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## Family and Four American Gay Playwrights

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### INTRODUCTION

Terrence McNally's *Mothers and Sons*, which first opened on Broadway in 2014, provides good material for considering gayness and family. On the stage the audience first sees a confrontation between Cal, a middle-aged gay man who lives in an apartment that faces New York City's Central Park, and Katharine, the mother of his former and deceased lover. Then Katharine meets two other characters, Cal's male spouse and their son. After ten years, Cal has overcome his grief at losing his lover and has had a family now for ten years, while Katharine has suffered from the loss of her son for twenty years. She tells Cal, "People don't change," to which he responds, "People have to want to change" (qtd. in Gardner).

*Mothers and Sons* is the first play "to portray a legally married gay couple on a Broadway stage" (Sheward). The play challenges the still dominant belief that "'gayness' and family are mutually exclusive concepts, a belief that prevails because 'the same-sex family, more than any other form, challenges fundamental patriarchal notions of family and gender relationships'" (Allen and Demo 112). The last scene of the play, which shows the change in the mother's attitude, suggests the possibility of

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reconciliation or beyond: she might become a member of the family; at least, she “might come to know the family better” (Healy). The audience is encouraged to accept the possibilities and indeed seemed to do so in the performance I attended on April 16, 2014.

According to Leopold Lippert in a 2010 article with the subtitle “Mainstream Gay Drama, Homonormativity, and the Culture of Neoliberalism,” “McNally’s frank espousal of marriage as the *ultimate* form of gay communion, paradoxically, includes a notable willingness to *feel backward* as well” (55). *Mothers and Sons* can be criticized as a work that affirms “homonormativity,” a term originally coined by Lisa Duggan to mean “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (qtd. in Lippert 45). As Diana M. Pash argues in her chapter that discusses “gay co-father families,” “their [gay co-fathers’] public presentation as a [gay] two-father family, however, is unusual and they challenge traditional definitions of family in both the gay and straight communities” (165).

Jeffrey Weeks argues that in relation to ideologies that has dominated the Western view on homosexuality, “increasingly over the past hundred years the reference point of anti-homosexual hostility has not been ‘religion’ or ‘sin,’ but ‘family,’ and in particular, the roles that men and women are expected to act out in the family” (5). Certainly “family” is one of the main themes on which many gay playwrights have focused attention, and *Mothers and Sons* is the most recent example. However, recent works by gay playwrights portray the changes that have taken place in the social milieu in regard to “family.” Plays, especially ones staged on Broadway, are mirrors that reflect the times, for audience reaction strongly influences actors’ performances and can lead to revisions in the plays.

In this article I focus on how gay playwrights have tackled “family” in their works. In order to emphasize the present situation and show the change that has gradually taken place in America, I discuss in reverse chronological order four plays by four gay playwrights that were staged on Broadway. I will first briefly summarize the history of gays and family, and some useful theories relating to them, from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present.

After Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004, thirty six states followed suit as of March 3, 2015. Partly because of this, “gay” and “family” may not be such mutually exclusive categories now. When the AIDS epidemic started in the 1980s, it accelerated the backlash against the gay rights movement and was a serious blow to the

promiscuous gay subculture. “Homosexual Diseases Threaten American Families,” for example, was the headline of the *Moral Majority Report* in 1983 (Weston 23). However, the epidemic had the effect of solidifying a sense of community among gay people and turned their attention to gaining legal rights for couples. Before the epidemic, a promiscuous gay subculture flourished. It surfaced along with the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, which followed the Stonewall riots in 1969. Harvey Milk, “the first openly gay person to be elected city supervisor in San Francisco,” insisted on “coming out” as “a strategy designed to gain political power and promote self-respect” (Weston 47). Simultaneously, there were many antigay campaigns; for example, Anita Bryant, a popular singer at that time, was a strong campaigner whose 1977 autobiography was subtitled *The Survival of Our Nation’s Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Bergman 188). Before the movement, gay people were generally in the closet. “The armed forces’ antihomosexual screening” spread the homophobic atmosphere in the early 1940s (Paller 25), and it was not until 1948 that Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* became “the first significant challenge to the prevailing ‘gay is sick’ orthodoxy” (Miller 249).

Historian Carl N. Degler in 1980 named five elements that define “family” in his *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. A family begins with “a ritual between a woman and a man”; they have “duties and rights of parenthood”; family members “live in a common place”; “there are reciprocal economic obligations between husband and wife”; and “the family serves as a means of sexual satisfaction for the partners” (3–4). In 1991 Kath Watson in *Families We Choose* provided a new framework for thinking about family. Weston “examine[d] the ideological transition that saw ‘gay’ and ‘family’ change from mutually exclusive categories to terms used in combination to describe a particular type of kinship relation” (22). Degler’s elements of family, as Katrina Kimport observes in 2014, “institute[d] heteronormativity” (8), and now “same-sex marriage will transform the meaning of marriage and, with it, society by disrupting the dominance of heteronormativity” (7). Each of the four gay playwrights I examine in this article—Terrence McNally, Harvey Fierstein, Edward Albee, and Tennessee Williams—has challenged the institutionalization of heteronormativity and experimented with “family” in the frame of their times.

*LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION!* AND “AN EXTENDED FAMILY”

Drama critic John M. Clum considered that in Terrence McNally’s 1995 Broadway production of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* “McNally’s characters have forged a gay family” (“Where” 108). He quotes what McNally himself said about the play:

I want to write about family. To me a very important line is when Gregory says, “Are you going home to Texas?” Bobby says, “No, home is here. Texas is where my parents are.” Gay people do create a society for themselves, an extended family. (108)

When he wrote the screenplay for the 1997 movie version of the play, McNally added the words “like a family” in the opening narration made by one of the characters, Gregory Mitchell, to emphasize the theme. Both the original play and the movie version start with the narration of Gregory, who is hosting guests at his country house. When the movie starts, Gregory says, “I love my house. Everyone does. . . . I like to fill it with my friends. Over the years, we’ve become more like a family. It makes me happy to have us all together in our home. Mine and Bobby’s” (*Love!* 1997). Gregory’s narration that follows is cut in with, or more precisely supported by, the other characters, whose responses make the audience feel they share Gregory’s feelings.

Both the screenplay and the original play versions of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* delineate the various relationships among eight gay men. They come to visit at Gregory Mitchell’s summer vacation house that he shares with his lover Bobby Brahm, a blind man. The visitors include the couple Arthur Pape and Perry Sellars; a single man, Buzz Hauser; and John Jeckyll and his new young lover, Ramon Fornos. John’s twin brother, James Jeckyll, joins the group later and becomes a couple with Buzz.

McNally’s “extended family” is equivalent to Weston’s “families we choose.” The stage play consists of three acts. The time of the three acts varies, but the place is fixed at Gregory’s house. That is, the stage is the house and vice versa. The friends, who visit Gregory’s house on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day weekends are like family members who visit their parents’ homes on important holidays.

As Clum also comments (“Where” 109), Weston’s notion of “families we choose” consists of “consciously incorporated symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of

enduring solidarity” (109). Those elements are shown in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

The characters are in their thirties and forties except Gregory’s lover Bobby and John’s new boyfriend Ramon, who are in their early twenties. The two younger characters have an important role as they introduce big themes. Ramon says near the end of act 1, “We don’t love one another because we don’t love ourselves” (McNally, *Love!* 54). These words make the characters and audience think about what love is. Ramon’s words are, however, ironic in a sense. He says “I love myself,” but as he goes on it turns out that his love for himself is conditional; he says, “I love myself when I’m dancing well and no one can touch me” (55). Ramon does not love himself unconditionally. His words connote that his love of other persons is also conditional.

In act 2, Bobby confesses to Gregory his affair with Ramon, which takes place in act 1. He tries to be honest with his lover, but Gregory cannot accept Bobby as he is. Left alone, Bobby confesses to the audience that he used to believe in the unconditional love of “lovers, friends, family” but he now has come to an understanding: “We love, but not unconditionally. Only God is unconditional love” (87). Paradoxically, his words suggest that he formerly believed that lovers’ or friends’ love can be as unconditional as that of family.

Here it is appropriate to be reminded of Weston’s view. She introduces many instances of gay people who are disillusioned with parental unconditional love. “The unconditional love recognized as both symbol and substance of kin ties has come under intense scrutiny by almost every gay-identified person” who has considered coming out to their parents (Weston 64). Gay people have wrongly believed parental love is unconditional. Unconditional parental love is a myth. The human love of “lovers, friends, family” is “not unconditional.” Here, it should be noticed that in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* Bobby juxtaposes the three words.

John, who is mentioned in Gregory’s journal as “John the Foul” (McNally, *Love!* 65), confesses his resentment and shows ambivalence toward his twin brother, “James the Fair,” who has just arrived from London and is dying in act 3: “You had Mum and Dad’s unconditional love and now you have the world’s” (124). Here is the parallelism of the two loves, “Mum and Dad’s” and “the world’s.” If parental love is unconditional, so is the world’s: love of lovers, love of friends, love of family. McNally, who says that “I’ve learned as I get older, without unconditional love we never reach our potential” (qtd. in Clum, “Where” 114), believes “the world’s” love can be

unconditional. Although he seems to be disliked by the other visitors, John is always invited to stay with Gregory. He is also a member of the family. This might indicate the possibility of the world's "unconditional love."

Buzz can be called a "musical queen." He is the campiest character of the group. He is also an HIV carrier, and he knows it. He meets James. The two fall in love and start dating in act 2. Near the end of act 3, he confesses his fear of losing James, who suffers from some symptoms of AIDS, and of his own dying alone. He imagines his own death bed dialogue with his best friend, Perry, after James's death:

Buzz: Can you promise me you'll be holding my hand when I let go?  
That the last face I see will be yours?

Perry: Yes.

Buzz: I believe you. (132)

The backdrop for the scene should be mentioned here. In the 1990s, same-sex marriage was not legal. It was probable that even a gay partner could not even be at the bedside of his dying lover because relatives often refused to allow in his partner. Accordingly, Perry should know that such a promise might not be able to be fulfilled. However, he dares to make the promise. He wants to show his love to his friend as a family member.

Gregory thinks up a plan for an AIDS benefit. It is a dance of "the Swan Lake Pas des Cygnes" by "six men, nondancers all" putting on tutus (47). As Clum explains, the dance represents "an image of family" ("Where" 110), which symbolizes "enduring solidarity" (Weston 109). AIDS also functions to indicate mutual assistance among the characters, as seen in the conversation between Buzz and Perry. As American playwright and journalist Steven Drukman writes, "McNally celebrates the familial bonds formed by gay men as friends" (132).

