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Patriarchy vs Matriarchy: Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*

Hans Osterwalder

In this essay I would like to explore the dynamics of partner relationships and their effect on the family unit in two American plays from the 1960s. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an obvious choice. Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* premiered only fifteen months after Albee's classic and addresses the same theme.

A central question is whether the destructive impulses which are so potent in both plays are represented as innate drives of human kind or if, in analogy to the left-wing sociological ideology of the sixties, social causes are adduced to explain the couples' destructiveness. Eric Mottram outlines this tension within Miller's work and comes to a conclusion which will have to be scrutinized :

The weight of the action falls cruelly on the individual within the fixed, powerful society which fails to support him at his moment of need and remains, as he falls, monolithically immovable. 'Evil' is those social pressures which conflict with an equally vaguely defined individual integrity in the hero or heroine. But critical though he is of American, perhaps Western values, Miller finally has come to believe that 'evil' is really the natural cruelty of human nature. (23-4)

As a theoretical matrix for the psychodynamics of the couples I shall refer to some classical texts on masculinity and femininity by Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mead, Karen Horney and Erik Erikson. A careful application of depth psychology in its innocent, pre-Lacanian guise can help to uncover the unconscious motives of the characters' behaviour patterns. This is not to say that I deal with the characters as if they were real people; but Elizabeth Wright's assessment that "the main contribution of classical psychoanalytic criticism [to literary criticism] was to point out the role of desire in the

figuring and structuring of texts" (150) seems to me to the point and I shall use its tools to that purpose.

Jean Gould's comment on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* could be used as an epigraph to the whole undertaking: "Martha's [words] sound the note of decay that Albee intends to show in the honored institutions of the family" (282).

Surprisingly few critics have pointed out that the mainspring of Martha's energy and ferocious drive is her quasi-Oedipal (or rather Electra-like) desire to win her worshipped Daddy's love. It is a losing battle, as George points out in the third act, when illusions and strategic lies are being exorcised; she is simply "a misunderstood little girl" whose father "doesn't give a damn whether she lives or dies" (131). In a way one could see the whole play as the surface-manifestation of a Freudian deep-structure: Daddy is the old patriarch presiding over the family, a constellation reminiscent of Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The patriarch's most burning desire is to have a son to ensure his succession. In a way Martha never received her Daddy's love because she committed the unforgivable crime of being born as a girl. I am not going to indulge in dated Freudian red herrings like penis-envy, but Martha probably lost her real mother (cf. 69-70), so she had more tangible reasons for turning to her Daddy for love than the discovery that her mother lacks the mythologised member (cf. Freud 46). In her teens she gave free rein to her natural erotic feelings and eloped with a gardener, an escapade Daddy swiftly put a stop to: she was "revirginized" (53). After this act of disobedience Martha tried to expiate by doing everything to provide the wished-for successor: she married George, seemingly an up-and-coming historian worthy of following in her father's footsteps, only to realise a decade later that once again she failed to please Daddy. George turned out to be a flop, "a bog . . . a fen . . . A.G.D. swamp" (36), a metaphor aptly describing her conception of George as too feminine, lacking the masculine attributes of hardness and aggression. Hence her constant taunting of George about his paunch, something incompatible with Daddy's "physical fitness kick" (39).

All males present in the play are found to be lacking; even Nick, whose "firm body" (38) Martha eulogised in Act 1 turns out to be too soft in his most masculine part. Only Daddy is put on a pedestal as the archetypal figure of masculine drive and hardness: "Daddy's a strong man" (40). Martha's pathetic failure to please this towering figure is the root-cause of her profound self-hatred as expressed in a cathartic moment at the beginning of Act 3, where she confesses: "I do not wish to be happy" (113).

The fantasy of a son should compensate for her additional failure to produce a real heir-apparent for Daddy's empire. It is Martha who mentions the treasured secret, but it is George who kills the son. He instinctively knows that that's the way to cut deeper than merely to the bone, namely to "the marrow" (125) of Martha's psychological house of cards. When they re-enact the fantasy of the child's birth George prods Martha by asking: "A son? A daughter?" (127). She dodges the question by answering "A child!" In Martha's psychology a son is the only possibility, he must even have Daddy's green eyes (cf. 51, 128).

Another way of doing penance for not fulfilling Daddy's desire for a male heir is assuming a male identity herself by a pervasive display of masculine character traits: she is older than George, she actively courted him, she is far more aggressive in an open, braying way. She keeps picking up younger lovers, according to George even "undergraduates" (112). This is a stereotype masculine pattern of behaviour, while George is given the feminine attributes. But *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is not an example of what has been labelled the "Momism" of American society (cf. Bock). The play is not about the mother figure of the early settlers, who, abandoned by her husband, raised her children single-handedly and became therefore omnipotent, keeping especially her sons in baleful neuroticizing dependence. Hedwig Bock may be right about Albee's work in general, but she is certainly mistaken when claiming that *Who's Afraid* is "about 'mom' as a typical American woman" (Bock 439, my translation). Ultimately Martha is just a "misunderstood little girl" (131). She may have the desire to "castrate" all the males around her, as Bock puts it (442), and with Nick she may be temporarily successful, but in the end George literally carries the day when it is dawning. In the final round he successfully exposes Martha's pitiful dependence on her omnipotent Daddy.

