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Introduction

Gender, Structure, and Dialogue

This book is about the power that is exercised by, contested by, and occasionally shared by American men. The canon of realist male-cast drama does not merely illustrate and display such power; by repeatedly staging it, this drama transforms it into an active and crucial component of American cultural politics. Thus, American male-cast drama affords a unique perspective on the mutual determinations of dramaturgy and culture, particularly on the relationship of realism to changing gender codes. Precisely because of the absence of women from its otherwise realistic context, the male-cast play embodies a striking, double-edged politics. On the one hand, the choice of realism, which purports to mirror reality, invites the playwright to document the historicity of patriarchal ideology, its dogmas as well as its variations. On the other, unfortunately, it is only the dogmas that have traditionally been privileged in the canon under study. In spite of its place in realist tradition, most variations of American male-cast drama resist the diversity of American male experience and its challenge to traditional masculinities; rather, they aggressively limit themselves to perpetuating a rigid, antihistorical account of male identity.

Realism is the dramatic mode that makes the strongest claim to forging links between a play's theatrical system and its cultural context. The characters in realist drama purport to voice our thoughts; their words are supposed to be our words. But, as recent feminist criticism points out, realist drama's account of reality is thoroughly determined by patriarchal ideology. In particular, the materialist feminist perspective, which, according to Jill Dolan, "deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations" (10), reveals how realist drama tends to reify "the dominant culture's

inscription of traditional power relations" (84). Yet "[r]ather than considering gender polarization as the victimization of only women," Dolan (who acknowledges her indebtedness to Gayle Rubin) argues that "materialist feminism considers it [gender polarization] a social construct oppressive to both women and men," since *both* are "historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class, and sexual identification" (10). Inspired by this theoretical position, Jeanie Forte asks "whether or not a realist play could not also be a feminist play" (115), and Elin Diamond wonders if there can be a "feminist mimesis" (69).

Recent explorations into the issue of women's writings, feminism, and realism in literary studies by such critics as Rita Felski, Paulina Palmer, and Anne Cranny-Francis have redeemed the value of a "new realism" in fiction that, as Laura Marcus points out, associates "realism and an identity politics" (24) of diversified female subjects. Felski, in particular, forcefully demonstrates how the "confession [i.e., autobiographical realism] and the novel of self-discovery" by women authors reveal the "search for identity . . . as a dominant motif, exemplified in the construction of a model of gendered subjectivity combined with a self-conscious appeal to a notion of oppositional community" (16). In the "search for identity," or as Felski suggests, "the construction of [the] self as a cultural reality" (78), writers of fiction continue to employ realist forms to represent *changing* subjectivities. For this reason, the possibilities of "new realism"—in terms of representation, for instance—stimulate provocative questions if one relates them to issues of gender representation in drama. Can dramatic realism ever be a site for the subversive practice of challenging dominant ideology? Can the "hegemony of realism" be disrupted and dismantled, thereby unmasking what Lynda Hart calls "the *re-creational* power of mimesis" (4)? Can dramatic realism present diverse subjects, women and men, whose individual manifestations of gender are not restrained by conventional social codings? Can drama respond to the notion that "[i]dentity is not a destiny," as Jeffrey Weeks argues, "but a choice. . . . [a] self-creation . . . on ground not freely chosen but laid out by history" (209)?

It would seem that of all realist representations none would be more antithetical to this program than a male-cast play. Surely men among themselves make the best (because most unchallenged) agents of patriarchal mimesis? Yet if one examines the dynamics

of male-to-male dialogue, one finds that certain male-cast plays actually do challenge or at least qualify the realist model of rigid gender polarization. Not all such plays automatically and wholly reinscribe dominant ideology, not, that is, if we identify that ideology as the semiotic of maleness produced by the male-cast canon as a whole.

Although realism has traditionally reflected patriarchal ideology and presumed (white) male spectatorship, perhaps more glaringly in male-cast drama than in other plays, several contemporary American playwrights are confronting the assumptions that underlie the representation of male subjectivity. They are embracing the notion that the asymmetries of gender affect the construction of male subjectivity, resulting in a varied range of male identities when dramatizing men alone together. In doing so, they are also acknowledging the presence of a diverse male *and* female spectatorship. The playwrights' pioneering efforts indicate a possible shift—albeit a slight one—in attitudes toward male representation. This shift, in turn, enjoins a new critical commitment to specificity when discussing the limitations and possibilities of realist representation. Critical awareness of exactly *how* cultural codes are materialized in dramatic dialogue allows recognition of those slight, but significant, movements toward dialogue that resists normative gender codings.

During the last decade, the male-cast plays at the forefront in challenging traditional models usually share two characteristics: first, they respond to or are informed by major post-World War II events: the Civil Rights movement, the AIDS crisis, and the ongoing impact of contemporary feminism on American life; and second, they feature persons of color or gays or both. In regard to the latter characteristic and contrary to popular assumptions, minority male-cast drama, historically, has not challenged the patriarchal norm. Rather, its characters have been presented as objects within the dominant culture who become subjects only after they claim their status as gendered subjects—that is, as men, culturally defined. As exemplified by some of the recent plays that focus on minority characters, however, the representation of gender in realist drama, and in male-cast plays in particular, need not be hopelessly static and therefore need not be summarily dismissed, as it has been. While all men “share in the privilege of the phallus” (Schor 264), not all men experience phallic power in the same way. This difference is critical to this project. Diverse manifestations of self-

identified power, which exist as counterpoints to culturally coded power, are beginning to be written into male-cast dramas.

