

## A Warp in Albee's *Woolf*

Bernard F. Dukore\*

On numerous occasions, modern playwrights have gone to the classics for subjects or characters. Sometimes the borrowings are obvious, as in Sartre's *The Flies*. At other times the derivations are obscure; Eliot, for example, was so successful in disguising the classical source for *The Cocktail Party* that no one identified it until he himself pointed it out as Euripides' *Alcestis*. Such theft—if I may distort Proudhon's expression—is a playwright's proper cup of tea. Terence called his audience's attention to the fact that he did it, Shakespeare had no qualms about the propriety of doing it, few believed Shaw when he said he did it, and Brecht boasted of having had the sound judgment to find good authors to do it to. Every playwright may not be doing it, but many playwrights—bad as well as good—have. In 1920 Bernard Shaw wrote an article for *Hearst's Magazine* called, "I Am a Classic But Am I a Shakespear Thief?"<sup>1</sup> He replied that he was and concluded the article by ironically saying to the man who called him "a Shakespear Thief," "You would guess eggs if you saw the shells." From what looks like a shell, I should like to guess the classical egg that Albee hatched in his first full-length play, and also to suggest its relation to the authoress alluded to in the title.

In Euripides' *Alcestis*, the god Heracles brings Alcestis, wife of Admetus, back from the dead. In Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, Harcourt-Reilly, a god-surrogate, brings Lavinia, wife of Edward Chamberlayne, back from a sanitorium where he had secretly sent her. A similar parallel exists between Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Euripides' *Medea*. In Euripides' play, Jason breaks the marriage vows he had made to Medea; in revenge, she kills their children. In *Virginia Woolf*, Martha breaks her vow of secrecy by telling outsiders of the imaginary son; in revenge, George "kills" that son.

Although the strongest parallel between Albee's play and *Medea* is the similar plot, there are others as well; *Virginia Woolf* appears to contain a broken line of references—some direct, some indirect—to the story of Jason and Medea.

Medea's ancestors had magical powers—her father was a sorcerer, her grandfather was Helios the Sun God, her aunt was Circe the enchantress—and she inherited supernatural powers from them. Albee has George attribute supernatural qualities to Martha's ancestors, though in a comic manner. "He's a God, we all know that," he says of Martha's father—who as president of a university has a position of authority that is suggestive of that of Medea's father, King Aetes. A few minutes later he adds, "the old man is not going to die. Martha's father has the staying power of one of those Micronesian tortoises. There are rumors . . . which you must not

\*From *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 30 (Winter 1964):261-68. Reprinted by permission of The Southern Speech Communication Association.

se it ever so ephem-

Buchanan's funda-  
lybris involves the  
re"; nemesis is that  
:"<sup>7</sup> Albee's play sets  
spent, resulting in  
gic hero: irony, "the  
ar ideas." The other  
ams hidden behind  
end of action. And  
ters' motives neatly

because she is a  
usband, that Nick  
heir son for revenge  
audience and from  
ith the characters.  
, despite objections  
Lionel Trilling<sup>8</sup> has  
ion, sin, and vile  
ecious goodness by  
puritanical moral  
nd *Its Discontents*.  
n unpleasant, or in  
ed impulses often  
matic expression of  
ising" the impulses  
s. Although Albee  
of our society (we  
as had to select his

11).

1), p. 104.

ry," *Twentieth Century*

December 1963).

), p. 223.

1962), p. 147.

red at the University of

breathe in front of Martha, for she foams at the mouth . . . that the old man, her father, is over two hundred years old."<sup>2</sup> Later, George describes Martha's mother as a rich witch who expired in a puff of smoke. In addition Martha herself has had the benefit of what might be called her father's magical restorative powers. Although she has been married before, "her father," she says, "put an end to that . . . real quick . . . annulled . . . which is a laugh . . . because theoretically you can't get an annulment if there's entrance. Ha! Anyway, so I was revirginized . . ." An additional suggestion of *Medea* occurs when George corrects Martha's claim to be an atheist: "Not an atheist, Martha . . . a pagan. (To HONEY and NICK) Martha is the only true pagan on the eastern seaboard." In another passage George presents her with a bouquet of flowers in the third act, she says, "Pansies! Rosemary! Violence! My wedding bouquet!" There even appears to be a reference to the golden fleece in George and Martha's description of their imaginary blond son:

MARTHA: . . . and in the sun his hair . . . became . . . fleece.

