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In 1951, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer published a book entitled *Washington Confidential*. One of its chapters, called "A Garden of Pansies," had a dire warning for patriotic Americans: "With more than 6,000 fairies in government offices, you may be concerned about the security of the country. Fairies are no more disloyal than the normal. But homosexuals are vulnerable, they can be blackmailed or influenced by sex more deeply than conventional citizens; they are far more intense about their love-life."¹ Now, Lait and Mortimer have two problems here which, while not particular to McCarthy's America, are epitomized by it. The first is one of anonymity: 6,000 in office, they say, and "One cannot snoop at every desk and count people who appear queer. Some are deceptive to the uninitiated."² And this anonymity poses the larger threat of potential blackmail: because homosexuals have a secret, they are willing to hide it at any cost. What's worse, they may be willing to sell the goods on someone else, if the price is right. Because that price is national security, the homosexual poses a threat to 1950s cold-war America that is unmatched in that country's history.

When Lait and Mortimer attempt to weed their garden of pansies, they equate homosexuality with political sedition. This is as it's always been. The interdiction of sex between men, as it comes to us from Leviticus, was grounded in Israel's developing need to assure a plentiful supply of soldiers and tribesmen. (As well, it kept out Babylonian influence: homosexuality is never considered an indigenous product; it's always imported.³) Furthermore, Lait and Mortimer specify a *financial* element in that sedition. This, too, is as it's always been. In Judeo-Christian thought, homosexual acts denied the *use-value* of semen, equating non-procreative sex with misuse of natural resources. The wasted seed directly affected national stability by refusing to follow its naturally reproductive function – it refused to pay its debt to the nation. And that tradition of financial management has continued throughout Western history. As Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick's work has emphasized, male bonds are *essential* to the enormous web of western capitalist relations; because of this, what she calls the homo-social bond has always been promoted and protected.⁴ But it has also been policed: within that system of bonds, genital contact has always been condemned. Men can do lunch, but never breakfast. Given this, the stakes are particularly high for McCarthy's America: the homosexual is *by definition* a threat to national security because he harbors a secret which is linked to economic imbalance, and which makes his behaviour transgressive. And this is the context within which Tennessee Williams is writing, a context which, as I hope to show, is helpful for discussing his 1958 play, *Suddenly Last Summer*.

With the historical link between homosexuality and political stability, it is both ironic and understandable that the city has become a Mecca for gay men. Ironic because it puts them at the heart of political activity, understandable because the city offers safety in numbers: homosexuals can both fade into a larger, impersonal mass and find sexual pleasure within that mass. Such was the city of New Orleans for Tennessee Williams when he first came to it in 1938. "I found the kind of freedom I had always needed", he wrote of New Orleans. "And the shock of it against the puritanism of my nature has given me a subject, a theme, which I have never ceased exploiting."⁵ Thomas Richardson argues, then, that the city of New Orleans, particularly at night, represented an exotic, and erotic, fantasy world which Williams exploited in his plays to contrast the realism of the city by day. That contrast between sexual freedom and political stability, with their apparent incompatibility, is exactly what Williams found in the geographical layout of New Orleans, the setting for *Suddenly Last Summer*. According to Richardson, Williams was particularly struck by

... the sense of division between the business world dominated by the American spirit and the exotic world of the Vieux Carré. ... The time-honored dividing line between the French Quarter and the American commercial and residential sectors, including the famous Garden district, is Canal Street. ... Traditionally, Canal Street defines the contrasts of the American-French city which include past vs. present, Protestant vs. Catholic, age vs. youth, wealth vs. poverty, inhibitions vs. a *joie de vivre*, and a clearly bilingual society. The sense of two cities, a divided world, was immediately available to the young Williams.⁶

The topography here is interesting, because it separates the scene of desire – and for Williams, homoerotic desire – from that of responsible economic and commercial management. Put another way, it separates the workings of the libidinal economy from those of the political economy.⁷ But while the French Quarter may well represent sexual freedom, that freedom is, by Williams's own account, shadowed by the adjacent city of puritan ethics and economic commercialism. The libidinal economy is constantly being surveyed by the political economy, so that the two worlds are not divided as much as they are

defined by each other, by the overwhelming sense of *difference* that each represents to the other. And an exploration of the laws which govern these worlds indicates that the borders separating them are not so distinct. Instead, Williams is exploring how, in the field of homosexual desire, the commercial sensibility of the American city surrounds the erotic topography of Sebastian Venable's sexual behaviour, and becomes complicit in what it seeks to condemn.