Conventional male-male representations adhere to the restraints of a rigid, binary system of gender coding. For the most part, they effectively erase differences among men based upon race, class, and sexual orientation, as they foreground their characters' identification—their subjectivity—according to polarized codings. "The formation of gender identity," argues Rubin, "is an example of production in the realm of the sexual system" (167); the gender system "fashion[s] maleness and femaleness into the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity" (Dolan 6). Up to the last decade, the most prominent feature distinguishing men among themselves in drama was the degree to which a man embodied "masculine" or "feminine" characteristics. The more individualized option that all men are "differently masculine" from one another,¹ for instance, was not a choice in terms of dramatic representation. Quite simply, a man rarely articulates his divergences from traditional gender codings. He does not acknowledge his "personalist terrain," which Una Chaudhuri identifies as one's "difference *within*" (199).²

Nowhere is the limiting of the characters in male-cast drama more vivid than in the dynamic of their dialogue. What men on stage say or do not say to each other when women are absent is nothing short of a full-fledged semiotic, one that includes strict rules about the settings of plays, the behaviors of characters, and the topics of conversation. This semiotic appears with surprisingly little variation in a surprisingly large number of plays. The full impact of a male-cast play's deviation from conventional dramaturgical strategies cannot be appreciated without identifying the distinguishing settings, behaviors, and topics of this imposing and hitherto unexamined body of literature. Only then can one recognize the force of the communicative dynamic so long authorized by the male-cast canon.

Where the Boys Are

The American male-cast canon is immense. Over one thousand plays have been produced;³ of these, over five hundred realist plays have been published. Many of America's noted playwrights have written at least one male-cast play, including Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, George Kaufman,

William Inge, Paul Green, Lanford Wilson, Charles Fuller, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Arthur Kopit, David Rabe, Israel Horowitz, Miguel Piñero, Thomas Babe, James Purdy, Ronald Ribman, David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Harvey Fierstein, Terrence McNally, and Robert Schenkkan. Two of our most celebrated playwrights, David Mamet and Sam Shepard, have, along with Robert Patrick, devoted the vast majority of their dramatic output to the male-cast play. With very few exceptions, male-cast plays are written by men; among well-known women playwrights who have used the form are Maria Irene Fornes, Megan Terry, and Lavinia Mueller.⁴ In general, white male authorship far outnumbers all others. White gay and African American playwrights are the most frequently published minorities.

As for the ethnicity of the characters in published plays, the vast majority are, again, white. Fewer than one hundred published plays feature African American characters, considerably fewer still, Latinos and Asians. None, to my knowledge, feature Native Americans. Approximately half of the published plays include one or more minority characters, either men of color or gay men or (very rarely) bisexual men. In short, the heterosexual white male is noticeably the most frequently dramatized figure in male-cast plays; the white gay, followed by the black male, is the most frequently represented minority character.

Where male-cast drama parts company most decisively with other American drama is in its choice of setting. In general, male-cast plays do not bear out what we assume to be American playwrights' preference for domestic settings. Few occur solely in the private sphere of a home, especially if they are cast predominantly with heterosexuals. However, male-cast plays that feature mainly gays are frequently set in homes.⁵

Public spaces—either in institutions of confinement or places of work—are the most frequent locale in male-cast plays. This feature provides a significant but complex link between these plays and an aspect of modern drama that has been theorized, most convincingly by Carol Rosen, under the figure of impasse. According to Rosen, “total institutions”—hospitals, insane asylums, prison, or military training camps—“at once naturalistically and symbolically” express how “different journeys of the human spirit” toward “self-fulfillment [are] thwarted by a relentless Structure” (12, 20, 22).⁶ Although American male-cast plays are often set in total institutions (with the noticeable exception of asylums),⁷ they nevertheless yield a quite different reading of the theme of confinement. Far

from thwarting men's aspirations, institutional settings afford the characters a kind of freedom usually denied to them elsewhere. The kind of freedom I mean is quite precise—it is *self-expression*. Traditionally, writers have found in institutional environments dramatic situations that yield engaging dialogue and action. These confined settings function in male-cast drama as “an apparatus for transforming individuals,” Michel Foucault's description of the actual prison system (1979, 233). The infrequency of alternative settings is noticeable and disturbing, for it implies the crippling notion that men cannot talk personally to each other until they find themselves menaced by coercive and confining institutions. Yet, personal engagement is precisely the vital component of American realist dramaturgy.

The other favored site of male-cast plays is the workplace. Here too “action . . . is rigidly controlled” (Rosen 260): workplaces involve congregation at a centralized location and the performance of repetitive tasks. Most importantly, they also have a predetermined hierarchy of authority. This hierarchy directly influences the shape of the plays' dialogue; the “laws of the space [they] inhabit” often determine when characters converse and what they talk about. The most popular setting in what Mel Gussow calls “occupational dramas” (qtd. in Rosen 265) is a professional environment, usually an office; nonprofessional working environments are rarer.⁸ This preference reflects the concerns of a middle-class American drama that is invested in perpetuating patriarchal images of cultural power and success. The appeal of these images rests in their ability to capture the society's almost fetishistic devotion to hierarchical structures, as well as to embody the spectator's often private desires for social recognition and influence. Situated far from working-class environments and representing men's interaction in a hierarchical context, these plays help systematize male dominance over subordinate individuals. Occupational dramas confirm the culture's investment in the idea of authority. And within those dramas, “the judges of normality are present everywhere. . . . the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based” (Foucault 1979, 304).