Why does George collaborate in this ritual of humiliation? Again an Oedipal pattern lends itself for explanation. From the complex web of fact and fiction it can be gleaned that George certainly harboured the desire to kill his parents. Whether or not the novel he was forbidden to publish by Martha's father was autobiographical is immaterial. It is certainly of great emotional value for George, he actually grabs Martha by the throat when she blurts out the secret (83). It is the equivalent of George killing the son: both betrayals drive the partner into hysterics. George himself tells the story to Nick at the beginning of Act 2, and there are a number of later references to the tale which give it some sort of credibility: the boy uses the misnomer "bergin" for bourbon, a word taken up later in the play and applied to

George. In a moment of exasperation Martha hisses: "Before I'm through with you you wish you'd died in that automobile, you bastard" (93). In George's original tale, however, the boy was put in an asylum and didn't utter a sound for thirty years (63). When George kills off their imaginary son he fashions the event in the same ludicrous manner in which the boy is supposed to have killed his parents, namely avoiding a porcupine and driving into a tree.

I am aware of the fact that thereby hangs a Lacanian tale: the "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Lacan 87); or as Wright puts it: "Desire is revealed by the metaphorical substitution for surface meaning of the repressed meaning" (154). But since this essay is concerned with family structures I cannot follow up this aspect fully. Let it suffice to point out that "both literary and psychoanalytical narrative depend on structures of repetition in order to make sense of experience retrospectively" (Wright 160). This is the mainspring of George's web of fiction. As a result "truth and illusion" are densely intertwined, their disentangling is the central theme of the second and third act of the play.

In the specific case of George's narrative one can argue in a Freudian vein that the child's mere desire to kill his parents creates enormous guilt-feelings. To do penance George married Martha, where he meets masculine sadistic traits in a woman, an ideal purgatory for the man who wished to kill both parents. On the other hand George also clings to the fantasy of the happy family when he remembers or fantasizes about sailing past Majorca with "Mommy and Daddy" who took him there "as a college graduation present" (118). Again, these contradictory fantasies are grist to the Lacanian mill, which rejects the classical psychoanalytical critics' endeavour "to recover a latent stable meaning" (Wright 161).

There certainly is some substance in Martha's claim that George's capacity for suffering is very large indeed, because he "married [her] for it!!" (92). Depth psychology does help to explain some aspects of the couple's bizarre behaviour. The only therapy offered is the ritual exorcism of the illusion of fertility and of a future. But the realization that it is "just [...] us" (140), George and Martha, which shades into a feeling of reconciliation, is unlikely to provide a lasting solution for the couple: at best it is a truce.

Whether or not Albee meant to depict destructive trends which are innate in human nature is a contentious question. As noted by many critics the Christian names George and Martha point to the Washingtons and thus to the whole of American society. But the sterility inherent in these couples is an indictment of the patriarchal family structure underlying the male-

orientated competitive society of which New England academia is the most typical specimen. George does quote from Spengler's *Decline of the West* (104), but as the title suggests, only Western culture is on the way out, while other races, "the yellow bastards" (99) are the future. The only cure hinted at is the exorcism of cherished illusions like the "blond-eyed, blue-haired" (i.e. Arian) son, the incarnation of the American dream. Critics like Quetz insist on the allegorical deep-structure of the play, claiming that it can only be read allegorically because the purely psychological motivation of the characters' actions in the marriage drama is insufficient. To my mind a psychoanalytical reading proves that there is a perfectly sufficient psychological rationale. But this surface-level is not incompatible with an allegorical deep-structure: the historical allegory of the imaginary son as the American dream and its failure makes perfect sense (cf. Quetz 79). The play can be viewed as a case-study of the patriarchal family structure. While showing the archetypal conflicts inherent in human nature and the nuclear family in an almost Freudian way, it is open to the sociological approach in the sense that it represents the patriarchal fixations and consequent doom of a particular society in a particular historical epoch. Much of the Oedipal conflict permeating the play may be due to nurture, not nature, a well-known modification of Freudian psychology by psychoanalysts with anthropological or sociological leanings like Margaret Mead and Erich Fromm.

