"Hey What's that From?"

— Edward Albee's

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

by Alison Hopwood

Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?(1) dramatizes personal and ideological conflicts in dialogue and action of unusual virtuosity. In fact, the depiction of middle-class Americans--alienated, cynical, unhappy, struggling to find other ways of ordering their lives--is generally accepted as a definitive portrait of recognizable people in familiar situations. But there are other elements in the play not so readily grasped; these are its numerous allusions to myths and history and literature, and the fact that many of its actions are analogues of those in other plays. Once identified, these are seen to make a coherent structure of meaning that interpenetrates the realism with remarkable consistency and unambiguous effect. These references convey the ideology that lies behind both the wrangling and the reconciliation. They lead to George's domination and Martha's submissiveness in the final scene. They provide the basis for George's "I have the right" and deny Martha's "You have no right." (p. 236) They assert the father's power over the life of his children, the man's right to dominate the woman. They express the ideology of the patriarchy, which the allusions and parallels show unmistakably to be the basis of the play.

The title is the first indication of the play's direction, and of the way in which quotation or adaptation is employed. The song "Who's afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" is equivalent to whistling to keep your courage up, defying what you fear. Albee's substitution of "Virginia," an exclusively feminine name, makes the threat denied emphatically female--a woman or

women in general. A friendly critic of Albee's work, C.W.E. Bigsby, states that Albee's "central preoccupation" is "male emasculation and the subordination of the human to the material,"(2)a formulation that implicitly identifies the male with the human, the female with the destructive and the material (non-human) world. The same polarity underlies the words Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Further the title makes the novelist Virginia Woolf a representative "Big, Bad (Female) Wolf." Albee's world consists of fixed elements, mutually exclusive and hostile--good and evil, order and chaos, devouring women and ineffectual men. Virginia Woolf's world is quite the opposite. She said of men and women, "in each of us two powers preside, one male and one female."(3)David Daiches writes that her last novel, Between the Acts, "illustrates how all reality depends on change, all unity on diversity." (4) As a living woman, she was an ardent feminist, a humanist, a critic of church and state. Albee uses her name to indicate the woman of independent mind and spirit whom he finds emasculating, and also to signify the philosophical and political ideas that his play attacks.

Further light on Albee's title, and on the play itself, is shed by resemblances to another parody, including parallels of plot and characters, in the earlier well-known American play (and movie) The Male Animal.(5) It, too, concerns the problems of an apparently weak college professor, whose job is in jeopardy because he is thought to be a "Red," and whose wife is attracted to the former star of the college football team. The play also has a birthday, drinking, flowers, dancing, broken glass. The professor, Tommy Turner, expresses his fears and his defiance of football players and "Red" baiters by singing "Who's afraid of the Big, Red Team?" At the end of the play, Turner asserts his dominance over his wife, but he is still threatened with the loss of his job because he refuses to comply with the narrow anti-humanist dictates of the university's trustees. The action of Who's Afraid is significantly both the same and different. Like Turner, George proves himself truly male by showing that he is the master of his wife; unlike Turner, he has already paid the price of his intellectual independence to keep his job at the University, and there is no indication at the end of the play that he will change that capitulation.

A similar pattern of parallels in characters, setting, action, and stage business has been traced between Who's Afraid and Strindberg's The Dance of Death in an article(6)that makes clear that Albee and Strindberg share certain basic attitudes. Following the trail that Martha suggests in the first scene of "Hey, what's that from?" (p. 3) is highly rewarding. In some instances

the quotation is used with an identity of meaning with its source; in others the meaning is inverted. In either case, Albee's quotation and adaptation are invaluable indicators to the overall intent of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? The references which form the main material of this article are related in particular to the setting of the play and its organization in three acts. It is certainly significant that the town where the play is set is called New Carthage. So are the other places that George names as the countryside Nick has come to: "Illyria. . . Penguin Island. . . Gomorrah."(7) This triplet of names suggests the settings of the three acts, that is, the associations of Illyria are particularly relevant to Act One "Fun and Games," Penguin Island to Act Two "Walpurgisnacht," and Gomorrah to Act Three "The Exorcism." In addition actions associated with these places are also related to the play as a whole.