Boys Will Be Boys

It is precisely when American men are in institutional settings of confinement, and to a lesser extent in workplaces, that the likeli-

hood of their self-expression—or their self-disclosure—increases. By self-disclosure I mean something almost wholly contained within the realm of language: an individualization that overcomes the restrictions of cultural coding, in particular the powerful masculine ethos, but an individualization wholly manifested in the characters' articulation of personal truths. Besides these settings, however, there are several other devices that playwrights employ to prompt self-disclosures: alcohol, drugs, and violence.

Speaking in a voice that recalls many characters who extol the virtues of drugs, Jay, the flamboyant, marijuana-smoking author in Robert Patrick's *The Haunted Host*, remarks that drugs "tend to make one talk rather loosely and honestly" (312). Jay's altered state, like that shared by the men in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, allows him to release any self-conscious inhibitions in favor of raw, revealing comments. Just as drugs release candid talk in characters, so does alcohol. As the Coach warns his soused, middle-aged former teammates in Jason Miller's *That Championship Season*, confessional talk, an unmanly behavior, comes from men who "drink like women" (31).

Throughout twentieth-century American drama, men together, regardless of their profile, drink too much or take drugs and then talk self-disclosingly.⁹ "Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no," William James submits, while "drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes" (377). Noting the importance in drama of drunken truth telling, Thomas Disch asks, "Are English-speaking peoples such inveterate sots that all their important emotional transactions must be conducted under the influence? Or is it rather that playwrights cannot resist the dramatic convenience of the Gospel according to Dionysus: *In vino veritas*" (661). In respect to the dramaturgy of the male-cast play, this is indeed part of a coded system in which drink and drugs facilitate personal talk among men.

While use of alcohol and drugs generally precedes men's self-disclosing dialogue, it can also lead men into violent abuse, whether verbal or physical, of one another. But male-male violence in drama does not depend exclusively upon this device: in fact, most verbal and physical abuse occurs when the characters are sober. Violent interaction, like alcohol and drug consumption, is coded in male-cast plays as a feature that precedes men's self-disclosing dialogue. Very simply: male characters often fight with words or fists before they talk personally. This feature holds throughout the canon, with one significant exception. Gays among

themselves are much more likely to speak personally without first resorting to violence.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, they do make use of the other technique of male intimacy, drink and drugs.

“Booze and women. I tried to protect you from it,” the Coach reminds his “boys” in *That Championship Season* (J. Miller 26). Implicit in the Coach’s remarks is the belief that both alcohol and women are agents of confessional talk. Or, put differently, a drunk man has the potential to talk openly, like a (sober) woman, who is presumed to speak personally. This comparison raises a critical issue about realist dialogue: what does it mean to have a man speak like a woman? From yet another perspective, what is the function of women characters in dramatic talk? A look at mixed-cast plays reveals the centrality of the women’s verbal contributions to the progression of dialogue toward characters’ self-disclosures. If, for instance, one examines the scenes between Linda Loman and her sons in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* as conversation, Linda emerges as an active participant in the talk: she eagerly responds to her sons’ comments, asks them pressing questions (especially about their relationship to their father, Willy), and steadfastly refuses to settle for easy, impersonal responses. Linda’s contributions substantially influence the play’s developing action; they are central to the structure of the play’s dialogue as well as to the development of its major themes.

I deliberately focus on Linda Loman since she has come to represent, for many, a quintessential male-constructed object—a female Other—who embodies a damaging stereotype of woman, wife, and mother. Understanding Linda’s role as a participant in the play’s conversations does not deny her culturally defined positions as woman, wife, and mother within the play’s heavily coded language system. Many critics have convincingly addressed the latter, most recently Gayle Austin (1, 46–51). But while Linda may not “act on her own behalf” (Austin 48), she nonetheless actively contributes to conversations at which she is present; she is not a passive, silent presence. Her voiced contributions, like those of most women characters in realist drama, have direct impact on ensuing verbal exchanges *and* dramatic actions—despite, or perhaps because of, her sex and gender.

Precisely because women’s words strongly influence these developments—one can argue, after all, that Linda’s direct plea that “attention must be paid” stimulates her sons’ subsequent actions and talk—the issue becomes immediately sex and gender centered: What happens to dramatic dialogue when women are absent, leav-

ing men alone together? How do men talk among themselves when no woman is present?

On the most obvious dramaturgical level, one can observe the extent to which playwrights initiate men's self-disclosing dialogue via the technical substitutes—alcohol and drug use and violence—for the verbal contributions of women characters. More profound in its implications for dramatic theory and realism, however, is the question of whether men, in the absence of women, replicate a gendered language system, one in which the voices of male and female, masculine and feminine, self and other remain, albeit coming exclusively from the mouths of men. If such a system exists, what are its features, and what can interrupt its otherwise characteristic dialogue and representations? And finally, to what extent is American male-cast drama responsive to the diversities of male experience and changing gender codes in its representation of men?

