation of Big Daddy's cancer comes at exactly the same moment that the play forces the audience to recognize that the plantation economy still depends on the exploitation of black labor even a century after the abolition of slavery. This symbolic timing consequently suggests that Big Daddy's cancer is tied much more closely to his own untruthfulness about racial inequality than to the fact that he probably had sex with men.

The formal intrusions of the black servants and the weird rendition of "Pick a Bale of Cotton" at the moment of death's revelation bring to the fore the fact that Big Daddy is not so isolated on the plantation as he claims because the plantation's success depends on the long-term settlement and

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<sup>9</sup>Savran writes that "Big Daddy is paying a terrible price for his youthful prodigality . . . he is dying of bowel cancer, which . . . becomes the currency, of mortal debt in Williams's homosexual economy. For Big Daddy, bowel cancer seems to be the wages of sodomy" (pp. 100-101).

control of a laboring black population kept in legal subordination. Indeed, Big Daddy himself reveals the extent of this pattern of settlement and control when he describes how he arrived on the plantation without a penny and eventually rose up the ladder to become its owner. At a crucial moment in which Big Mama tries to assert her authority as the matriarch of the family, Big Daddy corrects her almost violently with his story so as to reassert his own superiority as the father and the head of the plantation household:

I made this place! I was overseer on it! I was overseer on the old Straw and Ochello plantation. I quit school at ten! I quit school at ten years old and went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello's partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger! I did all that myself with no goddam help from you. (p. 58)

Although the added layer of homosexual meaning in Big Daddy's use of "partners" would have been less obvious in 1955 than it is now, it still conveys a sense that he is rejecting his relation to his own wife and placing himself instead in a homosexual economy in which the two men are joined in one household. The racial implications of his statement, however, are more overt, for while he can work alongside the poor black laborers "like a nigger in the fields," he fails to acknowledge that his skin color automatically gave him the advantage to prove himself and rise up the ladder of favoritism until he inherited the place. Moreover, while his whiteness robs the blacks around him of the opportunity for success, his skill at directing those same black workers leads to greater and greater personal wealth for him. He did not earn his success by doing "all that myself," as he claims, because his success as a planter is directly proportional to the size and the submissiveness of his black workforce. As he rises to become his own patriarch and the heir of Straw and Ochello, Big Daddy exploits the labor of his black work force more and more completely until he is rich beyond compare. It may be true that while Williams tries to expose Big Daddy's racism by invoking a self-consciously racist image of the "happy darky," reminiscent of the work of Thomas Nelson Page, the excessive friendliness of the servants and field hands might initially soften the effect and make Big Daddy come off looking like something much better than a racial imperialist. But as long as he can advance while blacks can't, the ultimate negativity of his racism is unmistakable.

Besides embodying the cancerous hypocrisy of racial exploitation, Big Daddy's power within the plantation household also depends on the continued exploitation of gender differences through patriarchal oppression. While race punctuates the action of the play at profound moments, the oppressiveness of patriarchy is more overtly one of the play's thematic concerns. Even the names of the characters almost comically identify them by their positions within the patriarchal order: Big Daddy, Big Mama, Brother Man, Sister Woman, and Little Brother. Likewise, the play's very title indicates the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology in the Pollitt family drama. Maggie is a "cat" on the "hot tin roof" of patriarchy, moving and dancing and performing to acquire wealth and comfort through the only means available to her: marriage. In her youth she struggles to get out of her family's economic destitution by marrying someone wealthy, but she is hindered in her efforts as a debutante and as a young bride by the fact that she has nothing more to wear than hand-me-down gowns. And her struggles for financial security hardly end once she marries Brick. Even though he obviously stands to inherit one of the largest fortunes of the region, Brick's alcoholism makes him a liability to her because it also makes him an unfit heir. Thus, Maggie has to continue to dance on the hot tin roof of patriarchy to fight for his inheritance even when he won't fight for it himself. She tells Brick, "Born poor, raised poor, expect to die poor unless I manage to get us something out of what Big Daddy leaves when he dies of cancer! But Brick?!— *Skipper is dead! I'm alive!* Maggie the cat is— . . . *alive!*" (pp. 45-46). Deliberately identifying herself again as the cat, as she does in almost every passage about money, she is the only one to confess openly the extent of her schemes and manipulations.