The structure of the play reinforces the theme of McNally's challenge to prevailing notions of family. Act 1 has an engaging system of narration. First, as mentioned, Gregory's narration is aided by the other characters. It gives the impression to the audience that Gregory is rehearsing the introduction in front of the other characters or that they are trying to help him finish his narration safely. Then other characters also play the role of narrator. Perry is the first to succeed Gregory. He tells the story of Bobby's love affair with Ramon that takes place after everyone is asleep. He says, "I don't know. I was upstairs, asleep with my Arthur" (11). It is strange that a person who does not know the situation narrates it. He seems to be "the 'all-

seeing' character" and "acts as the narrator of events" (Drukman 121), but it is evident that he has learned about the event later, because Buzz, who intervenes as the narrator, says, "I was upstairs, asleep with myself. All this I heard later that summer" (11). Time on the stage is double; the characters are experiencing the events and remembering them at the same time. Therefore, the performance gives an impression that all the characters seem to know about the events that each one might not know firsthand and try to dramatize it in collaboration. The narration gives the audience the impression that they share the history. In another instance of this unique narration system, John, who narrates "I see things I shouldn't" and "I overhear what was better left unsaid" (21), is overheard by other characters when he confesses his secret. As a result, his secret history comes to be shared by them all.

Time, as experienced by the characters, who exist in the story's time, and by the actors, who exist in the time of the performance, is consciously manipulated. Consider the following instance:

Perry: Buzz, you weren't awake for this.

Buzz: If I was, I don't remember it.

Perry: You weren't.

Buzz: Okay. (He rolls over and goes back to sleep.) (16)

Everyone is asleep during the incident except Bobby and Ramon. The latter seduces the former, and the two have a sexual encounter. Perry describes the incident as the narrator and also happens to mention John's musical work. Buzz, who likes musicals, responds to the word "musical" and starts talking. However, in the story's time, he has to stay asleep. In that sense, Perry also should be asleep because, as he says, "none of us were awake for this" (17). Even if in the story's time they are asleep, they are still summoned to the stage as participants in the play. Each character has two aspects: as a character in the story and as a participant in the play. *Love! Valour! Compassion!* consciously shows that the play acting is double. At the climactic scene of dancing "the Swan Lake Pas des Cygnes" in act 3, each character stops dancing and tells the story of his death. It is not clear whether it is his prediction or a statement of his actual fate. However, the audience senses that the characters share their histories beyond the present time. The structure of the play indicates the process of their sharing their histories and the situations in which they share them.

This double structure can also be applied to the relationship between the

actors and the audience. It invites the audience to participate because the audience also knows the process and the situation at the same time as the actors. The audience can thus feel like they share this same history. McNally provides the reason why he wrote *Love! Valour! Compassion!*: “I think I wanted to write about what it’s like to be a gay man at this particular moment in our history” (“Some Thoughts” xii). Then, the following words of McNally as told to interviewer Toby Silverman Zinman indicate the challenging effect of the play and the performance on the audience:

The most common comment I get is that by the end of Act One, they forget they’re gay men and just think of them as human beings they can identify with, and I take that as a compliment. . . . There’s a humanity going back and forth between the actors and the audience—you can feel it in the theatre. (12)

#### *TORCH SONG TRILOGY* AND “FAMILIES WE CHOOSE”

*Mothers and Sons* might have been written by McNally as a sequel to his earlier short play “Andre’s Mother.” It describes the memorial service of Cal’s late lover Andre. Andre’s mother gives a strong impression that she cannot admit that her son died of AIDS. In *Mothers and Sons* Cal says to himself, “God, how many of us live in this city because we don’t want to hurt our mothers and live in mortal terror of their disapproval” (qtd. in Healy). “Mothers” in the title of *Mothers and Sons* may refer back to this line of Cal’s, but it also reminds us of another play, Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*, first performed on Broadway in 1982, which also takes up the challenge of dealing with marriage and gay family as the main topics. The former may intertextually presuppose the latter that focuses on a mother-son conflict.

The *New York Times* drama critic Stanley Kauffmann thought, as Clum explains, that *Torch Song Trilogy* “places gay experiences squarely within the patterns of heterosexual marriage child-rearing,” so it is a “nonvindictive work” (*Still* 147). Conversely, James Leverett writes that “‘Torch Song Trilogy’ may not look or sound revolutionary on first inspection, but they [the three plays of the trilogy] are—trenchantly and potently” (3).

Leverett briefly summarizes the historical significance of the play: “In the trilogy, [Fierstein’s] focus shifts from the transitory sexual bond to marriage and finally to the family. He explores these units, re-forms them and reveals them in the light of new possibilities” (4). Each one-act play in



the trilogy focuses on an important aspect for considering gay in relation to family: loneliness in *The International Stud*, marriage in *Fugue in a Nursery*, and family in *Widows and Children First!* The first delineates Arnold's meeting with and separation from Ed; the second tells the story of two couples, the homosexual one of Arnold and Alan and a heterosexual one of Ed and Laurel; and the third shows two mother-son relationships: Arnold and his mother Mrs. Beckoff [Ma] and Arnold as mother to his adopted son David.