Gender, Dialogue, and Semiotic Apparatus

While Simone de Beauvoir's model of gender as sociocultural "universals" has been extensively revised by later, multidisciplinary theory,¹¹ it remains relevant to the study of male-cast drama, in which gender is represented as socially constructed universals.

In her revolutionary book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir presented, according to Peggy Reeves Sanday, "three basic propositions which articulated the view that sociocultural universals are at the heart of universal sexual asymmetry": (1) "the symbolic structures defining masculine and feminine conform to an essentially static, dialectical pattern of binary oppositions in all societies"; (2) "this dialectic follows a universal pattern: the masculine is associated with culture and the feminine is associated with nature"; and (3) "the nature of the dialectic places males in a position of dominating and exploiting women as culture exploits nature." From these propositions, Beauvoir "saw gender in terms of a semiotic apparatus that followed a universal pattern" (Sanday 1990, 2, 3).¹² This pattern establishes that humanity

is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. . . . Otherness is a fundamental category of human

thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the one without at once setting up the Other over against itself. (Beauvoir xvi–xvii)

Identifying specific, historically constituted social formations of gender, Beauvoir represents gender universals through the opposition between men and women as gendered beings: Man, as male, is subject and Self; Woman, as female, is object and Other; Woman, from her own (ego's) perspective, however, can also be, unto herself, subject and Self.¹³ This position on gender construction is the foundation of materialist feminist thinking (Moi).

As Beauvoir points out, "The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a *situation* in which she is the inessential" (xxix; emphasis added). The "situation" in a male-cast play is determined by and limited to the interaction of men among themselves. Hence, one would expect such a play to be filled with male subjects. However, when one examines the semiotics of the realist play, this does not prove to be the case. The semiotic system of the male-cast play relies upon subject-object structures, and the dramatic situation and the men's talk are heavily coded according to the social construction of gender as identified in Beauvoir's model. Some men in a group are essential subjects, and they identify as such only because they refer to absent women or objectify any remaining men as Other.

Beauvoir's definition of *subject* as one who "can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (xvii)—is, thus, an apt account of the distinction between subject and object that determines linguistic and social dynamics among men in drama. In male-cast drama, a man's objectification of another man—or *the male subject's construction of a male object*—is most often located in the latter's difference from the former, which is usually determined by his race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, or simply by his inadequate mirroring, or embodiment, of the gender codes of the (white) masculine ethos. (The male as "inessential," to use Beauvoir's term, or the male as object, is more commonly represented in male-cast drama than is the "essentially" diversified, or the differently masculine, male as subject.)

Beauvoir's assertion that gender is a semiotic system of socio-

cultural codes is further illuminated by revisionist theories of a “sex-gender system,” as set forth by such feminist social scientists as Rubin and argued, more recently, by Teresa de Lauretis. A sex-gender system, according to de Lauretis, “is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation that assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society. . . . The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (5). A differentiated sex-gender system continues to operate, therefore, in the same-sex gender system of the male-cast play. Here, the “product” and “process” are a representation of masculinity in which the Beauvoirian gender differentiation between subjects (male) and objects (female) is mapped onto and divided among individuals in the all-male group. This representation is most strikingly forged in what Keir Elam calls the play’s “discourse coherence” (182–84).

In his influential *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Elam urges, with certain important qualifications, the extension of theories of speech events in real life, such as John Searle’s speech act theories or H. P. Grice’s philosophy of language, to dialogue in dramatic texts.¹⁴ Elam’s interest in Grice’s identification of the “Cooperative Principle” in actual talk exchanges, in particular, is useful in understanding Elam’s theory of dramatic dialogue. The Cooperative Principle states, “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, *at the stage at which it occurs*, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 45; emphasis added).¹⁵ Elam suggests that a cooperative principle exists in the construction of dialogue, whereby “dramatic speakers . . . produce utterances which are informative . . . ‘true’ with respect to the dramatic world (unless strategically insincere), comprehensible and relevant to the occasion” (173).

While actual talk and dramatic dialogue may share a pragmatic participatory dynamics, the equation between the two kinds of talk “cannot be taken very far” (Elam 178).¹⁶ According to Elam, the systematic difference between dialogue and real-life conversation is “the degree of textual control to which dramatic discourse is subject” (182).¹⁷ In other words, a conversation has fewer textual constraints governing its progress than does dramatic dialogue. Elam identifies six “levels of textual coherence” that usually constrain dramatic dialogue (182–84);¹⁸ the third level is “discourse coherence”:

Each exchange or monologue within the drama, according to the “followability” requirement, will be geared towards a clear “topic” of discourse (or overall “theme”), changes in which will be plainly signalled. Similarly, the individual “objects” of discourse (referred to in the course of the exchange or monologue) will be introduced in a strategic order, rather than at random (as is often the case in ordinary conversation). (183)

The literary critic interested in analyzing drama as a semiotic system finds him- or herself most at home at this level of coherence because of its attention to content—specifically topic selection and order of discussion. Since each talk exchange within drama, according to Elam, is “geared towards a clear ‘topic’ of discourse (or overall ‘theme’),” I highlight the general topic selections in male characters’ cooperative and uncooperative communications (the latter recalls Grice’s “conversationally unsuitable” discourse [45]). Less concerned with how the dialogue functions as a comprehensive linguistic interaction (which includes extralinguistic actions), therefore, I analyze what the dialogue reveals at the level of discourse coherence.¹⁹ This emphasis on substance or theme reveals a culturally determined grouping of topics as a consistent feature of men’s dramatic dialogue. Furthermore, the male characters engage these topics in a specific order.