Yet Maggie is not the only one who makes such schemes. Mae is just as serious about getting the inheritance as Maggie, and later in the play, Brick spells out both women's strategy for Big Daddy: "Well. They're sittin' in the middle of a big piece of land, Big Daddy, twenty-eight thousand acres is a pretty big piece of land and so they're squaring off on it, each determined to knock off a bigger piece of it than the other whenever you let it go" (p. 60). Even Big Mama is doing her part to secure as much control as she can over Big Daddy's estate, as Big Daddy himself proves when he threatens to take his control back from her: "I put up with a whole lot of crap around here because I thought I was dying. And you thought I was dying and you started taking over, well, you can stop taking over now, Ida, because I'm not gonna die, you can just stop now this business of



taking over because you're not taking over because I'm not dying" (p. 57). At the end of the play, however, when Big Mama faces the fact that Big Daddy actually *is* dying and that her children are conspiring to take over the estate for themselves, she again asserts her power as the matriarch by invoking the position of her husband: "I'm talkin' in Big Daddy's language now; I'm his *wife*, not his *widow*, I'm still his *wife*! And I'm talkin' to you in his language an'— . . . *Nobody's goin' to take nothin'!*—till Big Daddy lets go of it, and maybe, just possibly, not—not even then! No, not even then!" (p. 116). Like Maggie, both Mae and Big Mama seem to recognize that they have more at stake than either of the sons in "taking over" Big Daddy's fortune, and somehow more to lose if they fail. Yet in keeping with the plantation's patriarchal assumptions, Big Daddy never once considers that one of the women in his life might make a more worthy heir to his fortune than even one of his own sons.

In addition to showing her need to negotiate the economic effects of patriarchy, Maggie's strategic behavior throughout the play also shows the extent to which she is forced to negotiate the limited deployment of her own sexuality. And nowhere is this limitation more obvious than in her near-total exclusion from the bond her husband shares with Skipper. Maggie resents the fact that her husband can share an emotional bond with his male friend at a higher level of intimacy and intensity than the one he shares with his wife. She expresses this resentment openly in Act One when she tells Brick how left out she felt in college when Brick and Skipper went on double dates: "Why I remember when we double-dated in college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you!—to make a good public impression" (p. 44). Protected by the heterosexual facade of the double date, the bond between men can thrive ambitiously and exclude the women as "tagalongs" or "chaperones." Patriarchy privileges men and the bonds between men to the extent that women can find themselves in a secondary position even when the heterosexual bond is supposed to be in the foreground, such as in the very "public" venue of a double date. Even after she and Brick are married, Maggie never overcomes her resentment of this exclusion, and when her marriage seems in most jeopardy, she confronts Skipper as the direct rival for her husband's attentions: "SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!" (p. 45). Frustrated by her constant exclusion, Maggie tries to force Skipper

either to cut off the bond—so that she can take over his position as the primary object of Brick's affection—or to force the sexuality implicit in their bond into the open—and thus give Maggie another kind of freedom because she will finally know once and for all that competing for Brick's affection is a waste of time. Of course, her ploy backfires in a way, because although Skipper does come out to Brick, Brick's refusal to respond to Skipper's revelation or deal with it leads him to cut Maggie off completely, so that she still doesn't know where she stands. Fully aware of how patriarchy works against her, Maggie the cat resents her exclusion from the economic and cultural power given to white men, and she also hates the gender-exclusive continuum of male homosocial relations that can thwart a woman's desire to become a truly equal partner, as it were, to her husband.

In one sense, Maggie's sexual exclusion here may not look any different from what she would experience in the patriarchy that exists outside the plantation. But when paired with the subtle interruptions of the black servants, it also demonstrates how the networks of paternalistic racism and sexism continue to exert their influence over all the inhabitants of Big Daddy's plantation, deflating his claim of "tolerance." Everyone on the plantation appears to have a well-defined place in a rigid hierarchy underneath Big Daddy, and one can easily expect that a man as quick-tempered as he would hardly be as tolerant if someone dared to challenge or reject his authority by stepping out of that place. Like the cotton he compares it to, tolerance is something he can "grow" on the plantation only through the close supervision of human bodies, and he quickly grows intolerant when a body does something contrary to what *he* wants, as shown in his behavior to Big Mama, Mae, the Preacher, and others. In the plantation's unique conflation of agricultural production and authoritarian social control, every gesture of insubordination is simultaneously a threat to the crop and the owner of the crop, to the plant and planter alike. Stepping out of the cotton row also means stepping out of the line of authority, and the person must be forced back in line if the plantation is to succeed. Thus, Big Daddy's very success as a planter implicitly proves that he is good not only at managing his work force but also at keeping them in check. Like his cotton, Big Daddy's empire of tolerance is built on a deeply rooted system of control that threatens a potentially violent *intolerance* at any deviation from the hierarchy of plantation identities.