Above all, the city in *Suddenly Last Summer*, indeed the city anywhere, is the site in which goods are exchanged. It is the place where things are bought and sold, and where the only law is equilibrium, the balancing of accounts, the paying of debts. As such, the exotic district of New Orleans, its Spanish counterpart of Cabeza de Lobo, and other glamorous urban settings like Paris and Venice, are the sites of exchange: the exchange of erotic pleasure. It is in these cities that all of Sebastian's erotic action takes place. Furthermore, this exchange has a distinctly commercial flavour: Sebastian manipulates his partners like exchangeable commodities. Catherine, Sebastian's cousin and erstwhile travelling companion, remembers the day last summer when

Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds. All the travel brochures he picked up were advertisements of the blond northern countries. I think he'd already booked us to – Copenhagen, or – Stockholm. – Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were – items on a menu.⁸

Most criticism of *Suddenly Last Summer* argues that this commodity mentality is Sebastian's fatal flaw which Tennessee Williams both condemns – because of his "puritan" upbringing – and implicates himself in.⁹ But the dealing in commodities is more than just the playwright's indictment of Sebastian's dehumanizing treatment of other human beings. It indicates the degree to which commercial laws invade and inform the way eroticism is lived out.

Furthermore, the commodity image points to a larger and more symbolic system of exchange, which operates on a number of levels. The first mode of exchange deals directly with the problem of anonymity that Lait and Mortimer had found so troubling. Sebastian's popularity at Cannes and Venice was captured on film when he was photographed "in a Renaissance pageboy's costume at a masked ball" (p. 23). Violet, his mother, brags that Sebastian's elegance on such occasions secured for him "a little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young." But Sebastian's motives may not have been quite so Platonic: this is the first hint we get that, by exchanging himself for another person – in this case, a theatrical figure – Sebastian could procure men for himself with a reduced risk of exposure. And his own mother's ignorance regarding the possible benefits of anonymity and masked role-playing here are telling. Earlier, she had declared that "Sebastian had no public name as a poet, he didn't want one, he refused to have one" (pp. 16–17). And little wonder. But

Violet's refusal to recognize the practical reasons for this points to more than simple dramatic irony: rather, there was – and is – a willingness to overlook this otherwise reprehensible behaviour as long as it was carried out through anonymous exchange.

Just as Sebastian exchanged himself for an anonymous and safely distant Other by masked exchange, so did he exchange *other people* as a means of obtaining his desires. Both his mother and Catherine were objects in his exchange; both were used to attract boys to Sebastian without risk of exposure. As Heidi Hartmann has argued,¹⁰ women are the material in a hierarchical system of exchange that allows an interdependent relationship between men, so that, in essence, Sebastian's homosexual liaisons operated on a principle of commercialism in which one object was exchanged for another of equal value. In this case, Violet and Catherine were exchanged momentarily for Sebastian only because that kind of exchange would facilitate homosexual liaisons in a hegemonically heterosexual world. They allowed him to live a life that Violet characterises by the word "grandeur", a life "that's hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes were crowded out of their palaces and gardens by successful shopkeepers" (p. 26). These shopkeepers, it seems, have established their own laws in regard to pleasure: it is the law of exchange, of *quid pro quo*. And as Catherine points out, this system of exchange is not only efficacious, but morally neutral as well. "[W]e all use each other", she tells Dr. Cukrowisc, "and that's what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's ... *hate* ... " (p. 61). Besides, she adds later, "I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District. ... " (p. 78). Catherine came out in the Garden District and later in Cabeza de Lobo precisely in the way Sebastian couldn't. But his passions were still allowed, or at least overlooked, as long as they expressed themselves through reasonable forms of exchange. As Michael Moon has argued in an essay on Horatio Alger, an otherwise "vilified and persecuted behaviour" is allowed in the marketplace world of Alger's Gilded-Age America as long as it is "made thoroughly congruent with the social requirements of corporate capitalism on the sides of both parties. ... "¹¹ In the case of Williams's play, the exchange of women transformed relations between men into a buy-and-sell contract, in which the homosexual male appeared free to seek his desire.¹²

But as the play points out, it is only an appearance. The implications of Moon's argument reach their fullest demonstration in the last of Sebastian's methods of getting boys. He bought them. Catherine remembers their days on the public beach, the "big city beach" of Cabeza de Lobo, when she attracted boys for Sebastian by wearing a scandalous white bathing suit:

... before long, when the weather got warmer and the beach so crowded, he didn't need me any more for that purpose. The ones in the free beach began to climb over the fence or swim around it, bands of homeless young people that lived on the free

beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children. ... He'd pass out tips among them as if they'd all – shined his shoes or called taxis for him. ... Each day the crowd got bigger, noisier, greedier! – Sebastian began to be frightened. (p. 78)