Whereas Elam suggests that unique “strategic orders” exist in single written texts, one can argue that an order also characterizes an entire canon. In the male-cast canon, this strategic order is directly aligned with the degree of the characters’ participation in cooperative or uncooperative talk exchanges. In order to demonstrate this concurrence I analyze the discourse coherence of thirteen published plays that are paradigms of the canon in respect to this specific focus. The majority of these plays come close to sustaining a *fully realized dramatization of a specific dynamic of communication*. (The only exceptions are the realist plays in which self-disclosing dialogue predictably occurs between men because it is generated within confining institutions [chap. 3] and a nonrealist play that rejects the neoclassic unities [chap. 4].) The majority of plays adhere, in general, to the neoclassic unities (especially as they relate to the structure of discrete acts): these plays represent, in effect, sustained conversations between characters simply because the speakers and listeners are not interrupted or inexplicably transformed because of abrupt changes in time, place, or action. Finally, all thirteen plays represent distinct levels of how American

male characters talk among themselves in various contexts; each also illustrates the range of features indigenous to a specific level of the dramatic dialogue's coherence. These features reflect both the linguistic-literary and the cultural codes operating within the dramatic system. These codes, in turn, indicate the power of the semiotic of maleness to determine through characters' dialogue the sociolinguistic dramatic system.²⁰

A significant difference between Beauvoir's model of gender universals (which is based in lived experience) and that which operates in nearly all male-cast drama is that Beauvoir's model is flexible in its responsiveness to historical influence and cultural change. The model depicted in male-cast drama is intractable by comparison, unresponsive to such influence and change. But, as Linda Bamber rightly points out, everything *has* changed within the culture since Beauvoir's writing: "the culture changes in response to the claims of individual women and women in turn respond to the changing culture" (10). Asking if this means that women "will cease to be the Other in fiction by men," Bamber concludes, "I presume not"—as do I in respect to male-cast drama. Despite cultural changes, woman does not cease to be Other in the fiction of nearly all (male-authored) male-cast drama. Although male-cast plays reflect Beauvoir's and materialist feminism's perception of the construction of gender in society, most conclude with a contrasting perspective: gender exists independently from and *outside* any evolving cultural history.

This double perspective is possible because the plays' representations of gender operate from two distinct, yet interrelated positions: social constructionism of gender and determinism of gender. A feminist and semiotic perspective on male-cast plays seeks to track the precise mechanisms of this *system* of social constructionism and determinism. Whereas their dynamic relationship is rarely acknowledged, particularly in the formation of the dramatic text, the realist male-cast canon affords the most intense illustration of their dramatic alliance—especially the depth to which determinist gender construction functions.

Although speaking about the semiotic constitution of the performance text and feminist poetics, Sue-Ellen Case indirectly addresses the problematic relationship between social constructionism of gender and realist drama:

Cultural encoding is the imprint of ideology upon the sign—the set of values, beliefs and ways of seeing that control the conno-

tations of the sign in the culture at large. . . . For a feminist, this means that the dominant notions of gender, class and race compose the meaning of the text of a play, the stage pictures of its production and the audience reception of its meaning. (1988, 116–17)

From within the interpersonal dynamics represented in the male-cast play itself, characters appear to comprehend and to experience gender as a social construction. That is, they appear to act according to a social prescription that identifies ways men are supposed to be. Thus, the cultural construction of gender informs, if not outright determines, a play's discourse coherence: male characters' dialogue replicates the socially constructed binary of male/female, masculine/feminine, and Self/Other.

It is exactly the schematic predictability of the discourse coherence in the conventional male-cast play, however, that reinforces for the spectator a kind of determinist perspective on gender; that is, the discernible mapping of the language of male representation encourages a "well, that's just the way men are" reading of the characters' lives. The schematic progression in the discourse coherence originates from the tension between the (apparent) desire to particularize dramatic content (through the individualization of character that is otherwise overdetermined by social codings) and to adhere to the (apparently) inflexible demands of realist structure. A reading of the plays' discourse coherence reveals this canon's rigid perspective on gender as monolithic and unchanging.

On the other hand, if one pinpoints through the same semiotic analysis how authors actually attempt to write characters out of a monolithic structure in order to individualize them, one reveals a deeper "language" structure that also shapes male-cast plays and male representation. This structure moves beyond the notion that gender exists independently from and outside of any evolving history and, instead, responds to the notion that gender is socially constructed and thereby changeable. A deeper text and its meaning are generally submerged and overwhelmed by the overdetermination (via conventional, static gender codings expressed in dialogue) of male representation. A dramaturgical tension remains not unlike the theoretical tension that exists in feminism, according to Naomi Schor, between "the interplay of social constructionism and essentialism." This "interplay," according to Schor, remains an "unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) debate within feminism" (267),

a position most recently documented by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean.

