



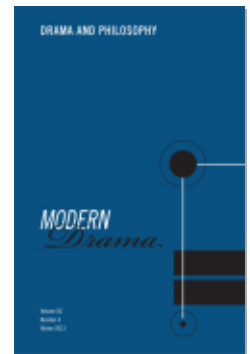
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Fun and Games with George and Nick: Competitive Masculinity in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*¹

CLARE VIRGINIA EBY

I do wish I weren't surrounded by women; I'd like some men around here.

—Daddy in Edward Albee, *The American Dream*

The other play is about a two-in-the-morning drunken party of two faculty members and their wives.

—Edward Albee

Poor emasculated Daddy in Edward Albee's *The American Dream* (1961), surrounded by women, pining for some red-blooded masculine company. He makes a fitting precursor for poor beleaguered George who follows one year later, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Notwithstanding Albee's description in the interview cited above (see Ross), proffered while the play remained a work in progress, critics or teachers rarely examine *Who's Afraid* for its delineation of the relationship between two heterosexual men. Most define the focal point as George and Martha (the Strindbergian marriage and battle of the sexes), while some focus on Martha (as illustrating Albee's misogyny or his sympathy for strong women, depending on the observer's viewpoint), and several on George (often as a heroic figure, whether for stripping away illusions or for affirming humanistic values). Even the intermittent descriptions of *Who's Afraid* as a closeted gay play – which have shifted from early *ad hominem* attacks on Albee to increasingly sophisticated analyses of the play – centre on George and Martha.²

Rather than continue the well-established discussion of these issues, I propose to focus on the relationship between George and Nick, who represent two competing but interdependent models of heterosexual masculinity. This focus can provide a useful way of historicizing for students changes in concepts of gender identity. When *Who's Afraid* debuted in 1962, American masculinity was heading into one of its recurrent crises of definition. As the male ideal had shifted, during the nineteenth century, from conquering space (the frontier) to conquering one another (by competing successfully in the marketplace), the twentieth century generated a new set

of challenges for heterosexual men, which intensified after World War II. The bureaucratization of America and the growth in service-sector jobs minimized opportunities to display the aggressive and entrepreneurial acts by which an earlier generation had defined masculinity and perpetuated a sort of collective identity crisis for American men. As the field for publicly displaying masculinity shrank, the need to demonstrate it increased, and so the post-war period also witnessed an intensified dissemination of the ideal of the nuclear family, with a subservient and domesticated wife in relation to whom the American man could know his masculinity. But the second twentieth-century wave of American feminism, which crested in the early 1960s, seriously challenged this ideal, and with it, how American men understood themselves. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (debuting in the year before Betty Friedan would crystallize those challenges with her best-selling *The Feminine Mystique*) registers the crisis in post-war masculinity.³

I will argue that *Who's Afraid* stages, in addition to its famous battle between the sexes, an equally urgent battle within masculinity. Not only does the verbal combat between George and Nick illustrate Albee's understanding of gender as discursively constructed, but the legendary marriage delineated in *Who's Afraid* depends both structurally and psychologically upon the competition between the two men. Specifically, I will argue that *Who's Afraid* presents post-war heterosexual masculinity as fundamentally competitive, as gender identity demands proof as well as performance. The play suggests that, if competitive masculinity produces a victor, it also demands a loser. As it takes one man to prove another's masculinity, an attentive and ultimately vanquished male audience is necessary to complete the performance. Moreover, *Who's Afraid* shows heterosexual masculinity as constituted through a particular form of triangulation: George and Nick compete to see which is the better man and fitter mate for Martha.

One of the primary disseminators of the idea of triangulation, anthropologist Gayle Rubin builds upon the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud. Rubin's influential analysis centres on the fact that, in marriage, a man gives a woman to another man. Rubin explains, "If it is the women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (174). At key points, *Who's Afraid* gestures toward this traditional model of triangulation; for instance, when George tells Nick, "[T]he way to a man's heart is through his wife's belly" (126). The relationship between Daddy, George, and Martha likewise manifests elements of Daddy and George's triangulated exchange of Martha.⁴ But the more consequential form of triangulation in *Who's Afraid* differs from the model outlined by Rubin, in that George makes Nick the "conduit" through which he speaks, and ultimately speaks back to Martha. In doing so, George will turn Nick into a metaphoric "woman," reassert his beleaguered masculinity, and as a direct consequence, regain Martha. Her importance

lies not only in her functioning, as in traditional versions of triangulation, as the prize for the victor but also in her being the one implicitly addressed by George through his explicit assault on Nick.⁵

The focus here, then, will be on the play's neglected homosocial current. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it, "homosocial" refers to the primacy of relationships between men, including "friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality" (1). Albee structures the George-Nick relationship as rivalry based on age, professional affiliation, and relationship to Martha. While the concept of homosociality may be relevant to the debate over the possible gay subtext of *Who's Afraid*, that is not my concern here. Indeed, *Who's Afraid* demonstrates that homosocial competition is essential to shoring up heterosexual marriage.