GEORGE: (*Echoing her*) . . . fleece . . .

One of Jason's trials was to sow dragon's teeth and to plough them into the earth. From these dragon's teeth, a crop of armed men rose and attacked him. Albee has George enact what may be a parody of this. In the third act, shortly before he reports the death of the son, he enters the living room holding some snapdragons before him, flourishing the flowers, and crying, "SNAP WENT THE DRAGONS!!" He then takes each snapdragon and throws it "*spear-like, stem-first*" at Martha, crying "SNAP!"

In both *Medea* (as in most extant Greek tragedy) and *Virginia Woolf*, the killing—real in the former play, fictitious in the latter—is performed offstage. In *Medea*, the murder of Creon's daughter is reported by a messenger; in *Virginia Woolf*, the murder of the imaginary son is reported, appropriately, by an imaginary messenger—a Western Union messenger ("the doorbell . . . Chimed . . . it was good old Western Union, some little boy about seventy . . . crazy Billy . . . and he had a telegram" etc.).

Finally, it is possible to see a parallel in the concluding moments of the two plays: Euripides' ends with *Medea* appearing in a chariot sent to her by her grandfather, Helios the Sun God; Albee's ends at dawn.

Although Albee's play resembles *Medea* in these aspects, an important difference exists: the classical allusions are inconsistent sexually. The Jason references are used not only in connection with George but also with Martha; the *Medea* references are used not only in connection with Martha but also with George. In Albee's play, *Medea's* ruthlessness toward her family is echoed in George's tale of the boy who killed his parents—his mother by a shotgun and his father by an automobile accident—and it is implied several times that the boy was George. In Euripides' play the man

hat the old  
ge describes  
smoke. In  
called her  
ried before,  
mulled . . .  
mulment if  
additional  
im to be an  
and NICK)  
her passage  
t, she says,  
ven appears  
description

ough them  
en rose and  
of this. In  
e enters the  
the flowers,  
snapdragon  
pl"

inia Woolf,  
performed  
orted by a  
ary son is  
stern Union  
ld Western  
ld he had a

moments of  
riot sent to  
dawn.

, an impor-  
xually. The  
ut also with  
ction with  
ness toward  
arents—his  
it—and it is  
lay the man

is unfaithful; in Albee's the woman. In Euripides' play the woman kills her offspring; in Albee's, the man "kills" the son.

Not only is there sexual fluidity in the classical allusions, but Albee reverses the traditional marital characteristics of the two major characters. Martha is older than George. He, not she, is brought into the family home of the other. She admits, "I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to." There are frequent references to George's emasculation. When Martha angrily says to him at one point, "I'll fix you," it is unlikely that the *double entendre* is accidental; and when she tells him that some men would give their right arm for the opportunity of being married to the daughter of the president of the university where they teach, he reminds her, "Alas, Martha, in reality it works out that the sacrifice is usually of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy." There are neither such simple parallels as George-Medea, Martha-Jason, nor the attractively alliterative George-Jason, Martha-Medea. As the sexual roles of George and Martha are hermaphroditic, so are the classical echoes split between the sexes.

In addition to numerous revelations in the dialogue of Martha's masculinity and George's emasculation, Albee provides us with an onstage view of the castration ceremony. At the close of the first act, as she is busily emasculating her husband for the benefit of her next conquest, Albee provides appropriate images. Martha informs the guests that her father realized that her husband did not have any leadership qualities: "Georgie-boy didn't have the *stuff*. . . he didn't have it in him!" Although George asks her to stop, Martha—"Viciously triumphant!"—replies, "The hell I will!" and continues: "he wasn't particularly . . . aggressive. In fact he was sort of a . . . (*Spits the word at GEORGE'S back*) . . . a FLOP! A great . . . big . . . fat . . . FLOP!" At this point Albee makes the operation visually as well as linguistically symbolic: "CRASH! *Immediately after FLOP! GEORGE breaks a bottle against the portable bar and stands there, still with his back to them all, holding the remains of the bottle by the neck. There is a silence, with everyone frozen.*" George speaks, "(Almost crying) I said stop, Martha." But Martha completes the castration: "I hope that was an empty bottle, George. You don't want to waste good liquor . . . not on your salary." George then "*drops the broken bottle on the floor, not moving.*" . . . and the ceremony is terminated with a chanting, almost ritualistic accompaniment:

MARTHA

. . . who's married to the Presi-  
dent's daughter, who's expected  
to be somebody, not just some  
nobody, some bookworm, some-  
body who's so damn . . . con-  
templative, he can't make

GEORGE

I said, don't. All right . . . all  
right: (*Sings*)  
Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,  
Virginia Woolf,  
Virginia Woolf,  
Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,

anything out of himself, some-      early in the morning.  
body without the *guts* to make  
anybody proud of him . . . ALL  
RIGHT, GEORGE!