The recurrent dramatization of gender binaries in male-cast plays is a far cry from Judith Butler's vision of gender "as a corporeal field of cultural play" (1988, 531). Rather than being presented as Butler's "basically innovative affair," gender is repeatedly played out as a binary system when men are among themselves in drama. And while Butler's philosophical, phenomenological notion that gender "is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy" in lived experience, male interaction in realism continually represents gender as determined by and through language. Gender-based (and, therefore, gender-biased) dialogue in male-cast drama is presented, to turn Butler's use of the phrase, as a "linguistic given." Whereas Butler explores what possibilities "exist for the cultural transformation of gender through [specific corporeal] acts" (1988, 521) in lived experience, I examine here what possibilities exist for the dramatic transformation of gender through "realist" dialogue.

Man to Man

Whether brought together out of choice, necessity, force, or familial bonding, characters in the American male-cast play initially engage one another cooperatively in what I call "social dialogue," which is determined by the American masculine ethos and expressed through familiar male mythologies. These masculine myths, Anthony Easthope suggests, inform and often dictate the way in which a man lives privately and publicly: "within, femininity and male homosexual desire must be denied; without, women and the feminine must be subordinated and held in place" (166). An American male is socialized to embrace the ethos that such myths set forth in order to embody what Peter Schwenger calls a "state of male wholeness" (632). The cultural coding of the ethos—based in the rigid system of the Beauvoirian Self/Other dichotomy—privileges heterosexual white males among all men while marginalizing gays and heterosexuals of color. It materializes itself as the constant social pressure on a man to confirm his masculinity via its *difference* from femininity, thereby denying male diversity. Deeply rooted as it is in American culture and language, this ethos consistently informs the dramatic system of the male-cast play.

Most characters in male-cast plays begin by engaging in social dialogue. They do so in an effort to situate themselves within the hegemonic patriarchy, which they presume to be supported by all the other participants in the talk exchanges. The characters use social dialogue because they want to confirm their common ground with each other. Moreover, social dialogue is safe; it guarantees cooperative communication. What we see and hear at this stage of the plays is an articulated *awareness* of their individual and collective power—political, economic, domestic, and sexual—as men within American culture. The male characters are fully aligned with the patriarchal ethos that creates this power, conscious of its rules and of its role in constructing their public image. Inevitably and pointedly, their power at this level is over women, the Other. Finally, this ethos is not amorphous; it is a rigidly ordered discourse, that is, a structured thematic consisting of certain specific topics. During the social dialogue that begins most male-cast plays, and with virtually no exceptions, the characters engage these topics explicitly. The topics are employment, consumerism, families, women, and their own active identification with the cultural ideal of male virility.

Throughout the twentieth century, the vast majority of characters within the male-cast canon have encouraged social dialogue in order to exercise the culturally coded powers prescribed by male privilege. Only recently have some playwrights begun to present male characters whose desire to transcend the limitations of a culturally coded identity leads them to depart from conventional behavior and social dialogue. These characters move into what I call “personal dialogue,” a dynamic of communication in which self-disclosure and individualization are central to the expression of one’s identity and desires. Personal dialogue reveals a character’s wish to know and to activate his “difference within,” which is associated with personal rather than culturally coded terms.²¹ Recurrent topics that surface during men’s personal dialogue include one’s wish to reconnect with a deeper sense of family and home; a desire for relationships and intimacy but a fear of responsibility that inhibits the pursuit of that desire; a yearning to release the “infantile self” without fear of rejection or abandonment; and finally, one’s conscious struggle with the “other,” generally gender coded as the “feminine” within himself. This latter topic appears quite dramatically, however, as a man’s more profound, less conscious struggle with the Other, which Jacqueline Rose, reading Jacques Lacan, identifies as that which “stands against the phallus.”

In being positioned so against the Other, the phallus, according to Rose, “seeks authority and is refused” (51). The tension created by the paradox of man’s dependence upon, rejection of, desire for, and desire to be an “other” provokes some of the most startling, though infrequently articulated, personal dialogue in male-cast plays. It is also intrinsically linked to a man’s urge to understand and to accept himself as differently masculine, and thereby to understand and to accept difference in others.

Lest it be presumed that American playwrights are now dashing off dozens of plays about males who are challenging the cultural privileges afforded their gender, let me hasten to say: they are not. It is still the rare male-cast play, whether realist or not, that takes the leap to dramatize American male characters who speak personally and openly in the company of other men. That leap is a political one and a dangerous one, for in breaking with convention the playwright risks provoking an audience’s incomprehension.

Chapter 1 discusses three plays that are constructed, first and foremost, to sustain social dialogue. In the first of these, I show how the discourse coherence of David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983)²² depends upon topics related to the theme of the masculine ethos and male mythologies. This Pulitzer Prize–winning play can be read as full-scale dramatization of the initial level of male social dialogue. Despite any passing personalized comments that challenge the status quo, the play’s traditional white heroes remain committed to the cultural codings of maleness. These codings include one’s belief in male myths, which, according to Beauvoir, “imply a subject who projects his hopes and his fears toward a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subjects and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected” (142). Mamet’s play—with its erection of virile myths—is the paradigmatic American work dramatizing this particular dynamic of male characters’ talk exchanges. There are no published male-cast plays that are cast with nonwhite or gay characters that wholly mirror this level of discourse coherence. Therefore, it is a level that, if sustained, appears to capture a dramatic talk that only white, straight subjects authentically pursue and perpetuate. This dramaturgical detail is no doubt due to the fact that such men are culturally privileged by the social codings of the masculine ethos, sanctioned to embody and represent the ideal American man.