This approach can help prod students beyond the comfortable binaries of George "versus" Martha, men "versus" women, or the equally limiting question of whether Albee is "for" or "against" strong women. Focusing on the competition between George and Nick infuses the classroom with the destabilizing notion that manhood is not an essence but something that must be enacted. When deprived of the familiar fall-back positions that predetermine interpretation, students can read the play more closely. Analysis of the intense verbal exchanges can then open up the equally intense relationships among the characters, leading students to understand why these relationships shift throughout the play.

Few would dispute that Nick's attempt to "hump the hostess" in Act Two, while an indifferent George reads in the living room and an oblivious Honey vomits in "the euphemism" (30), marks a turning point in the play. What deserves greater emphasis is that George had suggested this particular form of fun and games early in Act One. "Musical beds," he taunts Nick, is a popular "faculty sport" in New Carthage (36). As George's always-careful wording here emphasizes, players of the "sport" belong to the faculty. What George does not say, indeed does not need to say because it is common knowledge, is that faculty members at New Carthage are men. Women can only, as Martha will later observe, "marry into the college" (86), not themselves become part of it. Faculty wives are necessary for the faculty sport in the same way that calfskin and helmets are essential for another masculine competition popular on college campuses, but we would never confuse accoutrements with players. Wives are the accoutrements; they do not play the game. We might ask students why would George tease Nick into sporting with Martha, especially given her penchant for handsome younger men? Or, to put the question differently, since Nick realizes early on that George is playing a game with him (35), what are its rules? And how does the game relate to the one that structures George and Martha's relationship? All that is clear at the beginning of Act One is that George wants the young man

to play a game with him, which accounts for why, despite his initial resistance to having guests, George quickly decides that he wants them to stay.

In *Get the Guests*, Walter A. Davis emphasizes the importance of aggression in *Who's Afraid*. As he sees it, "working together, [George and Martha] use their relationship to...activat[e] a complex subtext focused on male authority" (220). The exchanges between George and Nick that Davis ironically labels "male bonding" (221) are ultimately instigated, in his reading, by Martha. She is the one who "goad[s] the two men into phallic competition" (221). After Martha castrates George by publicly humiliating him, "the next step is to phallicize the other man in George's presence while belittling George's 'organ.'" If Martha is the engine, she is also the director, "positioning both men for a drama she will control" (224).

Davis's psychoanalytic approach offers considerable insight into one of the most notable aspects of *Who's Afraid*. Students are as quick as critics to note that Martha plays the role of ball buster and castrating bitch, especially in Act One (see, e.g., Kundert-Gibbs). But while Martha parades her heterosexuality, Albee's characterization of her demonstrates that he conceives of gender as less about biology than about assuming certain qualities. George himself admits as much, describing Martha as her father's "right ball" (50). Martha demonstrates many masculine qualities, and her masculinity feeds off of George's emasculation. As she will later explain, "I wear the pants in the house because somebody's got to" (173). She humiliates George by telling Nick about the time she donned boxing gloves and knocked her husband out cold (61). At the end of Act One, Martha completes his degradation by publicly declaring that "maybe Georgie boy didn't have the *stuff*. . . didn't have much . . . push. . . In fact he was a sort of a . . . a FLOP!" (92-93; emphasis in original).

Martha's infantilizing and sexually deflating description of George, as well as her assuming masculine qualities, draws attention to Albee's presentation of gender as performative. Four decades after the appearance of the play, this idea has become familiar, particularly through the work of Judith Butler, who defines gender not as "an *attribute*" but "an 'act' . . . which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning." Thus, "the various acts of gender creates (*sic*) the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (*Gender Trouble* 10, 139; "Performative" 522). The idea of gender as performance meshes well with established trends in Albee criticism, particularly that *Who's Afraid* stages a sort of meta-performance. Nick and Honey function as the necessary audience in front of whom Martha and George perform not only their gender but also their marriage, a relationship in which the theatre audience often becomes uncomfortably implicated as well. As John M. Clum puts it, "[T]he emphasis in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is on performance as superior to real experience" (188).⁶ Albee treats "real" or biological maleness and femaleness as incidental to the

performance of gender, a performance that often takes place discursively. Albee's understanding of gender as enacted through language finds perfect form in a play that features such spectacular verbal battles.