As mentioned, gayness and family used to be thought of as incompatible by society. There were homosexuals who internalized such a notion about gayness and family (Bergman 190). *International Stud* and *Fugue in a Nursery*, the first two plays of the trilogy, suggest the internalized homophobia or the despair of life without love. Arnold once has a relationship with a man who was "tall, handsome, rich, deaf" (15). He describes this relationship as having "everything you could want in an affair and more" (15), yet all he obtains from the relationship is "an affair," not love. He finally seems to find love with Ed, but Ed leaves Arnold for a relationship with a woman. Ed might love Arnold, but he tries to escape from living as a gay man. In *Fugue in a Nursery*, as the title and the setting of a big bed on which four characters stay symbolically show, the relationship of one couple lights up mutually that of the other, in the process of which the truth of each relationship is revealed to the audience: the emptiness of their relationships. The first two plays demonstrate, as James Fisher says in his article "From Tolerance to Liberation," that "Fierstein seems poised to explain homosexual promiscuity as a direct result of the exclusion of gays from 'normal' heterosexual relationships." However, Laurel and Ed are no exception to the problem of "promiscuity"; they try to seduce Arnold's young lover, so Fierstein rather seems to relativize homosexual desire. Arnold by occupation is a drag performer. He says he is "strictly Torch" (97). He loves torch songs because "getting hurt is one thing we all have in common" (98). He includes heterosexual people in "we all." "Getting hurt" is no privilege of gay people.

Leverett summarizes the third play in the trilogy, *Widows and Children First!*: "It attempts no less than to re-invent the family. The tenuous world of *Fugue* has collapsed. Alan is dead, Ed's marriage with Laurel is over, Arnold is trying legally to adopt David—a gay adolescent pronounced incorrigible by a parade of foster parents. Arnold's widowed mother arrives for a visit" (7). Interestingly, the stage direction says the stage is "the set of a conventional sit-com with a convertible sofa, windows overlooking Central Park." (107). The setting reminds us of that of *Mothers and Sons*.

The confrontation between Arnold and Ma reveals their similarities and differences. As Arnold's adopted son David says, Arnold resembles Ma in words and deeds (157). Arnold himself admits to having the same personality as Ma. For example, he says to Ed, "I can Mother-smother David, she [Ma] can Mother-smother me" (114). However, Ma tries to differentiate herself from Arnold when the topic comes to the death of her husband, Arnold's father.

Arnold tries to explain their shared experience of losing their beloved partners by using the word "widowing" (114). Ma refuses the equation. She tries to differentiate the weight of the loss of her husband from what Arnold experienced in losing Alan. Behind their conflict lies the thesis that all love is conditional. Believing the myth that homosexual persons only use lovers to satisfy their lust, are unable to experience true love, and cannot be a family makes Ma's love conditional. Ma believes that homosexual Arnold wants to have sex with even his adopted son and tells him, "I had no intention of having a homosexual for a son" (150). She loves him only when he is what she expects him to be. She, therefore, cannot love Arnold who is gay. She also refuses to understand that David has been gay since he first became aware of himself (149). Her imagination forbids her to go beyond the mythical prejudice that no one is born gay. She somewhat resembles Ed, who tries to believe that Arnold's being gay is his "sexual preference" and that homosexuality should be "in the closet" (120). Ma and Ed might represent what Chrys Ingraham calls the "heterosexual imaginary" (qtd. in Kimport 8). They try to hide the existence of homosexuality in the closet. Accordingly, "hiding in the imaginary," as Kimport explains, "heteronormativity does not require explanation or critique and its institutionalization of inequality is perpetuated" (8). Fierstein here seems to be confronting a theory about momism and homosexuality that was prevalent at that time he wrote his trilogy.

According to literary critic David Bergman, "Irving Bieber's report, *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study*, issued in 1962 as an official publication of The Society of Medical Psychoanalysts . . . codified the strong mother/weak father theory of homosexuality and asserted that 'all parents of homosexuals apparently had severe emotional problems'" (190). Bergman continues, "In the straight myths, gays are so intimately attached to the images of their mothers that they have made themselves unfit for life within the family structure" (208). This image of mother is, as Alan Sinfield suggests (224–26), linked with "momism," a term coined by Philip Wylie in 1942 to mean, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, "excessive

attachment to, or domination by, the mother” (“momism”). Sinfield writes that “in my view Momism was largely an attempt to scapegoat women for the difficulties men experienced in living up to a contradictory and oppressive ideology of masculinity” (226). However, Fierstein seems to be exorcizing this myth about momism and homosexuality.

Arnold came out to his parents when he was thirteen (116). For some time they had “a healthy Mother/Son relationship” and kept “an open line of communication.” Then something happens when his father dies; “the root” of their present miscommunication lies in his father’s death (117). His parents have not had the problems that the Bieber theory would suggest. However, after her husband’s death, Ma begins to feel “a duty to continue the family name” (128). She thinks Arnold’s coming out “took a lifetime of dreams” out of both herself and her husband (150). They might have had at heart the idea that their family name would continue, and the loss of her husband seems to make Ma cling to the notion of a traditional family.

Arnold in *Widows and Children First!* is more openly proud of his homosexuality than Arnold in the first two plays. He tells David about the Oscar Wilde trial in front of his mother (139). He rejects Ma’s traditional family values and says he only needs someone who gives him “love and respect” (152). He says that adopting David is “a wonderful thing that I’m very proud of” (142). Referring to A. J. Sbordone’s observation in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, Charlotte J. Patterson writes in “Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men” (2000), “Given that fathers had higher self-esteem and fewer negative attitudes about homosexuality than either group of [gay] nonfathers [i.e., a group who said they wanted children and another who said they did not, Sbordone suggested that gay fathers’ higher self-esteem might be a result rather than a cause of parenthood” (1058). Arnold might represent such a gay father ahead of his time.