The name New Carthage, the setting of Albee's play, recalls a powerful city of the ancient world, now only ruins. In legend, Carthage was the city where Aeneas loitered with Dido, neglecting his destiny as the founding father of Rome; in ancient history, Carthage was Rome's rival, destroyed finally in the Punic Wars; in Christian history, Carthage was associated particularly with St. Augustine, who wrote of the ultimate triumph of the Christian Church, outside of which he held there was no salvation. All of these associations of Carthage have some relevance to Albee's play, but especially that with Augustine who is connected to Carthage for most modern readers by T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (if in no other way). On the line "To Carthage then I came," Eliot's note refers the reader to Augustine's Confessions: "to Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears." New Carthage, too, is a "cauldron of unholy loves," and the Christian Church triumphs when George undertakes his exorcism and recites from its liturgy. It was at Carthage, when Augustine was an influential bishop, that the rite of ordaining exorcists in the Roman Catholic Church was established.

Illyria as the setting of a play suggests Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, in which the Christmas Feast of Misrule licenses jests and tricks, chiefly at the expense of Malvolio. The "Fun and Games" of Albee's play take place on the birthday of "our son," with drinking that matches Sir Toby's "as long as there is drink in Illyria," and "squeaking out coziers' catches" in the form of "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Virginia Woolf? Virginia Woolf?" The gulling of Malvolio has its parallel in "Humiliate the Host," which Martha inaugurates in Act One and completes, with Nick's assistance, in Act Two. Like Malvolio, George vows in effect, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you." But Shakes-

peare's play does not include that revenge. The poetry and music and love that can endure in silence "Like Patience on a monument," together with the promise of making amends and future happiness at the close, make Twelfth Night a romantic comedy. In Albee's play the "ugly games," (p. 207) the verbal abuse, the violent actions and George's devastating success in turning the tables on the others make Who's Afraid an ironic comedy.(8) Reverse images of Twelfth Night continue to the end of the play. Shakespeare uses the concept of demonic possession as a matter for a joke, with the Clown's "Out, hyperbolical fiend" as a mock exorcism. Albee's use of exorcism is obviously a serious matter, and supernatural agents of good and evil are assumed to influence human acts in some way. This view of the natural and the supernatural becomes obvious in Act Two, which uses beliefs about witchcraft as an important ingredient in its language and actions. Walpurgisnacht is the name of one of the major witches' sabbaths, degenerate survivals, under later changed conditions, of pre-historic fertility rituals. To the Christian Church, which tried to stamp them out, these rites are devil worship, the obscene intercourse of the devil with women who have sold their souls to him. The early Christian Church had discouraged belief in the power of witches, but the doctrine was later reversed, and the practices of witchcraft were declared real and heretical. Scholastic churchmen insisted that witches did in fact make pacts with the devil, which enabled them to fly and to do harm to others. The doctrine that women played the chief role in witchcraft and that sex was central in its practice is enunciated in the Malleus Maleficarum, or Hexenhammer, a handbook compiled in 1489 by two German inquisitors: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable."(9) The

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German hexe, like the Greek and Latin lamia, were originally demons whose particular acts were to kill and devour children, or handsome young men, and to cause impotence, sterility and abortion; later these acts were believed to be in the power of witches, who were thought to sometimes assume animal forms for the purpose. All of the practices mentioned above are attributed to Martha or Nick or Honey, indicating that they are in league with the devil.

The identification of Martha as a witch--a woman who turns into an animal--begins in Act One: she is a "subhuman monster," (p. 19) a "hyena;" (p. 25) she "brays," (p. 7) and when she fell in love with George, "she'd howl and claw the turf," he says. (p. 81) When she calls George a pig, he responds, "Oink! oink!" (p. 16)--Martha-Circe turns men into swine. As the bacchantes loosed their hair and clothing for their rites, Martha changes into something "more comfortable." (p. 47) She is "a devil with language" (p. 21) and "the only true pagan on the eastern seaboard." (p. 73) Her sexuality is emphasized throughout Acts One and Two; she is interested in Nick's physique, and has rated all the men of the college community for their sexual potential and performance.