The remaining plays in chapter 1 derive their discourse coherence from a specific topic within the thematic of the American

masculine ethos: the absent woman. The topic of women is the only one that is sustained, for a play's duration, as the articulated object in male subjects' dialogue. In Alice Gerstenberg's *At the Club* (1930) and Sidney Morris's *If This Isn't Love!* (1982), the male characters talk about specific offstage, or absent, women for the plays' duration. In each play, women are defined by specific socio-sexual roles that are determined from the male characters' perspectives. These female referents, or what Elam calls "objects" of discourse, are cast in what Case has identified as classical roles in the Western tradition of drama: "misogynistic roles," woman as "the Bitch, the Witch, the Vamp and the Virgin/Goddess," or, less frequently, "positive roles," woman as "independent, intelligent and even heroic" (1988, 6). By sustaining their focus on the topic of absent women, male characters perpetuate social dialogue that is, while cooperative, nonetheless restrictive in its representation of women. Women, after all, are not present in male-cast drama; they are not their own subjects. Women remain heavily coded, gendered bodies that are subjected to the power of male authority and privilege.²³

This level of male interaction clearly reveals men's preference for discussing the Other, rather than their own complicated, conflicted selves, as a topic of conversation. As Beauvoir recognizes, "[W]oman is the Other in whom the subject transcends himself without being limited, who opposes him without denying him; she is the Other who lets herself be taken without ceasing to be the Other, and therein she is so necessary to man's happiness and to his triumph that it can be said that if she did not exist, men would have invented her" (186). The absent woman is the most engaged and thoroughly explored topic in male-cast dramas; in talking about woman, or in "exchanging" her as a topic among themselves (which recalls Rubin's theory of men's "traffic in women" as property), male characters communicate their deepest feelings to each other.

The first chapter, then, illustrates those fundamental features of male discourse that produce cooperative communication. Chapter 2, "Silence, Violence, and the Drama of Abuse," discusses three dramaturgically significant male-cast plays that derive their unconventional structures and content by isolating the dynamic of uncooperative communication: Eugene O'Neill's *Hughie* (1959), Amiri Baraka's (formerly LeRoi Jones) *The Toilet* (1963), and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1960). For the characters in these three works (and in most male-cast plays as well), uncooperative commu-

nication occurs primarily when speakers and listeners are unwilling or unable to create a shared text by engaging either social or personal dialogue. Such a dramatic occurrence could be viewed, for instance, as analogous to an outright failure of the cooperative principle.²⁴

Uncooperative communication within a dramatic text is manifested in three general ways: sustained silence, verbal abuse, or physical violence. First, the least frequent sign of communicative failure among characters is sustained silence. This can occur either when participants literally say nothing to one another, or when a speaker engages in monologues because his listener is uncooperative or nonreciprocal in providing verbal responses. In both instances, silence becomes "abusive," or offensive, in its violation of interpersonal communication; silence in and of itself, however, is not automatically an uncooperative feature in talk exchanges. When silence does violate the dynamics of interpersonal communication in drama, it is most often the outcome of characters who either deliberately resist taking any responsibility to share in the creation of a text or oppose revealing why they prefer to remain silent. O'Neill's *Hughie* is historically important in its depiction of this level of interaction. The play is the first critically acknowledged male-cast play that utilizes the dynamic of uncooperative communication as its essential source of dramatic form and content. It is the first play to dramatize in an everyday setting men struggling to engage topics that differ from those within the thematic of the American masculine ethos. The characters strain to communicate, particularly on a personal level, resorting to an interplay of monologues and sustained silence as a way to fill time and space.

Prolonged verbal abuse, through the use of loathsome sexual or racial epithets, for instance, distinguishes the second type of uncooperative communication. When verbal abuse erupts, it effectively diminishes, if not eliminates, any talk exchange among participants. Thus, it can be an outstanding feature of less than cooperative communication (i.e., talk is still occurring, but uncooperatively), or a signal precipitating the talk exchange's demise into uncooperative communication, and possible termination of the exchange altogether.

Finally, the third and by far most common sign of uncooperative communication is physical violence. Physical assault is a frequent response of male characters and indicates their unwillingness or fear to assume any responsibility for creating or furthering a

communicative act among other men. At this level of antisocial interaction, men fail altogether to use words in order to connect with other men. Rather, they initiate physical violence. *The Toilet* and *The Zoo Story* rely upon both verbal and physical abuse as primary structural devices. Unlike O'Neill's characters, who eventually relinquish their silence in order to engage in social dialogue, Baraka's and Albee's men move through silence into verbal and physical abuse in their struggle to identify the base of power among themselves.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider seven plays, each characterized by its construction of sustained personal dialogue. It is not insignificant or coincidental that gays or heterosexuals of color appear in seven of these plays. In a striking departure from white heterosexual characters' often deliberate commitment to the preservation of social dialogue, underrepresented male characters—African American, Latino, Asian American, bisexual, and gay—readily initiate and engage in personal dialogue when they are in the company of white heterosexual men. This is not the case, however, when minority men are among themselves (for example when African Americans are alone together or when gay men are alone together); a range of features, therefore, distinguish individuals who participate in personal dialogue. The fact that characters share racial sameness with one another or share the same sexual orientation, for instance, does not, in and of itself, guarantee that characters will engage in self-disclosing dialogue. In many groups of men, notes Lynne Segal, "Open discussion can arouse fear and anxiety, because it is regarded as essentially 'feminine' behaviour" (165).