*Widows and Orphans First!* delineates a type of “families we choose.” First, the family relationship is open to the person who wants to join. David says to Arnold, “I stay with you because I want to. . . . You make me feel like I got a home” (158). Next, Arnold’s role in the family is “being mother, father, friend and confessor all rolled into one” (114). The roles in this family are not fixed, unlike those in a traditional family. Furthermore, Arnold invites Ma and his brother (who does not appear in the play) into the “family.” He says to Ma that his brother is “part of this family too” (171). Weston’s theory should be recalled here: “By substituting images of creation and election for the logic of reproduction and succession, discourse on gay families can—and does—remind people of their power to alter the

circumstances into which they were born” (202). If Arnold changes Ma’s way of thinking, the notion of family also changes.

*Torch Song Trilogy* portrays conflicts and possible integration of the two families: Arnold’s biological family and the one he is building with David and Ed, who now lives in Arnold’s apartment as a lodger. While the “family” in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is based on friendship and gay community, the “family” in *Torch Song Trilogy* is an integration of a biological family and a gay family. The “family” in *Mothers and Sons* has two fathers: Cal and his partner are called Pap and Pappy, while Arnold is “Ma” for David. Although Kauffmann might have thought he could place the play “within the patterns of heterosexual marriage child-rearing,” “the family” proposed in the play is far beyond the traditional definition of family. Arnold and Fierstein believe that, in the phrase of Weston, “gay kinship offers an authentic alternative” (198).

*WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? AND  
“ANXIETY ABOUT THE AMERICAN FAMILY”*

Edward Albee “has been attacked from all sides” (Clum, *Still* 148) for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which debuted on Broadway in 1962. Stanley Kauffmann emotionally argued that in this play “the homosexual dramatist” distorts heterosexual relationships (Clum, *Still* 148). As Sky Gilbert, a critic with “a militant gay point of view” (Clum, *Still* 147), concludes, “the play is limited by the closet aspect,” and he argues that Albee’s misogynist characterization and unrealistic descriptions of the couples is the result of his homosexual bias (58). The attacks by critics on all sides may be because of Albee’s spoofing and campy dialogue. Alan Sinfield summarizes this point:

The principal rationale for the internecine taunting that constitutes the dialogue of Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* . . . is anxiety about the American family. . . . What is revealed is a hysterical terror of not siring and bearing offspring, and hence of failing to become fully American. (226–27)

Many critics attack this play as a closet drama that is actually about a homosexual relationship (Clum, *Still* 147–48). The play does have many elements of a closet drama, which illuminates its intertextual relation with Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Hongo 41–61). However,

this reading could cloud its incisive criticism of the American family myth as seen from a gay playwright's point of view, which may be the main point of the play. Here, "camp" is important because "camp" is a kind of coded language for homosexuals and can be used as a weapon against heteronormativity. Many critics perceive camp in the play; for example, Stephen Bottoms senses "a gay sensibility" in "the play's occasionally campy wit" (87). Just after George and Martha, the host and the hostess, enter the stage, she says "What a dump!" imitating Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest* (1949) (11). Davis is a gay icon (Babuscio 44). Wordplay, including rhyming and alliteration, is one of the characteristics of the play. "Dump" slightly rhymes with "camp."

George and Martha's late return from a party hosted by Martha's father starts the play. Her father is the president of the college where George teaches. At the party, he has ordered her to invite a young couple, Nick and Honey, to her house. When the couple appears, George and Martha create various games to entertain the guests and compete against each other fiercely. Nick and Honey become involved in the games, and the secrets of the two families are gradually revealed. Nick and Honey are young and not so keen or sharp witted as George and Martha, so they are sometimes prey of the latter's campy wit. Martha and George ostensibly show off that they are opponents, but they can easily cooperate when making Nick and Honey the "butt" of their humor (Albee, *Who's Afraid* 116), which might show a campy spirit. Martha seduces Nick to her bedroom in the end of act 2, but he fails to perform sexually. In act 3, Martha makes fun of the failure and treats Nick as a houseboy. George participates in the game. When Nick objects to it and says "I'm nobody's houseboy," they sing in unison, "I'm nobody's houseboy now. . . . [Both laugh]" (116), making fun of Nick and his male vanity.

David Van Leer, who finds campiness in the play but concludes that "Albee's story is not camp" (20), writes that "camp quotation in the play is itself camped, performed 'within quotation marks' as a formal device, but emptied of its customary meanings and used for purposes not common in the gay tradition from which it derives" (25). Van Leer's intention is to demarcate the border between camp in the gay tradition and camp "within quotation marks." In this he provides a clue to the very structure of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: camp as quotation. As Chuck Kleinhans argues, "camp always uses parody but, more importantly, it embodies parody as a general mode of discourse" (188). The basis of parody lies in quotation. Albee makes heterosexual characters parody what is, as Richard Dyer

argues, “distinctly and unambiguously gay male” in “language and culture” (qtd. in Kleinhans 186–87). If camp can “challenge dominant culture” (Kleinhans 188), then parody of camp that is performed by the heterosexual characters may be used to challenge their own dominant culture.