### Homosexual Sameness and the Patrilineal Legacy



Supported by Maggie's feeling that there is no room for her in the emotive space between Brick and Skipper, the rigidity of Big Daddy's social ideology finally reveals the answers to why he so readily accepts Jack Straw and Peter Ochello's homosexual love, why their love is structurally central to the plantation, and why he accepts the possibility that his favorite son might be homosexual, too. In short, Big Daddy is at ease with the idea of homosexuality not so much because he himself "knocked around" (p. 85) with men in the past but because the structure of the plantation is such that white male homosexuality poses no threat to white masculinity or authority. As Winchell notes, "[O]ne of the ironies of Williams's play is that its two most overtly heterosexual characters—Maggie and Big Daddy—are also the most tolerant of the latent erotic ties between Brick and Skipper" (p. 707). I would add that while Big Daddy's homosexual past actually reinforces his acceptance of Brick's homosexuality, the extent of both his and Maggie's tolerance stems from the fact that they are also the most aware of how to exploit the plantation's complex system of racial and patriarchal oppression for personal gain. Because they profoundly understand the plantation's social economy, these two also know better than anyone else that elite white male homosexuality can safely coexist with the hierarchies of paternalistic patriarchy. Because both characters are so invested in the male homosocial continuum, they know that white male authority on the plantation is created through the subordination and control of racial, class and gender identities, and not through the separation and exclusion of homosexuality. In other words, it doesn't matter if Brick is homosexual because the plantation hierarchies work to guarantee the primacy of his masculine identity and his status as the (potential) patriarch, regardless of his sexual identity. This is why Maggie tries to force the matter of Brick's sexuality into the open instead of simply trying to correct or deny it. Though it matters to her if he is gay, she is really only concerned with what she needs to do to deal with it herself—not with what it means about her husband's masculinity.

While the plantation hierarchies reinforce the white male's social superiority, homosexuality does not simultaneously undermine or destabilize his social position or his masculinity because homosexual desire operates well within that singular pattern of relations that join men to other men as equals. As the play portrays it, homosexual desire is rooted in sameness rather than the hierarchical reification of difference, and is thus structurally complicit with male *homosocial* desire in a direct, unbroken



continuum. Despite Brick's own vituperative objections, the love between Jack Straw and Peter Ochello proves that using homosexual panic to draw a line between the homosocial and the homosexual on the plantation is arbitrary, unnecessary, and even dishonest. For unlike the other three marriages in the play, the symbolic marriage of the plantation's original patriarchs involves a tenderness whose very definition infers a profound mutual affection instead of a constant struggle between them for domination and control. Big Daddy offers a strange image of this mutuality in Act Two when he describes the way that the two men took their love all the way to the grave: "When Jack Straw died—why, old Peter Ochello quit eatin' like a dog does when its master's dead, and died, too!" (p. 86). This description is perhaps the most surreal image in the most realistic play by a surrealist playwright, suggesting once more the difficulty of representing homosexuality within the representational frame of the Southern plantation. Straw and Ochello relate to each other not as master and slave, master and servant, or master and mistress, but as master and dog. What defines Straw and Ochello's love as much as their fidelity is their mutuality, and the singular component that protects their love within the domain of the plantation is their fundamental sameness as white men of the planter class. Their love escapes the typical form of plantation affections and clears a space for the full expression of mutual devotion—a love so profound that the one man can't go on living without the other. Thus, because no significant differences exist between their identities, their relationship lacks any differentials in status or power, and the two men live and die as double patriarchs of one plantation. And yet, at the same time, the symbolic language of the plantation lacks a vocabulary to describe Straw and Ochello's positions in relation to each other. There is no other model of human relations to compare this couple to, so Williams has Big Daddy describe their bond in terms of a nonhuman love that is unquestioning, unconditional, and purely emotional because it is communicated without language.