Building upon the masculinity of Martha in Act One, the scene with the fake gun exemplifies George's gender as also a social performance. In retaliation for Martha's telling the humiliating story of vanquishing him with her boxing gloves, George sneaks up on her with a shotgun, aims, and fires. "POW!!!" he yells, and the stage directions instruct that "*a large red-and-yellow Chinese parasol*" pops from the fake gun (62). As Matthew Roudané puts it, the fake gun functions as a "negative phallic symbol" (66). By drawing attention to the fact that he is male but not a fitting subject for heterosexual desire, George appears to accept his emasculated role – indeed, to flaunt it. Martha understands George's fake gun play as he intends her to: as paying tribute to Nick for having the real article. She makes explicit the triangular linking of George and Nick when she turns to the young man and speculates, "You don't need any props, do you, baby? . . . No fake Jap gun for you" (66). But the only way to demonstrate a gun is real is by firing it. Notwithstanding George's pointing the fake gun at Martha, he really aims at Nick, further goading the guest to play Hump the Hostess.

Gender vacillates even within a single scene in *Who's Afraid*. Both George's stylized "pow" and the flourishing of the parasol deflate not so much the history professor's masculinity as the phallic impulse to which they seem to defer. George's success with the play gun sets the stage for him to establish the primacy of imagination over biology that will prove so important to his game. In fact, because George's performance with the gun is clever enough to arouse tributes from his audience, it also works to re-masculinize him. George may only have a toy weapon, but his performance terrifies Honey ("I've *never* been so frightened), impresses Nick ("This is quite a gadget"), and arouses Martha ("Yeah . . . that was pretty good. [*Softer*] C'mon . . . give me a kiss") (63; emphasis in original). Notably, George, who has put his hand on Martha's breast, brushes her aside at this point; the confirmation of masculinity he seeks will come not from heterosexual desirability but from homosocial approbation. Annoyed at being thus cast aside, Martha calls George a "prick" – one of the few times she reaches into her extensive vocabulary of profanities and comes out with a word for the male genitals (64). Though this is intended as an insult, Martha's word choice begrudgingly confirms George's masculinity.

Albee thus illustrates the now-common belief that gender is not interior, fixed, or private, but rather, in Butler's formulation, a "public action" (*Gender Trouble* 140) occurring within particular social situations in front of observers. *Who's Afraid* demonstrates repeatedly that gender not only has to be acted but also must have an audience. No matter how hurtful Martha's insults might be were she and George alone, to issue them in front of an audience, and especially in front of a virile, up-and-coming young scientist

like Nick, makes them devastating. Likewise, George's fake gun play would be meaningless without Martha to interpret and Nick to approve it.

Thus while George appears emasculated in Act One, he is never completely so. Rather than being emasculated (either by Martha's insults or by invidious comparison with Nick), George instead performs his emasculation. That is, he play-acts in both senses of the compound word: plays his game with Nick and acts for an audience of three – of whom one is, to borrow George Orwell's phrase, more equal than the others. Indeed, it is because George understands his need for both competitor and audience that he abruptly shifts from resenting to embracing the late-night guests.

Several of George's remarks in Act One discursively establish his masculinity. When Martha castigates him, in what we can assume is a routine complaint, for not taking proper advantage of having married the college president's daughter, noting that "[s]ome men would give their right arm for the chance," George replies that "the sacrifice is usually of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy" (29; emphasis in original). Since George has decidedly not been a careerist, the implication is that his genitals remain intact and functional. George also speaks obliquely to his virility in response to Martha's insinuation that he may not be the father of their son, declaring, "There are very few things in this world that I *am* sure of . . . but the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership . . . in the . . . creation of our . . . son" (79; emphasis in original). Strictly speaking, no man can ever be certain of his biological paternity, however committed he may be to assuming the responsibilities of fatherhood. George's insistence on his paternity of Sonny Boy, especially given the running commentary about Martha's infidelities, is surprising, though, at this point in the play, unintelligible.

Albee again anticipates contemporary thinking about gender as a matter not of individual identity but of one's relation to others (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10). As Martha cannot completely erode George's masculinity, only Nick can fully reassert it. In an important interlude early in Act One when the men appear alone onstage, George turns Martha's earlier description of his identity as "a blank, a cipher," and her warning that she would divorce him, "if [he] existed" (18), into a question that only Nick can answer. "Don't I sort of fade into backgrounds . . . get lost in the cigarette smoke?" (37), George asks Nick. Although the younger man cannot know how the question echoes Martha's indictment and responds with a commonplace reassurance, the exchange signals George's turn to Nick for discursive confirmation of his masculinity. George then starts speaking in a masculine code so obvious that even his unsophisticated guest can understand: "I've always been lean . . . I've got this little distension just below the belt . . . but it's hard . . . It's not soft flesh" (37). He looks to Nick, not Martha, to confirm his virility.

Although Act One establishes Martha's sexual attraction to Nick, the scientist and former jock's hyper-masculinity matters far more to George. The young man's field, biology, fits perfectly into the host's game.

He parodies Nick's research as both playing with masculinity (re-engineering "the genetic makeup of a sperm cell" [71]) and playing at being a woman (giving birth to "a race of men . . . test tube-bred . . . incubator-born . . . superb and sublime" [71]). George's mocking fantasy of humans created without women is of more than passing interest, especially given his insistence on his paternity of Sonny Boy. George quickly points out the limitations of this imagined new race of beings: "Everyone will tend to be rather the same," he declares, and this homogeneity will erode the arts – "I suspect we will not have much music, much painting" (72). Moreover, George imagines significant civic and political losses in that "[t]here will be a certain . . . loss of liberty" (73).