When Martha's voice is first heard in Act Two, George says, "Forest sounds." (p. 100) The witches meet in a forest or on a mountain top for their sabbath. For her dance Martha chooses a record --"some rhythm she understands. . . Sacre du Printemps maybe," (p. 129) says George, and, while she and Nick dance, he calls it "a very old ritual," "old as they come." (p. 131) As they dance, Martha tells Nick the story of George's novel in extemporized rhyme, which adds to the effect of the dance as ritual. Martha's exposure of George--that her father had forbidden him to publish his novel, that the novel was the story of George's own life--drives George to fury; he rips off the record, grabs Martha, and calls her, "YOU SATANIC BITCH!" (p. 137) After Martha has gone out of the room with Nick, her laughter is heard offstage; the witches' sabbath is coming to its climax. Her partner is not Old Nick himself, but his representative for the occasion, a young Nick.

The most famous literary Walpurgisnacht is in Goethe's Faust, which Albee's play parallels in its university setting and questioning of evil knowledge. In Act One George gives his credentials as a scholar: "I am a Doctor. A.B. . . . M.A. . . . PH.D. . . . ABMAPHID!" (p. 37) as Faust declares he is "Magister" and "Doktor." Faust and Mephisto, dancing with the witches, exchange rhymed quatrains; Martha speaks in verse during her Walpurgis dance. Nick's biological studies are presented as sinister and demonic. George says, "You're the one's going to make all

that trouble." (p. 37) And he accuses Nick of planning the "sterility of the imperfect," (p. 66) causing sterility being one of the evils attributed frequently to those accused of pacts with the devil. The "bing, bang, bong" of the door chimes at the end of Act Two seem to echo the striking of the clock as Marlowe's Faustus faces his last hour. George's chimes, however, do not bring the devil to claim him; they give him his inspiration of how to "get" Martha, for George does not make a pact with the possessor of the knowledge that he considers evil; he defies the devil.

Considered as realism, George's version of what the biologist intends to do is obsessively personal for a man whose study is history, and strangely preoccupied with his own fertility for a man whose marriage is sterile. Nick, he says, is working to produce a race that "will tend to look like this young man here," (p. 65) but he, George, intends to fight "one hand on my scrotum, to be sure." (p. 68) Nick tries several times to interrupt but George does not allow him to protest or to qualify his nightmare vision. Finally Nick merely says, "you don't know much about science, do you?" (p. 68) To this George replies, "I know when I'm being threatened." In fact, he sees science as wholly destructive, and its inevitable impact that: "Cultures and races will eventually vanish," and history "will be eliminated." (p. 67) He calls Nick "scientist" as an insult. (p. 92) It seems that science is for George the modern form of dealings with the devil.

Of "Illyria, Penguin Island, Gomorrah," Penguin Island seems the most limited in significance and the most ambiguous. One link perhaps is that Albee's men and women are as mindless as the creatures of Penguin Island; another link presumably is that George is an historian. Being "bogged down in the History Department," (p. 50) he is a twin to the historian buried in his file-cards described in the Preface to Penguin Island. However, Albee's tone and attitude to his material are quite the reverse of the sardonic anti-clericalism of Anatole France. George's recital from the Mass for the Dead in Act Three is the kind of "monkish imposture" France delighted to satirize. Near the beginning and again near the end of Act Two, George makes statements that define his concept of history, and, by implication, of himself. In the speech, "You take the trouble to construct a civilization. . . ." (p. 117) he speaks as if he were personally a builder of civilization, a maker of "morality out of the unnatural disorder of man's mind," the architect of "government and art." He seems to congratulate himself on achievements which he has not accomplished, and to be aggrieved at a lack of appreciation he has no reason to expect. Like Malvolio, he is sick of self-love; like Faust, he has a taste for more than human power. The Speng-

lerian passage he reads near the end of the Act places him in a similar light. He has just been exposed by Martha as a would-be novelist (the relation between his life and his novel is confused, but George does not deny what Martha says); he was intimidated by his father-in-law, the college president, into conforming to the pattern expected in New Carthage. In his own eyes he exemplifies the state of society as he sees it:

> And the west [George], encumbered by crippling alliances [his job and his wife] and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events [he didn't defy Martha and her father], must . . . eventually . . . fall. (p. 174)

The stage directions that follow this speech make clear the importance of the passage, that George takes it personally, and that it is the turning point in the play--

> he gathers all the fury he has been containing within himself . . . he shakes . . . he looks at the book in his hand and, with a cry that is part growl, part howl, he hurls it at the chimes.

The force and meaning of the play depend to a great extent on the implications of this scene; it points forward to Act Three, and makes clear Albee's intention that George's actions should be taken not only as a solution of his own problems, but a paradigm of a solution to social problems.

George says that he tells the story of their son's death, which produces the denouement of the play, because Martha mentioned the child. In fact, the point at which he is roused to deepest anger, grabbing her by the throat, and vowing "I'LL KILL YOU," (p. 137) is when Martha tells what is apparently the truth about his novel. It is also significant that he invents the story of the son's death shortly after reading about the decline of the west, which goads him into throwing the book at the chimes. His expressed motives for "getting" Martha are to be revenged for her disclosures and to put an end to her "distortions." (p. 155) But underlying these is his determination to take a hand in history; neither "the west" nor he himself "must fall." Both opposition to his values and Martha's domination must be exorcized or destroyed. The exorcism starts with the throwing of the snap-dragons at Martha "spear-like, stemfirst" (p. 203)--beating people possessed by evil spirits, or throwing things at them, was a recognized part of primitive exorcisms. George's recital of the Mass for the Dead in the following scene, which appears to be for the son, is more fundamentally for Martha. What is truly dead at the end of the play is Martha's ability to insist on her version of events. The independent will of a Big, Bad Female Wolf, opposition to male authority, has been exorcized.

George carries out the execution of

the "child" and of Martha as "mother" with cruel ingenuity and apparent enjoyment. "A tiny chuckle" (p. 231) accompanies the words "on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket." "Barely able to stop exploding with laughter" is the stage direction when he says that he ate the telegram. (p. 234) He relishes his triumph; he has been preparing to demolish Martha all evening. By telling her earlier not to start in about the story of the child, he seems to be daring her to do it; by telling Nick the story of the "bergin" and the boy who killed his parents, he makes it almost certain that Martha's loquacious tongue will reveal the relation of this story to his own life. He clearly announces the final scene as a fight "to the death," (p. 209) and there is no doubt that he is the victor.

George introduces his scheme for "getting" Martha by coming on stage with a large bunch of flowers, saying, "Flores; flores para los muertos." (p. 195) The same words, the cry of the Mexican flower-seller, occur in A Streetcar Named Desire,(10) beginning the scene of Blanche's despair and degradation. The parallels between the two plays are considerable. Streetcar is a slanging match between Blanche and her brother-in-law Stanley, in which Blanche is finally defeated, as Who's Afraid is between Martha and George with Martha defeated. The basic struggle, the same in both plays, is stated by Stanley: "What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? . . . I am the king around here." (Sc. 8) Both plays deal with truth and illusion; Blanche sings, "It wouldn't be makebelieve if you believed in me." (Sc. 7) She says, "I don't want realism. I want magic . . . . I tell what ought to be the truth." (Sc. 9) Both plays end with the stripping away of the illusions of the women but the implications are quite different. Streetcar makes plain that what is arrived at is not truth but defeat for Blanche's illusions and triumph for Stanley's. "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley," (Sc. 11) says Stella, accepting Stanley's version, which the audience knows is false. At the end of Who's Afraid, when Martha says that he doesn't know the difference between truth and illusion, George answers, "No; but we must carry on as though we did." (p. 202) But in spite of this, George's position is given a sanction that is not given to Stanley's position in Streetcar. George's actions are done with "light from heaven." (p. 199) In the role of priest he directs the final scene unchallenged. He says, of killing the child, "I have the right, Martha," (p. 236) a right that is endorsed by Honey's "Amen" to his "requiescat in pace," (p. 237) by Nick's "I think I understand this," (p. 236) and by Martha's final capitulation. By these means, the play validates his actions

and his beliefs, and his victory over the other three.