This brings us to the question of Virginia Woolf. Why Virginia Woolf? Why not Thomas Wolfe? Why not simply *The Big Bad Wolf* without any literary allusions? I do not believe that Albee selected his title haphazardly or that he did so solely because of the pun. The change of sexual roles in the play *Virginia Woolf* reminds us that the author Virginia Woolf, spokesman for *The Emancipated Woman* (or "*The Mannish Woman*," as opponents labeled her — and this reminds us of Martha) and in that sense the Simone de Beauvoir of her day, is known not only for *The Common Reader* but also for *Orlando*, whose title-bearing hero becomes during the progress of the book a title-bearing heroine. At the beginning, Orlando is a male teenager during the reign of Elizabeth I: "there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it,"<sup>3</sup> the author tells us. Later, in Constantinople near the close of the seventeenth century, Orlando wakes up one morning to discover that he is a woman.

The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrified blast: —

"THE TRUTH!"

at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice but confess — he was a woman.

The sexual change that occurs in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is in harmony with the situations presented and the views demonstrated in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and, I believe, was in Albee's mind when he gave his play its title.

Now that some of *Virginia Woolf's* possible sources have been suggested,<sup>4</sup> one must ask what they tell us of the play.

In Albee's play, unlike Euripides', the explanation is everything. Medea clearly tells the Chorus what she intends to do; we know what she is doing as she does it; finally, we see the results of the deed. Euripides uses the deed to focus on other matters (the social repercussions, the characters' responses to each other as well as to the deed, Medea's proud and wholehearted embracing of the crime); Albee uses other matters to focus on the deed. Unlike *Medea*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is essentially a detective story: it hinges upon the revelation of a mystery, the explanation that the child is a fiction.<sup>5</sup> Albee does not show us *how* the lives of George and Martha had been propped up by the lie; he merely tells us *that* they had been so sustained — and since he offers no evidence (one can, in fact, argue that the marriage is "sustained" not by the fantasy but by sado-

g. masochism), we are asked to accept his word that this is the case. In this respect, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* may be compared with Harold Pinter's *The Lover*, in which an apparently sedate suburban couple also sustain their marriage by a fantasy. Each assumes a different identity (with appropriate costumes): he becomes a sensual stud, she a sexy whore (in his role as the very proper husband, he describes her as "a common or garden slut"). However, the audience knows all of this by the time the play is halfway through. Pinter explores the operation of the fantasy in the private lives of his couple and their response to the threatened destruction of their fiction. He is concerned not with giving a pat answer to a conveniently planted question, but with dramatizing the manner in which people employ fantasies in order to cope with their everyday lives and how these fantasies, upon which they are dependent, affect their relationship with each other. Albee, on the other hand, is concerned only with the pat answer: the shattering of the lie upon which George and Martha maintained their marriage is simply an answer to the question of what he will do to revenge himself on her.

A number of critics have found fault with what is intended to be one of the high points of the play (as its counterpart was one of the high points of *Medea*): the killing of the fictional child. Others, however, have put forth the view that Albee intends the child to be a metaphor for the illusions upon which we build our lives, and that he is saying that although our lives are desperate when they are built upon lies, we can find happiness by destroying those lies and facing reality.<sup>6</sup> Although this is probably the intention, Albee's play does not realize it. When Medea, outraged at the wrong done her by Jason, kills her children, we are horrified not only by the enormity of the revenge but by the fact that such an act is possible. Where there is a real child, a real murder may be committed, and such a crime is appalling. When George is humiliated to the degree to which Martha humiliates him, we can believe that he may react violently. However, the make-believe death of such a make-believe child should result, our common sense tells us, in make-believe tears unless the "parents" are hopelessly psychotic. Albee does not succeed in making us suspend our common sense. Although people do build their lives on illusions, the particular illusion upon which George and Martha build their lives is so fantastic that one questions whether even they themselves believe it. The fictitious child is too special to function as a symbol either for mankind in general or for Americans more specifically.<sup>7</sup> The structure of *Virginia Woolf* is built on too flimsy a foundation.