George's undermining of biological research in favour of humanistic values illustrates what sociologists describe as the operation of "hegemonic masculinity." Replacing the concept of a unitary male "role" that all men are expected to follow, the theory of hegemonic masculinity explicates how various models of masculinity compete, with one victorious model finally subordinating the others (see Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 86). In George's discursive reconstruction of Nick's work, to be masculine in the manner of the young man appears sub-human. Moreover, he reveals Nick's one-dimensional hyper-masculinity to be, paradoxically, emasculated. Much as George's fantasy of Nick's "supercivilization" entails the decline of civilization (73), he predicts "a certain number of sperm tubes will have to be cut" (72) to perfect the race. He elaborates, "millions of tiny little slicing operations that will leave just the smallest scar, on the underside of the scrotum" (72). The painful image of a series of "nicks" to the scrotum suggests a continuous and incremental emasculation.⁷ Through his parody of Nick's research, George simultaneously exaggerates and deflates his guest's masculinity. To use a phallic pun that George might appreciate, he discursively manipulates the ups and downs of Nick's manhood.

George's attack on Nick's scientific research has fuelled discussion of the play as embodying the debate between the "two cultures," one of the few respects in which the competition between the men has been systematically addressed. It is a debate that George is generally seen as winning.⁸ The desire to assign victory to the historian is understandable, but it should not be overlooked how little Nick has done to provoke this attack from a man who barely knows him, especially given how early it occurs in the play. The biologist has proven himself banal and arrogant, but also courteous and amicable. Certainly, he has done nothing to warrant George's full-scale assault.

As if to rationalize his attack on Nick's research, George declares, "I know when I'm being threatened" (75). Later, he more emphatically calls Nick a "direct and pertinent threat" (124). Clum raises an important question that can help students focus on the gender issues central to the play: "What threat does Nick really pose?" (186). While the juxtaposition of humanities professor and scientist enriches the cultural commentary of *Who's Afraid*, the deeper reason for George's assault is to engage Nick in masculine

combat, and at this level, while the historian may seem victorious, the victory is hardly admirable. As students can confirm when asked about their preconceptions of professors, academics have never been considered exemplars of masculinity in American culture, and the masculinity of a humanist will likely seem yet more dubious than that of a scientist. Joe Dubbert explains the American perception of unmanly academics as resulting from the association of masculinity with action: "Since manliness was the province of the action-oriented individual, it followed that intellectual or aesthetic pursuits were not part of being manly" (30). Consequently, professors, particularly humanities professors, do not conform to what Dubbert calls the "American masculine mystique" (48).⁹ George thus has a great deal to prove, as becomes evident when he tells Nick during his chromosomal tirade, "I will fight you, young man . . . one hand on my scrotum" (74). This overblown response to a perceived threat illustrates Michael Kimmel's point that a person of "stigmatized gender" will often assume "exaggerated forms of gender specific behaviour. Thus, those whose masculine identity is least secure are precisely those most likely to enact hypermasculine behavioural codes" ("After" 106). However valiant George's putdown of Nick may appear to those who bewail the valorization of the sciences over the humanities, the attack is also rude, childish, and in a real sense, lacking a legitimate motive. Or, rather, the motive runs deeper than can be accessed by talking about the two cultures. George's assault on biology reveals that, fundamentally, masculinity is his real concern. His tirade exemplifies a comment of Norman Mailer (presumably an expert on the subject): "Masculinity is not something given to you, something you're born with, but something you gain. . . . And you gain it by winning small battles with honor" (from *Cannibals and Christians*; qtd. in Gilmore vii.). George's challenge to Nick's masculinity is a transparent attempt to establish his own discursively.

In fact, George has been gunning for Nick from the time he stepped into the house. The host first attacks the guest for the latter's small talk about a painting (22) and quickly follows with a second attack over Nick's trite, if innocuous, comments about teaching as a career (33). Although, in both instances, George's verbal play establishes his as the superior wit, Nick proves himself less stupid and shallow than George assumes. Although he doesn't understand what motivates his host, Nick correctly identifies the discursive basis of the game: "Do you want me to say it's funny so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say, no, it's funny?" (34-35).

As anthropologist David D. Gilmore remarks, "[R]eal manhood is different from simple anatomical maleness," and problematic in a way that womanhood is not: "An authentic femininity rarely involves tests or proofs of action . . . win-or-lose contests dramatically played out on the public stage" (11, 12).¹⁰ To emphasize the growing importance of the masculine competition, Act Two begins with a lengthy exchange in which George and Nick

appear alone onstage (briefly punctuated by an appearance from Martha). Act Two proceeds from George's sense of threatened masculinity, as he prepares to reassert it by drawing Nick into direct competition so as to vanquish him.