As the bizarre comparison to master and dog suggests, a tenderness like Straw and Ochello's is possible on the Southern plantation only as long as both people are able to transcend the pervasive deployment of plantation identities. As long as patriarchal gender differences fracture heterosexual relations, and as long as paternalistic racial differences fracture interracial relations, then a couple can transcend the plantation's

hierarchies only when both members are sexually and racially the same.<sup>10</sup> And as Straw and Ochello's relationship proves, this profound mutuality is available only to white males of the planter class because a homosexual union between them leaves intact the very hierarchies of race, class, and gender that their love transcends. In fact, as the rhetoric of idealism and nobility that pervades the play suggests, the love between elite white men offers no challenge to the subordination and infantilism of women, poor whites, or African Americans because it actually *depends* on those networks of oppression to construct and confer the values of idealism. In other words, Straw and Ochello are able to engage in an open and loving relationship with each other precisely because their status as double patriarchs gives them the privilege to do so. Even though they represent a natural and admirable form of love, they can enjoy the strange liberation of a homosexual sameness only because they rigidly maintain the dehumanizing hierarchies of difference on their plantation. Moreover, as *authors* of both the plantation hierarchies and the "uncommon" bubble of white male homosexuality that the hierarchies support, Straw and Ochello also leave a profound legacy for white male privilege that opens up the continuum of homosocial relations for the other white patriarchs who follow them. Their status as the source of the plantation's economy of identities clearly implies that as long as Brick shared it with someone of equal class—which Skipper easily was—a homosexual relationship wouldn't undercut Brick's masculinity because it would simply offer further confirmation of his privileged place in that culture. On the gridiron, Brick and Skipper's friendship corresponds to their positions on the team: quarterback and wide receiver who win the game together through equal cooperation and the fluid exchange of power (the phallic football) horizontally from one to the other. Yet homosexuality can undermine their masculine identities, and they need to protect themselves with elaborate shows of homosexual panic, as when Brick claims that the most the two men ever touched was to shake hands (p. 89). On the plantation, however, their

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<sup>10</sup>Theoretically, this arrangement of sexual identities could leave room for a white patriarch to enjoy a homosexual relationship with a black man. However, if such a relationship were to incorporate the same tenderness as does Straw and Ochello's love, it would represent a very serious threat to the plantation because it would effectively elevate the black man above his "place" and make him an equal to his white lover. Otherwise, an interracial homosexual affair would actually constitute an act of sexual exploitation and domination, and "tenderness" would not be possible.

masculine identities are already safe, and the play clearly implies that they could easily and safely have pursued a fuller physical relationship in the manner of Brick's gay grandfathers.

The emphasis on sameness in elite white male homosexual relations offers a further insight into the way that white male homosexuality actually works to define the structure of the plantation as a socio-sexual institution. As Big Daddy's anxiety about who will take over the plantation makes clear, the maintenance of plantation hierarchies depends on the deployment of this notion of sameness in the pattern of inheritance. Savran notes the fact that homosexuality stands at the very origin of the plantation as a familial institution as much as an economic and political one: "The very setting of the play foregrounds the question of inheritance by commemorating the birth of the plantation: the bed-sitting-room once occupied by [Straw and Ochello]" (p. 100). This homosexual source in turn defines the pattern of male succession and inheritance:

[W]hat is most striking about this pattern of estate ownership is less its conspicuously patrilineal nature than the homosexuality that stands at its imputed origin and so determinedly "haunts" its development. For not only has Big Daddy inherited the plantation from Straw and Ochello, he has also inadvertently passed along the possibility of arousing homosexual desire to his younger son, Brick, a man driven to despair (and alcohol) over the death of his friend Skipper and married to a woman he "can't stand." (p. 100)

Savran here emphasizes the legacy of homosexual possibility as a component that "haunts" the "pattern of estate ownership" as one of the things that Brick stands to inherit as much as the plantation itself. But the question of inheritance in the play proves that the circulation of power from father to son even follows the same *structure* of relations that Straw and Ochello embody in their homosexual union. As the play makes clear, Big Daddy's anxiety about his legacy turns on the fact that the plantation must transfer from patriarch to patriarch. The patrilineal economy that ensures the perpetuation of the plantation as both an economic and cultural institution again privileges the notion of sameness, and is thus homosexual in nature. Indeed, if we analyze them simply according to their names, the legacy of homosexuality is quite explicit in the fact that one can't make Brick without Straw.