But while the "murder" may be a tepid Orlandization of the flesh-and-blood horrors of Euripides' play, it does not follow that Albee should be dismissed outright on this account. Although Albee may not have succeeded in shaping the classical story in contemporary terms (this appears to have been one of his attempts), he is obviously a serious playwright — and therefore deserves serious consideration. *Who's Afraid of*

Why Virginia  
Big Bad Wolf  
elected his title  
The change of  
author Virginia  
"The Mannish  
Martha) and in  
not only for *The*  
hero becomes  
the beginning,  
"there could be  
something to  
hear the close of  
to discover that

; blow one

lete naked-  
! Truth! we

is in harmony  
a *Who's Afraid*  
then he gave his

have been sug-

is everything.  
know what she  
Euripides uses  
the characters'  
a's proud and  
matters to focus  
f? is essentially  
y, the explana-  
ow the lives of  
ely tells us that  
ce (one can, in  
sy but by sado-

*Virginia Woolf?* may not be an artistically successful play, but if one were to apply to the author Martha's words to Nick in the final act—"Your potential's fine. It's dandy. (*Wiggles her eyebrows*) Absolutely dandy. I haven't seen such a dandy potential in a long time. Oh, but baby, you sure are a flop."—one should emphasize the potential no less than the flop.

### Notes

1. Reprinted in *Shaw on Theatre*, ed. E. J. West (New York, 1958), pp. 131-134.
2. All quotations from this play are from Edward Albee, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (New York, 1963). Four periods (...) indicate ellipses; three (...) indicate typographical devices in the text.
3. Quotations from this novel are from Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York: 1946).
4. *Medea* is not the only story Albee seems to have drawn on. Robert Brustein points out that there may be "elements of the story of Aphrodite, Ares, and Hephaestus, mixed with pieces from the story of Aphrodite and Adonis" ["Theater: Albee and the Medusa-Head," *The New Republic*, CXLVII (November 3, 1962), 30.] In fact, there are scattered references which evoke a number of places and periods far removed from the present day. George, who is in the History Department, tells Nick that he is "preoccupied with history," and then, struck by the phrase, repeats it oratorically. The name of the New England town in which the action takes place is New Carthage, and at one point George refers to it—"With a handsweep taking in not only the room, the house, but the whole countryside"—as Illyria, Penguin Island, and Comorrah. The house of Martha's father, wherein was held the reception which all our characters have just attended, is referred to as Parnassus. Further, George suggests that they should live on Crete, and insists that he once visited the Aegean Sea.  
There are modern references as well. For example, Albee points at least twice to Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*: at the beginning of the third act, Martha gives a title to the alcoholic and sexual activities of the evening: "THE POKER NIGHT"—which was the original title of *Streetcar*—and when George enters, preparing to announce the news of the son's death, he "(... speaks in a hideously cracked falsetto) Flores; flores para los muertos. Flores."—recalling the old Flower Woman of *Streetcar*.
5. Cf. Ionesco, who uses the term "detective story" in this sense (a mystery revealed) rather than in the sense of a whodunnit. In *Victims of Duty*, Choubert says, "Every play ever written, from ancient times up to the present day, has never been anything but a detective story. The theatre has never been anything but a theatre of realism and of detective stories. Every play is an inquiry carried to a satisfactory conclusion. There is an enigma which is revealed to us during the final scene. Sometimes before. First you seek, then you find." [Eugene Ionesco, *Théâtre* (Paris, 1954), Vol. I, p. 179.]
6. The most convincing exposition of this view has been given, I think, by Harold Clurman in his very provocative second review of *Virginia Woolf*: "Many marriages and lives, Albee may be saying, become miserable because they are based on chimeras, on an evasion of facts. Only when reality, howsoever painful, is faced, when life's wretched disappointments are steadfastly confronted, can there be any hope of sanity and strength. George, the husband, breaks through his wife's illusion by the fiercely determined declaration, 'Our son is dead: we must kill the lie.'" ["Theatre," *The Nation*, CXCVI (March 9, 1963), 213-214.]
7. Albee evidently meant to reinforce the metaphor by the parallel of Nick and Honey (to whom I have made no direct reference because they only touch upon the Medea-Jason parallel: Martha attempts adultery with Nick). The marriage of Nick and Honey is, among other things, also an example of a marriage built upon a lie; and the imaginary pregnancy echoes the imaginary child. However, their relationship seems to me to be at least as special as