At the beginning of the act, George talks as if everything reflects his precarious masculinity. Even when conversation turns to Honey's hysterical pregnancy, George manages the not-insignificant feat of making it speak to his emasculation:

NICK I told you . . . she's [MARTHA'S] making coffee.

GEORGE For your hysterical wife, who goes up and down.

NICK Went. Up and down.

GEORGE Went. No more?

NICK No more. Nothing.

GEORGE (*After a sympathetic pause*) The saddest thing about men . . . Well, no, one of the saddest things about men is the way they age . . . some of them. (107–08)

George's peculiar description of Honey's hysterical pregnancy – “up and down” – allows him to shift the conversation from pregnancy to his more phallic agenda. His suggestion that “some” men's erections are casualties of aging seems a lament for lost virility. It also marks a further step toward setting up the younger man to play his game.

Early in Act Two, Nick articulates an issue that arises for all viewers and readers of *Who's Afraid* and one worth raising in the classroom: “I just don't see why you feel you have to subject *other* people” to a display of marital problems (102; emphasis in original). Part of the answer is that George and Martha must perform their marriage before an audience, and in this respect, any audience will do. But George specifically needs a hyper-masculine audience both to confirm his masculinity and because he can no longer fight Martha directly. As he says, “I've got to figure out some new way to fight . . . Martha. Guerrilla tactics, maybe . . . internal subversion . . . Something” (139). That “something,” George's “guerrilla tactics,” will be to fight Martha through Nick. It is here that the play's triangulated masculinity assumes critical importance. The homosocial rivalry is not an end in itself, for George will use it ultimately to shore up his patriarchal authority within his marriage.

George's guerrilla tactics enmesh Nick in discursive competition centring on the triangulation of the two of them with Martha. Early in the act, in a relatively unguarded moment, George suggests why he engages so deeply with a man he purportedly finds beneath his contempt: “DISGUSTING!” George spits out; “Do you think I like having that . . . whatever-it-is . . . ridiculing me, tearing me down, in front of . . . [. . .] YOU?” (101). As George reduces Martha to an unnameable “whatever-it-is” absence, he identifies Nick as the capitalized “YOU” – the larger-than-life audience and the conduit through which he will speak to Martha.

Act Two also marks George's assigning his memorable names to the evening's fun and games. He assigns a significant order to the games: first, Humiliate the Host, then Hump the Hostess, and only then, Get the Guests (154–56), the tripartite sequence underscoring the play's broader interest in triangulation. While Hump the Hostess would seem to extend Humiliate the Host, it functions more significantly as a step toward Get[ting] the Guests. Taking up his host's earlier invitation to try New Carthage's faculty sport, Nick now proclaims his intent to "plow a few pertinent wives" (126). The men discuss how Martha, as daughter of the college president, is undeniably the most pertinent wife on campus, and Nick declares, "I'd just better get her off in a corner and mount her like a goddamn dog" (127). Nick's attempts at sexual banter demonstrate his immersion in George's game. But the crudeness of Nick's remarks indicates his lack of verbal facility, which does not bode well for his ability to maintain his masculinity discursively. Nick's incredulity when his host agrees that the young man should mount Martha is understandable, especially since Nick cannot know how Humping the Hostess will prove integral to Getting the Guest. In fact, when he steps up to play the star role in Hump the Hostess, his words reveal more than he can realize: "I'll play the charades like you've got 'em set up. . . . I'll be what you say I am" (167). By agreeing to play by George's rules, Nick will, in fact, allow the host to determine his identity. Indeed, although he does not understand the implication of his words, Nick's "I'll be what you say I am" accedes to the construction of masculinity through language and social acts. As Hump the Hostess unfolds, George will become director rather than actor: whereas he had earlier looked to Nick to confirm his identity, now the tables will turn.

It follows from Martha's seeming masculine and George unmanly in Act One that Nick can begin to occupy the symbolic place of "woman" in Act Two. The first step in his feminization occurs under George's tutelage. As George had corrected Martha's use of words in the first act, so he now corrects Nick. When Nick refers to a "gangle of geese," George comments, "Well, if you're going to get all cute about it, all ornithological, it's gaggle. . . . not gangle, *gaggle*" (126; emphasis in original). Nick's gaffe and George's superior vocabulary raise questions about the biologist's mastery of fundamental aspects of his discipline. Shortly thereafter, as George becomes especially patronizing, he provokes Nick to assume Martha's earlier role as speaker of frustrated profanity:

GEORGE (*After a silence*) I've tried to . . . tried to reach you . . . to . . .

NICK (*Contemptuously*) . . . make contact?

GEORGE Yes.

NICK (*Still*) . . . communicate?

GEORGE Yes. Exactly.