This moment marks the critical point in the play in which economic laws move in to suppress homosexual behaviour. Out of fear, Sebastian refused to give the boys any more money; in so doing, he severed the economic relationship which traded money for sex. Catherine analyses the situation this way: "This was the first time that Cousin Sebastian had ever attempted to correct a human situation! – I think perhaps that *that* was his – fatal error. ... " (p. 84). By attempting to correct the situation, Sebastian reneged on the economic systems that had allowed him his pleasure in the first place; he transgressed the cardinal rule of anonymous balance that the city marketplace demands, and attempted to privilege his libidinal economy over the political one. As a result, the law of exchange upon which the city is based moved to re-assert itself. Sebastian was chased to a large white hill in the centre of the city and there, in a bizarre scene of cannibalism, he paid his debt. His body was consumed, *quid pro quo*. What began as erotic exchange in the exotic city ended as a business closure of debt-payment, as the law of equilibrium assumed control over homosexual pleasure. Thus, in Williams's play the original boundary between eroticism and commercialism is fully eroded. Exchange in Cabeza de Lobo was not only a means of erotic procurement; it was a means of regulation.

The cannibalism scene, of course, is more than a simple corrective, an appetite suppressant for Sebastian's voracious consumerism. It also picks up on the laws of the third topography in the play – the jungle of the Encantadas. Whereas the city as a commercial district operates on a principle of economic order and balance, the jungle is the site of barbarism, of untamed primal urge. Violet recounts the trip she and Sebastian took to the Encantadas so that her son could find God. The God he found there, however, was one who presided over a scene of mass destruction. Newly hatched sea-turtles which were attempting to make their way to the sea were attacked by voracious, carnivorous birds. She recalls how the birds "were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning them over to expose their soft undersides, tearing the undersides open and rending and eating their flesh" (p. 20). The rent and eaten flesh foreshadows Sebastian's death at Cabeza de Lobo and, for critics of the play, marks the poetic justice that Sebastian had coming to him. *Quid pro quo*.

But the relationship between the jungle and the cannibalism scene in the city has a number of implications for understanding Sebastian's role in the play. First, it diffuses what criticism is *sure* must be Williams's condemnation of Sebastian's exploitation of others.¹³ Given that in Cabeza de Lobo Sebastian was the *eaten* rather than the *eater*, the Encantadas scene aligns him with the powerless baby turtles desperately scrambling for safety. And while it overstates the case to call Sebastian "powerless", it is fair to place him in a system of

power relations which he cannot fully control. This system uses cannibalism as a trope for the social anxiety surrounding homosexuality. It exaggerates the anxiety of one male's relationship with another, of a *mutually consumptive* bond between men, and then turns that trope against itself. The male social bonding that Hartmann and Sedgwick noted above reaches its fullest implication in an oral relationship, where one male is literally *consumed* by the other, and the strengths of the consumed man are passed to successive generations. But this bonding, as I've noted, is riddled with anxiety over sexual identity and national purity. In the play, this anxiety is indirectly articulated by Melville, who inspired Sebastian's voyage. As Robert K. Martin argues, Melville uses cannibalism in *Typee* to represent the male anxiety over proximity, desire, and male-male identification.¹⁴ In cannibalism, you are what you eat.¹⁵ Given this, Williams's play picks up on the cannibalism motif to argue that the social relation to homosexuality is ambivalent. On the one hand, market consumerism internalises and is strengthened by the homosexual body and its possibilities for national purity and economic exchange. But on the other hand, it consumes this body only to destroy it.

Furthermore, the scene collapses the barrier between the city and the jungle. Whereas the Encantadas originally contrasted with the order and balance of New Orleans, Paris, or Venice, the cannibalism scene argues that the city is an extension of it. The city had tried to transform the primal need for consumption – including sexual consumption – into an orderly, regulated system of trade. But by collapsing back into its primal, repressed form, the jungle exposes the underside of consumption upon which the city is founded. City and Jungle exist *not* in disjunction, but in trajectory. (Needless to say, it's a jungle out there!) And the implication of the trajectory is this: homosexual desire will be allowed as a form of market exchange, but the laws governing that exchange are always waiting to be exercised. By regulating all forms of consumptive disequilibrium, the commercial ethos of the city has paradoxically supported them. The supposed payment of debt and restitution of balance ignores – and strengthens – its own necessary power.

What all of this suggests is that the kind of social power structures in which Williams places Sebastian – and indeed in which he himself is placed – are always hidden behind a move toward equilibrium, toward that balance of accounts which is so attractive to a market economy. Sebastian himself was part of that movement, as Catherine explains:

[CATHERINE] I tried to save him, Doctor.