The investigation of a number of references has led to general statements about the whole play. "Gomorrah" remains to be considered. It is one of the most important of the clues that Albee provides, emphasizing and deepening the meaning that the previous examination has revealed. The account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, where sin was "very grievous," occurs in the chapters of Genesis that tell the story of Abraham, who was prepared to carry out his God's instructions to "slay his son," until God said, "now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." (Gen. XXII, 12) Clearly in a place called Gomorrah, the man prepared to kill his only son is the patriarch favored by God, with whom he has a covenant. George's pact is not like Faust's with the devil, nor is it with the God of love and mercy, but with the God of fear and destruction. Other sacrifices of the son by the father are probably implied in "killing" the son. George declares, "I'm not a God, I don't have the power over life and death, do I?" (p. 233) But he goes on to say, "I can kill him, Martha, if I want to" and a little later "AND I HAVE KILLED HIM!" (p.235) The implication is inescapable: George is a god; in fact he is a particular god. Earlier Martha says, "I am the Earth Mother," (p. 189) that is the great goddess of pre-historic Europe. George answers by killing the child, saying in effect," I am God the Father," the male god of patriarchy, Cronus who swallowed his children, Jehovah whose commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," was aimed in particular at the fertility cults of the mother goddess.

An interesting article(11)that explores the myth and folklore underlying Albee's realism interprets the action of the play as following the pattern of a pre-historic year-end rite, in which the priest-king appoints a young substitute who exercises the king's prerogatives for a day and then is sacrificed in place of the real king;(12)whereupon the king resumes his reign. Thus Nick is permitted "to possess Martha during an intercalary moment," after which George regains "his supremacy, his rightful kingship."(13) This reading accounts satisfactorily for the relation of the three characters, for the orgiastic nature of the night and for the value given George's actions. So far, indeed, as it concerns the events, it confirms my contention that the central action of the play is George's triumphant assertion of "kingship." Rictor Norton, the author of the article, goes on to say that "George and Martha will no longer live a life of manifold illusions; they will live a life of eternal reality,"(14)but nei-

ther the interpretation of the play nor the generalization about reality in this statement is, in my opinion valid. George does not acknowledge that he has been illusioned; rather he continues to declare what must be agreed to. From his science fiction version of biology to his story of eating the telegram, he imposes his version of events on others. Not truth, but his "supremacy," his "kingship," is his concern. But kingship is not, as Mr. Norton suggests, based on "eternal verity;" it is an historical institution which, after a long life, is virtually extinct in the political world, and is now fighting a last-ditch stand in its attenuated domestic form. Even as a metaphor, it refers to a particular relation of overlord and subject that belongs to the past.

George's success is complete, but it is engineered in part by giving him somewhat inadequate opponents. Nick is not allowed to make serious statements that would give a scientist's knowledge or point of view. When he begins to tell Martha and George about his work on chromosomes, they cut him off. When he describes how he will take over the college as an "historical inevitability," he is "playing the game" (p. 112) that George initiated. George insinuates that Nick is a revolutionary, but Nick is puzzled by George's speech about "ice for the lamps of China, Manchuria thrown in" and so on. (p. 166) He appears simply as an opportunist without expressed convictions either political or scientific, a poor match for George whose complex beliefs are expressed at length throughout the play. Further, in polarizing Nick and George, Albee places history, cultural variety, righteousness on one side, and science, regimentation, evil on the other. An alignment so tendentious requires justification that Albee does not provide.