NICK Aw . . . that is touching . . . that is . . . downright moving . . . that's what it is. (*With sudden vehemence*) UP YOURS! (130; emphasis in original)

Nick's outburst – capital letters and all – echoes the “FUCK YOU!” that George had provoked Martha to scream out, just as the guests were arriving in the beginning of the play (20). Nick's “UP YOURS” announces his intent to fuck George, and he will do so by fucking George's wife – a perfect illustration of triangulated masculinity. As Sedgwick puts it, “‘To cuckold’ is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man” (49). Nick's determination to hump the hostess has more to do with competitive feelings with George than with sexual interest in Martha.¹¹ And since Hump the Hostess is George's game, Nick the Guest will assume the subordinate position – in other words, Nick will get fucked.

Parallels in the plot between the first and second act also shift Nick toward the position previously occupied by Martha. In Act One, Martha and George shared secrets, some of which she revealed to Nick and Honey. In Act Two, Nick (unaccountably, it seems to me) confides in George that he married Honey because of her hysterical pregnancy and wealthy father. Given the men's rivalry, Nick's confession seems a strange moment of male bonding, although perhaps motivated by an illusory sense of camaraderie he feels because both men have married controlling women with powerful fathers. After the women return and Honey alludes to her hysterical pregnancy, a stage direction has “*GEORGE and NICK exchange glances,*” emphasizing their affiliation (134). In divulging compromising secrets, Nick assumes the role Martha had occupied in Act One. And as Martha revealed secrets earlier, George now positions himself to do so, shifting him to assume the masculine role previously assumed by his wife.

As Act Two begins with George and Nick alone in extended dialogue, so it ends with the triangulation complete: Martha and Nick exit to play Hump the Hostess, the game intended to cuckold the husband that will instead reassert his masculinity. Emphasizing the triangulation, the words concluding the act are George's, addressed to the person he cannot yet directly speak back to: “You're going to regret this, Martha. You're really going to regret this” (192).

If gender is “a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, “Performative” 522), then Act Three, which stages George's triumphant masculinity, enacts Nick's punishment for his spectacularly unsuccessful performance. As Martha repeatedly tells him, he is “a flop” sexually (198, 199), the same taunt she previously directed at George. Because Albee conceives gender as a role comprehensible only in relation to other roles, Nick's becoming the “flop” liberates George from the emasculated role he performed in Act One. It takes Nick a while to accept his loss of the masculine competition to George. Nick maintains, incorrectly, that George remains permanently wounded (202) and is incredulous when Martha tells him that only one man – her husband – has ever made her happy (200).¹² Given Martha's penchant for discursively parading her sexuality, the confession suggests that her husband has been spectacular in bed. Moreover, she continues Nick's emasculation by demanding that he, as

her “houseboy,” open the door (204, 205), just as she had insisted George open the door for the guests in Act One (19). Given the social-class as well as racial connotations of “houseboy,” Martha’s jeer insinuates that Nick has become sexually invisible to her.

For most of the rest of Act Three, Nick fades into the background, while George parades his masculinity. His challenge to Nick’s authority receives a single syllable in response, the concession of a broken man:

GEORGE You in a position to set the rules around here?

NICK (*Pause; tight-lipped*) No. (229)

The “rules” George inquires about point both to his games and to the patriarchal authority those games underwrite. As George joins Martha in asserting that there are only two roles for their guest to play – stud or houseboy – and since Nick can’t deny he has failed in the former, he loses the masculine contest. Because competitive masculinity mandates winners as well as losers, Nick’s loss means George’s victory. Whereas the younger man had appeared in Act One to be “at the *meat* of things” (69), it turns out that George gets “inside the bone... [to] the marrow” (225; emphasis in original).

Having vanquished Nick and thereby established, through homosocial competition, his own masculinity, George can now turn to Martha and reassert his primacy in the marriage. Newly confident, he demands she enter the ring where he earlier faced defeat when she knocked him down: “I want you on your feet and slugging, sweetheart, because I’m going to knock you around” (221). The devastating blow George will deliver when he kills off Sonny Boy is, as Davis remarks, “richly overdetermined” (211). George’s pronouncing the illusory son dead marks his decisive stroke in asserting his masculinity, for it is precisely because he imaginatively fathered the child (as he insisted so inexplicably in Act One) that he can terminate him at will. George thus demonstrates that, when it comes to displaying masculinity, a fantasy son is more effective than a biological one – again diminishing Nick’s professional specialty as he elevates his own. Were Sonny Boy a mere biological child, George could not terminate his life at a whim, as an exchange during which Nick ineffectually tries to comfort Martha emphasizes:

NICK (*Leaning over her; tenderly*) He [George] hasn’t decided anything, lady. It’s not his doing. He doesn’t have the power...