Albee uses a nesting structure in the stage setting of his later play *Tiny Alice* (1964). Similarly, he used a verbal nesting structure in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Nesting structure has, as it were, the structure of a quote within a quote. This structure, therefore, is linked to campiness, and wordplay contributes to constructing the structure in this play. The most intriguing and important wordplay structurally and thematically concerns Martha and George’s imaginary child.

The following exchange occurs after George knows that Martha has let slip the topic of their “son” to Honey, although he entreated her to keep it a secret:

Martha: I said never mind. I’m sorry I *brought it up*.

George: Him up . . . not it. You *brought him up*. Well, more or less.

When’s the little buggger going to appear, hunh? I mean isn’t tomorrow meant to be his birthday, or something?

Martha: I don’t want to talk about it!

George [falsely innocent]: But Martha . . .

Martha: *I don’t want to talk about it!*

George: I’ll bet you don’t. [To Honey and Nick] Martha does not want to talk about it . . . him. Martha is sorry she *brought it up . . . him*.  
(Albee, *Who’s Afraid* 48, emphasis added)

The repetition of the phrase “bring it/him up” produces a strong impression on the audience. It emphasizes the two meanings of the phrasal verb “bring up.” Simultaneously, the repetition implies that their son and the topic of the son are interchangeable.

The topic of their son is first introduced by George’s words “the bit” (18). They have no children and have secretly enjoyed bringing up the imaginary son with each other. “The baby” and “the bit” are interchangeable, but it does not mean that the two are equivalent. Either can contain the other: it either means baby’s bit or bit’s baby. Here, the wordplay has a kind of nesting structure. Martha and George “bring up” various kinds of games on the stage, and they “bring up” their “baby.” The words “bring up” connect the games with “baby.” The games include “baby,” and “baby” includes the games. The two words “bit” and “baby,” so to speak, quote each other.

“Baby” is seated at the core of the games and is absent. Campy wit focuses the audience’s attention on the absence of the baby, which should be situated at the core of “family.”

Nick and Honey are somehow involved in the bit in the nesting structure because they got married to form a family when Nick learned of Honey’s pregnancy, which turned out to be “a hysterical pregnancy” (60). The nesting structure is not limited to a thematic aspect; it is also applied to the theatrical structure. Matthew C. Roudané writes that “Albee’s dialogue creates an uneasy intimacy between actor and spectator” (41). Quoting theoretician of performance Herbert Blau’s “watchers watching the watchers watch,” Roudané argues that “this is a play about those seeing and those seen” (41). Martha and George are watched by Honey and Nick, and all are watched by the audience.

The relation between the watchers and the watched is not fixed; it can be reversed. Albee intentionally demonstrates interchangeability and reversibility by using the nesting structure. Roudané concludes that “Albee subverts the authority of his own dramatic text by casting the seers (the audience) into what is being seen (the performance). . . . He rejects the audience as voyeur. He courts the audience as active participants” (46–47). Applying here Albee’s nesting structure, the characters seem to be quoting everyone, including possibly the audience. Here, as mentioned earlier, “the principal rationale for the internecine taunting that constitutes the dialogue” is “anxiety about the American family” (Sinfield 226). When the reversibility is linked with the “anxiety,” the family performed on the stage can represent members of the audience. Here, the campy wit has power to subvert the heteronormative gender system. Many in the audience get involved in “the bit” because they share the myth of “the American family,” if not the “anxiety” about it.

As mentioned, Van Leer concludes that the play is not camp, observing that “camp quotation in the play is itself camped, performed ‘within quotation marks.’” These words bring to mind Judith Butler’s: “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (41). In the campy frame of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, having a baby in a family has an “utterly constructed status”—the “baby” is only a “bit.” The heteronormative spirit of the times has, to use Butler’s famous word, “performatively” induced the characters to believe they have a need for a baby in order to be a family. The traditional notion of “family” is only constructed. The camp and nesting structure expose the deceptive

nature of the family myth.

Albee thinks people find “the unnaturalistic base” beneath “the naturalistic overlay” in his play and that the minds of the people in the audience “work on both levels, symbolically and realistically” (Kolin 58). Camp is a methodology that can show “the unnaturalistic base” “symbolically and realistically.” This reminds us of Christopher Isherwood’s comment about camp: “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (110).

Quoting the words “What a dump!,” Martha says to George that the heroine of the movie is “discontent” in her married life (12–13). There is another allusion to discontent in marriage: Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is quoted and embedded. In Martha’s monologue at the beginning of act 3, Martha says, “Up the spout, not down the spout; *The poker night*. Up the spout” (273). “The poker night” is the subtitle for scene 3 of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The phrase “down the spout” can mean “bankrupt,” while the phrase “up the spout” can mean “pregnant.” The phrases may refer to Blanche, who comes to her sister’s place for emotional and financial help, but who is raped by her sister’s husband.

Martha’s notion of “family” might come from her father, for she says to Nick, “We’re a close-knit family here . . . Daddy always says so. . . . Daddy wants us to get to know each other . . . that’s what he had the party for tonight” (98). Ironically, against the traditional family concept, Martha seduces Nick into her bed. She tries to “get to know” him. When George finds out how Nick came to marry Honey, he teases Nick, saying, “That’s a good healthy heterosexual beginning” (66). However, the “healthy heterosexual beginning” is an illusion; he married Honey because of her money and pregnancy. However, in fact she does not have “a hysterical pregnancy”—she has chosen to have an abortion: “I . . . don’t want . . . any . . . children. I’m afraid! I don’t want to be hurt. . . . *Please!*” (105). Then she says, “I want my husband! I want a drink!” (106). She needs a marriage and to be intoxicated in a family fantasy.