Martha is a more adequate opponent for George, as she is allowed full expression of her point of view, and she is a totally uninhibited fighter. Her basic position, however, does not give the kind of opposition that would be offered by a woman struggling for her autonomy. Martha's plan for life was to "marry into the college." (p. 79) Her complaint against George is not that he is domineering but the reverse: "George didn't have much. . . push . . . he wasn't particularly . . . aggressive. In fact he was sort of a . . . (Spits the words at George's back) . . . a FLOP!" (p. 84) Martha has some of the characteristics of the American "Mom"(15)who does not want independence but the right to dominate a man who, for his part, is expected to acquire money and status. As well as a "Mom," a witch, and an Earth Mother, Martha is a realistic woman who is unhappy and disappointed in her marriage and her life. Similarly, George is a realistic man as well as a symbolic figure; he is bitterly aware

of his failure in his university career, sad at his lack of children, and driven to violence by his wife's seemingly callous behaviour and the crassness of university colleagues like Nick and of the New Carthage community. Nick and Honey, too, are, on one level life-like.people; the self-confident young career man and his empty-headed wife. The realistic attributes reinforce the symbolic aspects of the characters; the chameleon qualities of all four are integral to the play, which is "an allegory, really" and at the same time "straight, cozy prose." (p. 142)

By the end of the play the references have come together into a coherent whole, and all the evils in Albee's canon from the Earth Mother to the "wave-of-the-future-boys" (p. 107) have been loaded onto the scapegoat, whom he calls "Virginia Woolf," which must be driven out to achieve the unity he seeks.(16) Albee has stated that Martha's admission that she is afraid of "Virginia Woolf" means that she is "afraid of life without false illusions."(17) This interpretation corroborates mine when it is understood that the "false illusions" are those represented in the play by Nick and Martha. The "true" values of the play are those represented by George. The dramatization of the conflict, and the dense web of literary and historical allusions in which the thought is expressed, all serve the patriarchal authoritarianism that George asserts, and whose triumph is presented by the play as a solution to both personal and social problems.

NOTES

1. New York, 1962. Paperback edition, 1963, has the same pagination. Quotations from the play are followed by page numbers in parentheses.

2. Albee (Writers and Critics Series, Edinburgh, 1969), p. 109.

3. A Room of One's Own (Penguin, 1945), p. 97.

4. Virginia Woolf (Revised Ed., London, 1963), p. 122.

5. James Thurber and Elliott Nugent (New York, 1939).

6. Marion A. Taylor, "Edward Albee and August Strindberg: Some Parallels between 'The Dance of Death' and 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'" Papers on English Language and Literature, I, i (1965), pp. 59-71. See also Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions, 1959-1965 (London, 1966) for a discussion of the influence on Albee's plays of Strindberg, O'Neill, Genet, Williams, and Ionesco.

7. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? p. 40. The suspension points after "Illyria" and "Island" are as in the text of Who's Afraid. Albee makes frequent use of this form of punctuation and in all quotations I have made from the play the suspension points are as in the text.

8. "Ironic comedy brings us to the figure of the scapegoat ritual and the nightmare dream, the human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates." Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 45.

9. Quoted in Gordon Rattray Taylor, Sex in History (London, 1953), p. 110. Sources for material on witchcraft in general are: Robert Briffault, The Mothers (London and New York, 1952). Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed., Vol. XVII, "Malleus Maleficarum," and Vol. XXVIII, "Witchcraft." Pennethorne Hughes, Witchcraft (London, 1952).

10. Tennessee Williams (New York, 1947).

11. Rictor Norton, "Folklore and Myth in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Renascence, XXXIII, No. 3 (Spring, 1971), pp. 159-67.

12. For a concise account of the appointment of young king-substitutes and of the historical context of the practice, see Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (London, rev. ed., 1960), Vol. I, pp. 13-19.

13. Norton, p. 166.

14. Norton, p. 167.

15. For a virulent picture of the American "Mom," which corresponds to Albee's picture of Martha on many points, see Philip Wylie, Generation of Vipers (Annotated ed., New York, 1955), Chapter XI, pp. 194-217.

16. "Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy." Frye, p. 165.

17. William Flanagan, "Edward Albee: An Interview." The Paris Review, XXXIX (1966), p. 103.