Often, a minority male disrupts the traditional males' social dialogue. It is significant that a minority male character's relationship to personal dialogue when among white heterosexual male characters heightens the complications inherent in the naming of difference—in the identification of the complex intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this regard, the discourse coherence of the talk exchanges between marginalized men are reminiscent of the conventional portrayal of women characters in American dramatic texts. As with many women characters, men who are nonwhite, gay, or both are often presented as viewing their relative powerlessness in the white heterosexual patriarchy as a catalyst to be more self-disclosing, or at least to minimize their appropriation of social dialogue and its concern for the (white) American masculine ethos. When representing their marginalized status as Other (or as object) within a play's cast of characters,

therefore, these men activate a traditionally female or feminine function within the drama as facilitators of personal dialogue. Yet, from another perspective, they become “othered” subjects in the process—men who are differently masculine from those assuming cultural power. In this way, marginalized men are usually heavily coded to serve deliberate functions within drama’s semiotic of maleness.

The white heterosexual male character rarely makes a conscious effort to be self-disclosing in conversation. Unlike most women characters in all-female or mixed-cast plays, he is not represented as easily initiating or engaging in personal dialogue, particularly when in the company of other men like himself. He appears unwilling or unable to create an individual identity through self-disclosure that would distinguish him from those with whom he shares cultural power; to do so would jeopardize his access to that power and its attendant cultural privileges. This anti-individualistic position is a stark reversal of the long-standing American ideology of individualism as set forth by Emerson and his followers; or, perhaps, access to privilege actually reveals an anti-individualistic underside to the American ethos of individualism. Consequently, such men seldom assume any responsibility to understand, or even to acknowledge, their own or another’s individuality when it is revealed in personal interaction. White heterosexual characters rarely deviate from the culturally coded themes of the American masculine ethos.

If and when a more personal text is created, however, it usually surfaces as they get drunk or drugged, or find their lives imminently threatened. This latter condition recalls Carol Rosen’s definition of American plays of impasse set in confining institutions. My third chapter, “Liberation in Confinement,” focuses on the discourse coherence established in the predominantly straight world of David Rabe’s military play, *Streamers* (1977) and Miguel Piñero’s prison play, *Short Eyes* (1975), as well as the gay milieu of Robin Swados’s AIDS hospice play, *A Quiet End* (1991). It qualifies Rosen’s argument by illustrating that men among themselves in institutional settings, regardless of their sexual orientation, usually move toward a kind of self-fulfillment as they engage more readily in personal dialogue than men located in noninstitutional settings (Rosen 22).

Chapter 4, “Realizing Freedom: Risk, Responsibility, and Individualization,” highlights four noninstitutional dramas—one nonrealist and three realist—that derive their discourse coherence from

topics that are essentially identified by the theme of individualization: Philip Kan Gotanda's Japanese American *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1991); Dick Goldberg's Jewish, domestic *Family Business* (1979); David Mamet's Anglo American working-class *American Buffalo* (1977); and Alonzo D. Lamont, Jr.'s African American *That Serious He-Man Ball* (1989). While these authors employ the convention of framing male characters' talk within social and abusive dialogues, they eventually subvert this tendency in favor of sustained personal dialogue, albeit with varying degrees of success, insight, and articulation. Each play locates sites of intervention in characters' language usage by confronting and defying conventional gender representation. Their characters conceive of self-knowledge and personal survival in ways that finally challenge their identities as gender-coded men. Rather, the majority of characters favor self-identifications based upon racial, ethnic, and sexual differences which in turn lead them to claim the specificity of their experiences amid a shared humanity with other men—a humanity that transcends gender codings and biases, thereby making harmony among people a possibility. This sense of a shared humanity, I must sadly note, does not appear in the noticeably few published all-male plays with a cast of multicultural principals.

The epilogue returns to the topic of the "othered" presence in male-cast drama. This disruptive figure, I suggest, becomes the foundation of an alternative theory of American realist dramatic construction—one determined less by the tension between *sexual* subjects and objects than by the power dynamic between *gendered* subjects and objects. At the heart of this postulation is the transformation, via revisioned gender codings, of the male object into a differently masculine male subject—one whose identity centers on his difference within. Having shown that a male object—a male Other, who is traditionally associated with Woman and femaleness—usually exists in male-cast plays, I connect this character's varied manifestations to the deeper constructions that inform the dramaturgy of all American realist drama. American dramatic realism is finally a more gender-coded frame than it is a sexual, racial, or class-coded one. Even though sexual, racial, and class codings may be the originating point from which the conflict begins, gender codings finally subsume them; representations of the sexes, the races, and the classes within American realism are repeatedly dichotomized because they are overdetermined by dualist gender codings. For this reason, the realist male-cast dramatic canon appears as a considerable semiotic system, one so rigidly coded as to

restrict severely the range of representations available to the dramatic imagination. Once the mechanics of this system are revealed, however, the playwright has the option—through a radical reworking of the codes of male dialogue—to articulate and to stage new types of male subjectivity, new masculinities.