Heterosexist critics such as Kauffmann, as Clum argues, tried to confine Albee’s bitter criticism of heteronormative myth of marriage to a closet (*Still*, 143–48). Albee’s criticism, indeed, is leveled at the illusion of the nuclear family stereotype. If Martha had not told their secret to these other people, George might not have conceived the idea of their son’s death; that is, making up a story of a telegram’s coming to inform them of the death of their son. Their being unable to keep the secret “bit” to themselves shows



how George and Martha are obsessed by the illusion of a happy family. Albee may have considered it a serious problem for the couples to be obsessed with the family fantasy. Therefore, he uses camping to expose the “anxiety.” It functions so well that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has drawn negative emotional responses from heterosexist critics. Albee could incisively criticize the traditional family myth with campy wit because he is a gay playwright.

#### *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* AND “FAMILY CONFLICTS”

*The Glass Menagerie*, first performed on Broadway in 1945, depicts relationships in a family; the members are the protagonist and narrator Tom, his mother Amanda, and his older sister Laura. There are two Toms in the play: the one who narrates his past story and the character in his story. The narrator Tom first explains it is “a memory play” (145) and begins his memoir with a scene of Amanda talking to Tom about table manners. Amanda has been left by her husband, so the family mainly depends on Tom for economic support. Laura is too shy to adapt herself to the world. Amanda asks Tom to have a gentleman caller meet Laura and schemes to match her to him in vain. The final scene shows Tom’s escape from the family. As Albee’s quoting Williams in *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* indicates, Tennessee Williams has been an inspiration to younger gay playwrights. He is also a playwright who is interested in gayness and family. Even in *The Glass Menagerie*, in which no overtly gay people appear, gayness and family are quite important topics.

The following discussion starts with a question: What illusions and truths about family does *The Glass Menagerie* present? At the very beginning, Tom as the narrator introduces what the stage shows: “I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (144). Near the end of the play, when Amanda is aware of her failing to find a man for her daughter and says to her son to go wherever he wants to go, she tells him: “You don’t know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!” (235). Is Tom, who is accused of living in a dream, telling the truth in his narrative about his family? If he is, the truth must be what Amanda is not aware of.

Stephanie B. Hammer links the play’s power with “Williams’s shrewd utilization of the tradition of the bourgeois tragedy,” which is “serious drama containing a tragic catastrophe brought about by family conflicts

(often between father and daughter), and which consistently demonstrate ‘middle class virtue’”(36). *The Glass Menagerie* indeed has “a tragic catastrophe brought about by family conflicts”—in this play, between mother and son. The conflict is between the mother’s desire for unconscious continuation and the son’s conscious rejection of “family.”

In traditional literary criticism, Laura has been associated with Rose, the sister of Tennessee Williams. However, Hammer insists that Laura represents Williams himself (43). This interpretation becomes more interesting when we consider the possibility that Laura represents Williams’s past self and Tom his present self. Reportedly, Tennessee and Rose were often mistaken for twins (Paller 71), so it is no wonder that Williams superimposes his personality upon his sister. Hammer concludes that “it [*The Glass Menagerie*] dramatizes the attempt of a gay male artist to depict himself, his desire, and his mode of creation in the interstices of the feminine, but this gambit tends to make the female characters at once scapegoat and sacrifice” (47). This interpretation, however, presupposes that the play is a closet drama.

There is a quite different interpretation: “Tom is gay” (Paller 39). Michael Paller insists that “it is not metaphorical or abstract” (39). He also writes that “those who can read the signs, whose eyes do not fail them, will see Tom’s gayness; those who cannot will not. Light and dark, truth and illusion, are all of equal value in *The Glass Menagerie*” (40). According to Paller, gayness is linked to truth and illusion, and so might be family. As mentioned, gayness and family were formerly mutually exclusive concepts. Williams shows truth and illusion about family through Tom’s gayness.

C. W. E. Bigsby argues that both female characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are actresses (39). Hammer has a similar view; she argues that “the two female characters spend large portions of the play in disguise—pretending, and playacting at being something that they are not” (42). They are playacting because playacting can preserve their illusion of family: Amanda as a mother and Laura as a daughter.

Amanda always boasts of having had gentleman callers who were “sons of planters,” and as a young girl she was seemingly expected to get married to one of them and raise her family on a large piece of land with plenty of servants (204). She, however, chooses “a man who worked for the telephone company” (204). When she meets this man, she has malaria. The fever from the illness makes her “restless and giddy.” It was May, and the country was “literary flooded with jonquils!” and she has “an absolute obsession” for jonquils (194). “Malaria fever and jonquils,” so to speak, make her marry

the man. In the language of flowers, jonquil has a meaning of “desire” (Diftenbaugh 314) or, according to the section “Flowers by Name/Meaning” in Kate Greenaway’s *Language of Flowers*, “I desire a return of affection.” Malarial fever reveals her latent desire, and she chooses a man who her parents would not want her to marry; she chooses a man, not according to the tradition but following her desire. However, she now seems to deny desire and reduces family ties to economic needs. In both the Southern tradition and in the 1930s, husbands were required to support the family economically. “A family man” meant a son of a planter (204) or someone who earns more than “eighty-five dollars a month” (185).