This emphasis on sameness within the plantation's codes of inheritance and legacy can be seen in the family's obsession that Brick produce an heir. Normally, the majority of the inheritance should go to Gooper because he is the older son and has proven his ability to produce grandchildren sixfold. But Brick is Big Daddy's favorite son; and the family's talk throughout the play strongly hints that Big Daddy would gladly will him the entire estate despite the normal patrilineal emphasis on the *first* son. This suggestion becomes most evident when Big Daddy talks about his struggle in deciding on what grounds to base the direction of his legacy:

A little while back when I thought my number was up . . . I thought about you. Should or should I not, if the jig was up, give you this place when I go—since I hate Gooper an' Mae an' know that they hate me, and since all five same monkeys are little Maes and Goopers.—And I thought, No!—Then I thought, Yes!—I couldn't make up my mind. I hate Gooper and his five same monkeys and that bitch Mae! Why should I turn over twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile to not my kind?—But why in the hell, on the other hand, Brick—should I subsidize a goddam fool on the bottle?—Liked or not liked, well, maybe even—*loved!* (pp. 81-82)

This passage makes clear the ideology of patrilineal inheritance and its intrinsic emphasis on the idea of sameness. Big Daddy hates Gooper, in part because Gooper hates him. But the main factor that informs his decision not to will Gooper the plantation is that he is “not my kind” and that Gooper's five kids all follow suit—“Gooper and his five same monkeys.” More tellingly, the problem with Gooper's kids is that they all embody Gooper's sameness exclusively, while Mae stands apart from her own family, not like Gooper and not even really the mother of her own children (they are all “Gooper's”), but simply a “bitch,” an unworthy female. Big Daddy dreads the lineage that would stem from Gooper because he and Gooper are different, and he doesn't even consider Gooper's wife as a part of that lineage. Brick, on the other hand, whom Big Daddy loves, is clearly Big Daddy's “kind,” which would make him eligible for the full inheritance if it weren't for his alcoholism. This pattern of inheritance thus defies the mainstream conventions of patriarchy in one respect, because it flows not from father to oldest son so much as from same to same. Big Daddy's inheritance of the plantation from Jack Straw and Peter Ochello and his own desire to pass that inheritance on to someone who is also his own “kind” show that the patrilineal form of descent on the plantation actually values sameness over any other factor of identity.

The play deliberately ties the basis for Big Daddy's preference for Brick to his perception of Brick's sameness. For example, Big Mama wants Brick to produce "a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy!" (p. 117). More subtly, this sameness is evident throughout the text in the two men's mutual hatred of "mendacity" and "disgust," as well as in their frequent repetition of phrases and expressions, such as their use of "rut," "rutten," and "ruttin'" as an all-purpose epithet for people or things they intensely dislike.<sup>11</sup> Their sameness is also evident in the famous line they both use to keep their wives in a subordinate position whenever they tell the men that they love them. In Act Two, when Big Daddy has really hurt Big Mama's feelings, she pleads to him that she has always loved him so deeply that she "even loved your hate and your hardness" (p. 59). Similarly, at the end of the play's original third act, when Maggie tries to persuade Brick to sleep with her, she reminds him that she will always be there for him, ready to "take hold" of him "gently, gently with love" (p. 123). In both cases, the men respond to their wives rather indifferently, saying, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?" In this offhanded way, Big Daddy and Brick raise the possibility not only that the women are using the idea of love as a tool for manipulating the constraints of patriarchy at a moment in which their security seems most tenuous, but also that they are actually *incapable* of such an intense form of love. Especially because of Brick's supposedly metaphysical love for Skipper and Big Daddy's implied homosexual past with Straw and Ochello, these men's offhanded dismissals indicate that their wives couldn't love them as much as they say because there is actually a *stronger* form of love that white men can share only with other white men. This implication may explain Williams's omission of this famous line in the revised third act. Joined with the added emphasis on heterosexuality—as in Gooper's "pregnant-lookin' envelope" and Big Daddy's joke about the elephant (pp. 150-152)—this omission decreases the ambiguity by adding to the suggestion that Brick has begun to move past his homoerotic relationship with Skipper and to accept the possibility of a heterosexual future with Maggie. In this version, he doesn't reject Maggie's claim of love as an impossibility, and thus might be read as elevating heterosexual love to the "noble" level of male homoeroticism and homosexuality.