GEORGE That’s right, Martha; I’m not a god. I don’t have the power over life and death, do I? (248)

George, of course, is precisely a “god” in having absolute power over Sonny Boy’s life and death. George thus assumes a new role, one previously played

by the play's pre-eminent patriarch, Daddy, who is several times associated with God.¹³ In response to Martha's alternate challenges and pleadings that he let Sonny Boy live, George – emboldened after Nick's confession that the younger man can't set the rules – thunders at Martha, "I'M RUNNING THIS SHOW!" (243). If the show must go on, George will decide who acts in which parts.

Which character makes the better "man," and why? Students will answer both parts of that question differently if it is raised at the ends of Acts One, Two, and Three. This approach to teaching the play can foster critical thinking about constructs like manhood and marriage easily taken for granted. This approach can also help students think about dramatic form, since once they see how Albee positions manhood differently in each act and, indeed, how various characters occupy masculine roles at different times, they begin to appreciate how each act has a distinctive function and ultimately how all work together to create an explosive play.

As Rubin describes the traditional form of triangulation in which the woman serves as conduit between two men, "it is the [male] partners, not the [female] presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage" (174). The formulation nicely fits *Who's Afraid*, with one important difference: the linked partners at the end are George and Martha. Their alliance results from George's subordination of Nick, the once-virile, now-emasculated houseboy. The extended, largely monosyllabic, exchange between George and Martha after the departure of the guests emphasizes the reasserted primacy of the marital relationship:

MARTHA Just . . . us?
GEORGE Yes. (255–56)

As Martha asks and George answers questions, Albee closes the play with the image of a marriage presided over by a patriarch whose submissive wife finally admits her fear of the play's bogeywoman, "Virginia Woolf."

The various implications of Albee's inverted triangulation may shed light on why impassioned arguments can be advanced for the playwright's supposed hatred of and admiration for women; for his criticism of traditional gender roles and his support of them.¹⁴ As in the traditional model of triangulation, in *Who's Afraid*, woman functions "as currency that has no inherent value, but takes on value only in circulation among men" (Sedgwick 52–53). However bitchy and castrating Martha may be, she functions as an object, a prize coveted by two competing men. Rather than manifesting subjectivity, her role is largely to help confirm or deny George or Nick's masculinity. In these respects, the play seems to circumscribe women and support traditional heterosexuality. However, Albee's shifting of who plays the various triangulated roles points toward a different interpretation.

By the end of the play, Nick functions as the symbolic “woman,” thus freeing Martha from continuing in that role. He assumes this position not as a coded gay male, as some critics have argued, but as a vanquished heterosexual one. The discursive constitution of gender allows for some hope that Martha may be freed from restrictive gender stereotypes. In addition, her relative stature is further elevated (and Nick’s lowered) by George’s needing to speak to her through Nick. Looked at in this light, *Who’s Afraid* appears more optimistic about women’s autonomy and more critical of traditional heterosexual roles.

At the same time, Martha defers to George by the end, and he emerges as a more patriarchal figure than would have seemed possible in Act One. Moreover, heterosexual marriage, with all its machinery for keeping woman in her place (whether a biological male or female assumes that role), remains intact. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* does not so much attack marriage or proffer a coded gay plot, as various detractors have feared, but instead shows how competitive masculinity sustains marriage.¹⁵ That is, homosocial rivalry serves to underwrite heterosexual stability. What the play reflects, I would suggest, is less either animosity or sympathy for women than a critical interest in the gendered politics of dominance and submission. As to Albee’s view on marriage, he seems less for or against the institution than critical of the need for subservience.

Albee has shown remarkable patience in answering questions about whether (or as the question has been even more crudely phrased, *how*) his sexual orientation influences his writing. I should not care to perpetuate the essentialist idea that the playwright views gender, sexuality, or marriage in certain ways because he is gay. However, Albee has described his sexuality in terms closely linked to the triangulation and discursive construction of gender that I have been tracing in *Who’s Afraid*. According to Albee, “[T]he male homosexual does not have to indulge in all of the role playing that a heterosexual has to. We are not trapped into the role of male, and we don’t have to behave that way” (qtd. in Bhasin 25).¹⁶ The comment underscores Albee’s understanding of the extent to which heterosexual masculinity entails acting particular roles, an idea both startling and intriguing to students. As historians have demonstrated that, in the words of Peter Stearns, “maleness has long been in flux” (2), the fighting cocks in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* register the anxiety surrounding American masculinity at the advent of the modern feminist movement.