DOCTOR From what? Save him from what?

CATHERINE Completing! – a sort of ! – *image!* – he had of himself as a sort of ! – *sacrifice* to a! – *terrible* sort of a –

DOCTOR – God?

CATHERINE Yes, a – *cruel* one, Doctor. (p. 62)

Somehow, by sacrificing himself, Sebastian believed he would rebalance the scale and pay his debts. But, as I suggested earlier, homosexuality is antithetical to that principle of equilibrium, because it always constitutes a debt. The God to which Sebastian was sacrificing himself is the same God that he saw at the Encantadas, the god of consumption, of disequilibrium, of power. And as I have been arguing, it is the god whose jungle law is what the city, and bourgeois America, thought it suppressed but really only regulated, and, in so doing, reinforced. In short, Sebastian's image of himself, his self-definition, was the only one that had been provided for him at least since Leviticus: it was the *consciousness of self* as economic manipulator, as economic abuser. And it was this self-image, ultimately, that would seduce Sebastian into his own destruction.

Williams's presentation of this self-image would be condemnation were it not for the absence of alternative self-constructions in the play. This absence takes palpable form in its treatment of silence. *Suddenly Last Summer* is not only about the freedom and regulation of homoerotic desire in the city. It is also about telling a story: a story which, Catherine says, must be told and which no one wants to hear. And just as economic forces were the major regulator in Sebastian's life, so are they the prime controller in Catherine's *telling* of his story. Everyone in the play has a vested interest in keeping Catherine quiet. Her mother and her brother George each stand to gain \$50,000 from Sebastian's estate, but Violet has tied it up in probate until Catherine can be permanently and effectively silenced. Dr. Cukrowisc, the good-guy psychosurgeon, has to try to ease the story out of Catherine without upsetting Violet, because she is the potential donor who alone can save his debt-ridden hospital. And finally, there is Violet Venable herself. Not only does she continually flex her economic muscles in the way I've just indicated, but she elevates Sebastian's life-story into a national catastrophe. She accuses Catherine's story of being "a hideous attack on my son's moral character" (p. 25), and on his supposed chastity. (Curiously enough, it is *Violet* who deems the story immoral; Catherine makes no such claim.) It is for her, as for George, a terrible lie, a story unfit for "civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country" (p. 46). Once again, homosexual deeds and words are carried into a social context and presented as a threat to other people's moral and economic stability.

But it is here that Tennessee Williams's play takes on the tone of something other than confessional guilt: by pointing the finger at various vested interests in the play, Williams identifies the source of the silence which is at the heart of anonymity and, in turn, of the supposed threat of sedition and national instability. By presenting that source as an economic manipulation, and as a product of economic consciousness, the playwright exposes the threat of sedition as *extrinsic* to the homosexual, as a constructed social myth. He illustrates what Foucault, in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, has identified as the symbiotic relation between the grandiloquence involved in describing sex and that sex's moralistic repression. As Foucault reasons, the condemnation of

certain sexual behaviours is *intrinsic* to a social order which identifies them in order to exclude them.¹⁶ Once again, the ordered society *needs* its "disordered" Other to give it definition. And so, by pointing this finger, Williams erodes the final boundary in his tale of two cities and two economies: he destroys the distinction between the homosexual's self-construction and the social construction which condemns him.

As we saw earlier, the topography of New Orleans symbolically divided money and love, but only to indicate that money ultimately controlled love and enforced the payment of debt. This enforcement, effected by jungle warfare through cannibalism, is picked up once again to justify the supposed need for national stability. The main action of the play, the action of telling and not telling the story, takes place in another jungle: the tropical garden-jungle which Sebastian had constructed inside his home. But rather than seeing this merely as an extension of his own consuming passions, we are asked to place this *within* the Garden District, within bourgeois America. And the law of the Garden District is not merely to mute the homosexual story; it is, as Catherine knows, "to bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain" (p. 54). The lobotomy, which will make Catherine quiet and everyone else rich, is the final jungle law: it will enter the body, expose its underside, and rip it out. In this play, and in the homosexual life-script, Silence is indeed Golden; the political economy wants stability, and it is willing to resort to the most unstable means to get it.