Laura wants to live up to her mother’s expectations, so she has been “pretending” that she still goes to business college (154) even after she has stopped going. She loves her family, so she plays the role of mediator and asks Tom to reconcile with their mother after he has a big fight with her.

A visit from the gentleman accelerates their playacting, especially Amanda’s. Tom explains that “like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment” (159). The gentleman caller is “this image, this specter, this hope” for the family. Amanda explains to Jim, the long-awaited gentleman caller, that Laura is “domestic” (204). After spending time with Laura, Jim tries to excuse himself for kissing Laura and says that he is engaged to “a home-girl like you” (229). “Being in love” with a “domestic” girl has made him “a new man” (230). During the conversation between Laura and Jim, the candlelight makes a big shadow of Jim. As the alliteration of Laura and light and Tom’s words “blow out your candles, Laura” (237) show, candlelight is a metaphor of Laura. Laura as a “domestic” “home girl” metaphorically makes Jim look big. Amanda consciously and Laura unconsciously playact to emphasize the significance of the gentleman caller, whose existence is necessary for Laura to make a home and family.

Tom also uses the words “home girl” to describe Laura: “I guess she’s the type that people call home girls” (174). In response, Amanda says to him, “There’s no such type, and if there is, it’s a pity! That is unless the home is hers, with a husband!” (175). Here, the word “home” seems to have different meanings for the two. Tom says to Amanda: “Laura seems all those things [lovely and sweet and pretty] to you and me because she’s ours and we love her” (187). For him, “home” is a place with one’s “biological family” or “family of origin” (Degler 9). On the contrary, “home” for Amanda is a “nuclear family” that is created with, as in Degler’s definition, “a ritual between a woman and a man” (3). Children are only the result of it. Tom

insists on love among family members while Amanda insists “a family man” must earn a lot of money. Love is enough to make a family for Tom, while money is the most important requirement for Amanda. During the Great Depression, Amanda’s insistence on having a provider must have been realistic, but her idea is based on the illusion that a family must be a nuclear family.

The family, according to the stage direction that the reader of the text first encounters, lives in “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population” (143). This description indicates that life in each cell is the same. The direction also mentions the fire escape, “whose name is a touch of accidental truth” and which symbolizes an escape from “the slow and implacable fires of human desperation” (143). Of course, the desperation is based on the financial depression of the time, but the description strongly implies that it is also based on the sameness of living in “hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units.” Amanda might have escaped the fate of living as a Southern lady, but she is trapped now in another illusion: that of a nuclear family. In order to “properly feather the nest and plume the bird,” she tries to “rop[e] in subscribers to one of those magazines for matrons called *The Homemaker’s Companion*” (159). The title metaphorically implies her strong desire for “family” even if it is not for her but for her daughter.

Amanda’s effort to provide a home/family for Laura is strongly emphasized, while she strangely seems indifferent to Tom as a family man. In her analysis of Williams’s plays, Senata Karolina Bauer-Briski insists that Tom’s “lover instinct” to “take a girl out” and “start a family” is “blocked” (Bauer-Briski 22). This reading, however, does not solve the question of why Amanda has no interest in Tom’s getting married and having a family. It is as if she knows he is gay. When she asks him to bring a gentleman caller for Laura, she also says, “I mean that as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent—why, then you’ll be free to go wherever you please” (175).

There are no signs of Tom’s having his own family in the period when he narrates his story. Tom as the narrator rejects the nuclear family whose members live in a cell of a hive. He cannot give up his family of origin, however. “The nuclear family antedated the onset of industrialization,” writes Degler. “A close-knit family, held together by ties of affection, is quite advantageous in a complex, mobile, and often personally threatening industrial society” (196). The stage direction mentioned earlier indicates the

situation of a “threatening industrial society.”

In an age before gay men could conceive of “families we choose,” they could not help but reject having a nuclear family or heteronormative view of family. Tom does not reject family in itself; he loves his family of origin. However, the heteronormative environment does not recognize families other than the nuclear family. Therefore, he has no choice but escape into a world where he is not asked to have a nuclear family of his own.

### CONCLUSION

The five plays that I have discussed were all staged on Broadway. They fall into two groups: those written and produced after and before the Stonewall riots. McNally’s *Mothers and Sons* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* belong to the first group while Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* belong to the second. The Stonewall riots led to the gay liberation movement. As a result, a new gay subculture was created with promiscuity as one of its characteristics. In the subsequent period of the AIDS epidemic this characteristic was used against the gay subculture. The first group of plays respond to the challenge of presenting “families we choose” in an age when AIDS was used against the gay liberation movement. The second group took up the challenge of criticizing the trend to uniformize and heteronormalize family and deprive family of diversity in a time when the nuclear family was the social norm.

*Love! Valour! Compassion!* presents an “extended family,” a type of “families we choose” based on friendship, while the earlier *Torch Song Trilogy* tried to resolve the conflict of family and gayness by integrating biological family and gay family. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* attacked the heteronormative family illusion and unveiled the anxiety behind it through the logic of camp and theatricality, while the earlier *Glass Menagerie* challenged the ideal of a uniform nuclear family.

The reactions of the audience illuminate what lies underneath the performance. “Those who can read the signs, whose eyes do not fail them,” as Paller says, “will see Tom’s gayness.” Similarly, those who can detect gayness in these plays might understand why the plays had to be created: they are all challenges to the American family myth and the belief that gayness and family are mutually exclusive concepts.

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