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<sup>11</sup>See pp. 58, 62, 76, and 78.

The shift in emphasis on Brick's sexuality at the ends of the two final acts reveals the way that homosexuality generates the indeterminacy of meaning in Williams's play. The question remains whether Brick will sleep with Maggie and what that action will reveal about his sexual identity if he does. While on the one hand, sleeping with Maggie might confirm Brick's heterosexuality, Winchell writes that, on the other hand, it could just as well confirm his homosexuality: "By sleeping with Maggie, Brick may be vicariously establishing a sexual bond with his dead friend. Moreover, the practical consequence of resuming material relations would be to enhance Brick's chances of inheriting the plantation that originally belonged to two overt homosexuals" (p. 710). Savran also concludes that if Brick sleeps with Maggie, it would have to be read as a homosexual act despite the fact that it occurs between a man and a woman:

This destabilization is rendered particularly vividly by Maggie's final and peripetous confession, her invented pregnancy, which, ironically, becomes a testament not to the "naturalness" of heterosexuality, but to the impossibility of erasing male homosexual desire, and to Skipper's irrevocable position in the erotic triangle . . . [Thus,] his successful impregnation of his wife in the bed of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello would ironically attest less to the sudden and timely triumph of a "natural" heterosexuality than to the perpetuation of a homosexual economy and to the force of Maggie's fetishistic appropriation of Skipper's sexuality. (p. 109)

In Savran's estimation, the heterosexual act would actually cement Brick's place in a homosexual economy by producing an heir in the line of patriarchal sameness that began with Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. Yet even still, the simultaneous deployment of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the meeting of Brick and Maggie only increases the play's indeterminacy. So much speculation about what would happen and what it would mean if they sleep together amounts to little more than speculation, and the reader still has to make up his or her own mind.

One thing that the question of their intercourse does show concretely, however, is the way that homosexuality complicates and threatens to destabilize the structure of the plantation even as it works to define it. The line of patrilineal descent follows the structure of homosexual relations through its emphasis on sameness and repetition. As a result, the plantation easily accommodates homosexual relationships between patriarchs as long as they remain true to this notion of a privileged sameness and leave the hierarchies of race, class, and gender intact. At the



same time, if the patriarch embraces a homosexual relationship, that relationship also poses a significant *threat* to the plantation because homosexuality is non-reproductive and cannot guarantee an heir to carry on the tradition. Sameness preserves the plantation through the vertical transmission of cultural power from father to son in periodic increments of time. But it also threatens the plantation by accommodating sexual relations between two patriarchs at the *same* time, displacing the transmission of power to a *horizontal* field that shifts between the two men as in a closed circuit. Elite white male homosexuality thus operates as the primary source for the play's textual indeterminacy because, while Big Daddy's plantation is structurally dependent on it, the overt presence of a homosexual couple such as Straw and Ochello would generate a crisis in the question of inheritance. Aided by the fact that they are physically absent from the play, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello evidently got around this crisis by adopting Big Daddy as their son and heir. But Brick is not so lucky, and the representational dilemma that homosexuality introduces forestalls the resolution of the play's action by collapsing the plantation's heterosexual and homosexual components onto each other at once. If Brick sleeps with Maggie, he only compounds the problem of his sexual identity because both options—sleeping with her or not sleeping with her—produce both possibilities of identity at the same time. If he sleeps with her, he proves his heterosexuality even as he enters into a homosexual economy with Skipper and Straw and Ochello. If he doesn't sleep with her, he avoids linking himself physically with those men and preserves the sanctity of his heterosexuality; but he also appears to concede that he has no interest in a heterosexual union and that his sexual desires might indeed be reserved for other men like Skipper. Whatever he does, Brick's body thus becomes the site on which the contradictory forces of the plantation play themselves out. Just as his action will define his identity as both and neither at the same time, his status as the future patriarch simultaneously attests to both the plantation's inherent privileging of sameness for white males in a homosocial and patrilineal economy, as well as its privileging of sexual *difference* in its demand that the patriarch produce his heir through heterosexual reproduction. In other words, the inherent sexual contradiction that establishes the play's frame of reference, the plantation, makes it impossible to resolve that contradiction on stage, and the play ends without bringing the action to a close.