We now turn to Miller's *After the Fall* to analyse its family structure. Again we are confronted with marital agony: the basic question is why Quentin's marriages don't work. Towards the end of the play he comes to the devastating conclusion that he "could not love" (109). Why not? As in my analysis of Albee's play a glance back at the parental family and the traces or rather scars it left in Quentin's psyche is very enlightening. In crucial moments Quentin's stream of consciousness always goes back to scenes at home. But in stark contrast to Albee's play the domineering figure is the mother. In a first flashback the sons have to break the news of the mother's death to the ailing father. He loses his composure and gasps: "Oh boys – she was my right hand" (10). In a number of later flashbacks, however, we witness the systematic humiliation of the weak father by the mother. When he loses his fortune in the Wall Street Crash she threatens to divorce him (20). In a lengthy narrative she exposes the father's moronic nature to the boy Quentin, culminating in an uncontrolled utterance of hate: "If he went to sleep in the Turkish bath again, I'll kill him" (16). A number of times in crucial confrontations with his women the mother's voice branding the father as an "idiot" rings out in Quentin's mind: when he sees

Elsie bullying Lou (26), when he is quarrelling with Louise (30). The most telling instance occurs towards the end of Act Two: he has just arrived at the conclusion that “if there is love, it must be limitless” (100). But the traumatic experience of witnessing the love-hate relationship of his parents prevents Quentin from giving and experiencing limitless love. When musing why the world is “so treacherous” (30) Quentin bursts out: “Shall we lay it all to mothers? Aren’t there mothers who keep dissatisfaction hidden to the grave, and do not split the faith of sons until they go in guilt for what they did not do?” (31). This is Quentin’s attempt to generalize about the way his own mother implanted guilt-feelings in him. Like his father, he can never be good enough for his women, he is doomed to fail for ever. As Louise puts it: “I think now that you don’t really see any woman. Except in some ways your mother. You do sense her feelings; you do know when she’s unhappy or anxious, but not me. Or any other woman” (28-9). In this and a number of other instances the tower of the concentration-camp lights up when Quentin is remembering the scenes at home. The nuclear family is thus associated with the holocaust, the mother is cast in the role of the torturer while the father is the victim.

In contradistinction to Albee’s play, the all-powerful mother figure rules the roost and sows the seeds of destruction in this family. “Momism” rears its ugly head; what Bock called “the neuroticizing of the sons by an almighty mother” (439, my translation) is patently obvious. Quentin suffers from her as much as Martha suffers from the unattainable love of her worshipped Daddy. In fact, Quentin explicitly states that he “adored this woman” (76). Both Martha’s and Quentin’s masochistic and self-denigrating impulses spring from not receiving the limitless love from their most significant other. Another similarity consists in the projection of the American dream unto a son: imaginary in Martha’s case, but real in Quentin’s. One of Quentin’s most tenacious memories is his mother’s vision of him when he was a boy: “I saw a star when you were born – a light, a light in the world” (111). But Quentin’s conscientious, fundamentally moralist nature prevents him from following this vision blindfold. He is sitting in judgement over himself, condemning himself as a deterring instance of the American dream gone sour.

To what extent is the inability to love and form lasting relationships presented as inherent in human nature in Miller’s play? Let me first turn to the play itself before evaluating Miller’s own much publicized defence of the piece. The title itself clearly hints at the timeless nature of man’s fundamentally fallen state. In fact, Quentin’s last monologue is spiked with

references to Christ's passion: "But love, is love enough? [...] Who can be innocent again on this mountain of skulls? I tell you what I know! My brothers died here – *he looks from the tower down at the fallen Maggie* - but my brothers built this place" (113). Instead of the loving god of the New Testament there is the tower of the concentration camp. The world is a gigantic Golgotha, a mountain of skulls. Men die in concentration camps built by men. The term "brothers" evokes Cain and Abel. Quentin sees himself as Cain, killing his women that he "might live," all in the name of love, which is exposed as a lie, a series of betrayals. The title is taken up in a later passage: "we meet unblessed [...] after the Fall" (113). In stark contrast to this devastating insight the final gesture of the play is Holga's "Hello," spoken "with great love" (114), which is reciprocated by Quentin, in spite of the whole train of betrayed and betraying people behind him: Mother, Father and Dan, Felice, Mickey and Lou, and finally Maggie, all "endlessly alive" (114). The psychoanalytical truism that all your past significant others influence you for the rest of your life is blended with the Christian symbolism of the fallen nature of man, and paradoxically contradicted by the final gesture of hope. However, the same caveat as at the end of Albee's play is called for here: the play's psychodynamics and symbolic structures put the final optimistic gesture in question.

The biblical symbolism stresses that the penchant of man to inflict pain on woman is innate rather than just a consequence of Quentin's personal biography; but at the same time it is made clear that both sexes can play both roles, torturer and victim. What is certainly less prominent in *After the Fall* than in other plays by Miller such as *Death of a Salesman* are the social conditions, the competitive American way of life idolising success, as a cause for the protagonist's downfall.

In his defence of the play after the almost univocal and scathing dismissal by reviewers Miller stressed the general significance of the piece to play down the autobiographical, personal aspect residing in the obvious similarity between Maggie and Marilyn Monroe. But as I have shown in my analysis the allegorical, archetypal strain is inherent in the text itself, it is not merely imposed by the author to blur the biographical vestiges.

To sum up: in spite of the optimistic last lines both plays present a predominantly gloomy view of the family. In Albee it is a tyrannical father-figure, in Miller a domineering mother overshadowing the next generation and virtually annihilating the possibility of a happy family life.

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