By charting the dissolution of these boundaries, Williams writes a play which is much more disconcerting and subversive than its critics have allowed. Clearly, in this play, they who pay the money make the rules: both on political and libidinal grounds. But Williams has written his play for an audience, a *paying* audience, which has paid to hear a story about paying not to hear a story. In short, he implicates his audience in an economic complicity that allows sexual behaviour while at the same time demanding that the story of that behaviour be silenced. Which takes us back to where we began, in *Washington Confidential*. When they are stripped of their vicious rhetoric, Lait and Mortimer are right: the homosexual *can* be blackmailed by sex. But the political sedition comes from elsewhere. Washington needs to hear the homosexual story, because that's the only way it can overcome the anonymity problem: it must know who "is" and who "isn't", or else it is vulnerable. Yet, it also needs the story *not* to be told because, in telling it, it admits to the presence of such undesirables in power ... and again, it is vulnerable. And so the silence which Washington demands is a silence which, in turn, it can only read as a threat, making the capital complicit in its own threat of sedition. In a way, Washington has blackmailed itself.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Jonathon Katz, *Gay American History* (New York, 1976), p. 101.

2 Ibid., p. 100.

- 3 Other examples of homosexuality as an import are England and America. In England, homosexual acts have usually been considered as a *French* vice, connected to popery and the Catholic attempt to seduce faithful Protestants to it. For America, similarly, the "source" of homosexuality is often Britain. And for the West in general, the origin is ultimately Greek.

I am using the term "homosexuality" here for convenience more so than accuracy. The word is a nineteenth-century construction, and so it is anachronistic to speak of ancient homosexuality. However, even though the invention of the term "homosexual" entrenched the notion of an internal disposition toward same-sex love, the persecution of this love was no less active prior to the evolution of the term. Thus, I am using "homosexuality" here to describe the focus of a certain kind of social regulation – of a *behaviour* among men – as opposed to a definition of desire or of gender identity.

- 4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).
- 5 Quoted by Thomas J. Richardson, "The City of Day and the City of Night: New Orleans and the Exotic Unreality of Tennessee Williams," in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jacksonville, 1977), p. 634.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 636–37.
- 7 For a definition of the libidinal economy, see Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, trans. James Strachey (London, 1973).
- 8 Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer* (New York, 1958), p. 40. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.
- 9 See Paul J. Hurley, "Suddenly Last Summer as Morality Play," *Modern Drama*, 8 (1966), 392–402; Foster Hirsch, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* (Port Washington, NY, 1979); and John M. Clum, "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88 (1989), 161–79.
- 10 Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston, 1981), p. 14.
- 11 Michael Moon, "'The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes': Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger," *Representations*, 19 (1987), 101.
- 12 Another example of such market endorsement appears in Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In this play, the unresponsive and (possibly) homosexually panicked Brick Pollitt is haunted by the ghosts of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, the two "old sisters" who once lived and slept in Brick and Maggie's bedroom. But, as Big Daddy makes clear, these two men have been *productive*: they have built the plantation which Big Daddy has inherited, and in this way their "marriage" has resulted in successful marketplace offspring. This production, then, is the only acceptable alternative to reproduction, as Brick's problem makes clear. Not only

is Brick unwilling to produce a baby with Maggie, but he is also unwilling to assume responsibility for his dying father's economic affairs. In this way, his "love" for Skipper becomes a blighted frustration that is markedly opposed to Jack and Peter's, which has found a way to pay its debt to the capitalist nation.

- 13 For an example of this in *Suddenly Last Summer*, see Hurley (op. cit.). Similarly, in his recent article on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, John M. Clum argues that "Brick's homophobia is part of his sexual/emotional malaise" (op. cit., 171). Moreover, he says that Williams's privileging of this voice over any other which might be more sympathetic to homosexuality betrays in Williams a self-loathing which is complicit with homophobia itself. Clum's analysis, it seems to me, does not contextualize Williams's characters within a system of social regulation and condemnation. The "homophobic discourse" within which these characters move is very much a social discourse which they are powerless to escape. By depicting these tyrannical regulations, Williams articulates a critique against them, rather than accepting them wholesale, and in so doing, involves himself in a political act. Like so much other Williams criticism then, Clum's stops at the emotional and psychological without extending them to the social and political. It is my contention here that *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are, among other things, indictments of the social structures that regulate homosexual behaviour.
- 14 See the chapter on *Typee* in Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill, 1986).
- 15 This is a variation on a theme explored by Sedgwick, which she summarizes with the aphorism, "It takes one to know one." In her analysis, straight men are panicked by the double-bind they face when trying to identify homosexuals: on the one hand, they *must* identify the homosexual in order to persecute – and be defined *against* – him; but on the other hand, knowing the homosexual means being able to read the signs which identify the homosexual, and thus implicating oneself within that system of knowers. For a more complete discussion, see "Privilege of Unknowing," *Genders*, 1 (1988), 102–124, and chapter 2, "Some Binarisms (I), Billy Budd: After the Homosexual" in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990).
- 16 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980), p. 8.

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