Anne Paolucci has remarked that “Sex is the dynamo” in *Who’s Afraid* (46). While sex is certainly important, the most significant sex act during the play is the unconsummated one between Nick and Martha in Act Two, the attempt at cuckolding George that is over-determined, as is its failure. Gender, I would submit, is the real dynamo in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and as befits a dynamo, it is always on the move.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Margaret Breen, Leonard Cassuto, Brenda Murphy, and an anonymous reader for *Modern Drama*; their comments all stimulated my thinking and substantially improved this essay.
- 2 For a characteristic statement of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a marriage play, consider Robert Brustein, who calls it "a Strindbergian battle royal between George, a contemplative History professor . . . and Martha, his bitterly shrewish wife" (46). For varied readings of the play as centred on Martha, see Kundert-Gibbs; Hirsch; Finkelstein. Stephen J. Bottoms discusses how strong performances of actresses playing Martha, beginning with Uta Hagen, who debuted the role, have influenced interpretations of the character (30). On the play as centred on George, see Sawyer; and esp. Roy. Also see note 8. The early attacks on the play as having a gay subtext began with Richard Schechner and Stanley Kauffmann ("Homosexual Drama"; "On the Acceptability of the Homosexual"). More sophisticated treatments of a homosexual undercurrent include those of Sky Gilbert and especially John M. Clum. Albee rejects this line of interpretation, complaining that "nobody has ever bothered to ask *me* whether it was true" that the play has a gay subtext; moreover, there has been little attempt "to document the assertion from the text of the play." "The facts," Albee maintains, "are simple: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was written about two heterosexual couples. If I had wanted to write a play about four homosexuals, I would have done so" (qtd. in Flanagan 52).
- 3 This historical sketch of changing notions of masculinity derives from Filene; Stearns; Dubbert; Pleck and Pleck; Brod. In an important survey of what he calls "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," Michael S. Kimmel argues that, while "[t]he historical evidence suggests that while both masculinity and femininity are socially constructed . . . , definitions of masculinity are historically *reactive* to changing definitions of femininity" ("Contemporary 'Crisis'" 123; emphasis in original). Kimmel's point suggests why so towering a female figure as Martha provides an essential backdrop to the struggle between George and Nick.
- 4 As Martha relates how she came to marry George, Daddy did not approve of her earlier marriage to a lawn worker and so had her "revirginized" (86) – a comment that emphasizes the social rather than biological basis of gender. She decided to obey Daddy, who "was looking for someone to . . . take over" the college after his retirement (90), and fell in love with George. As she significantly puns, George "was the groom . . . he was going to be groomed. He'd take over someday . . . when Daddy retired" (92). George's inability or unwillingness to live up to Daddy's exemplary masculinity is Martha's single greatest complaint.
- 5 Honey, the "superfluous second woman," in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, is largely irrelevant to my reading (138). For a reading of more traditional triangulated relationships in modern American drama, see Austin.
- 6 On the performative nature of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, see Clum; Davis; Bottoms 5–7; Ducker 468–69.
- 7 My thanks to Margaret Breen for pointing out this pun.
- 8 See, e.g., Roudané, who describes George and Nick standing in "marvelous dialectic" (79). Roudané also conspicuously sides with George, whom he finds "one of the more compelling figures in all of modern American drama" (72).

- Roudané finds George “intelligent and clever, shrewd and thoughtful, the only one in the play with a heightened sensibility. . . . He does not challenge Nick the man as much as the principle upon which Nick has founded his professional values” (72–73). One of the first to discuss the two-cultures debate, Diana Trilling does not side with George. She argues that “history has failed” George, while Nick stands as the “new man . . . [of] science in cold command of himself . . . but impotent in his connection with humanity” (82). It is striking how often discussions of the two-cultures theme include such sexual double entendres. James G. Martin, for instance, links the professional text with the psychosexual subtext: George is “impotent” and Nick “apparently virile.” Nick displays “intellectual cocksureness” but, Martin asks, whose “is the more seminal mind?” (2). Criticizing George’s stance as “anemic” and “simplistic,” Ruby Cohn notes, and I think correctly, that “his defense of life and love is too closely centered in his scrotum” (26). C.W.E. Bigsby is also critical of the idea of a victor in the quarrel, stating that “[h]istory and science, as represented by George and Nick, become forms of evasion, rationalisations” (270).
- 9 John Kenneth Galbraith’s explanation of the pertinence of the academic setting stands unparalleled: George “will serve his life as a permanent associate professor, a title which many colleges and universities . . . use, also with exquisite cruelty, to brand their errors in according permanent tenures” (150).
 - 10 Gilmore’s point about femininity not needing proof is resoundingly illustrated by Martha’s comment, after Nick’s inability to perform sexually, “You’re all flops. I am the Earth Mother, and you’re all flops” (199).
 - 11 Bottoms notes that George Grizzard, who played the first Nick, “create[s] the distinct impression that, if he is to ‘plough’ this ‘pertinent wife,’ it will be as much out of spite for George as ambition for himself” (170).
 - 12 Anne Paolucci seems correct that “George is the only man who has ever satisfied [Martha] sexually. Even the suggestion of physical impotence is canceled out in the end, when George proves that the ultimate power of life and death lies with him” (50). However, it is entirely possible that Martha’s much-discussed infidelities are just that – talk – and, like Sonny Boy, are part of the game that structures her and George’s marriage.
 - 13 For instance, George says, Daddy is “a god, we all know that” and talks about him living at “Parmassus” (27, 31–32). Martha’s comment, “I worshipped him,” may be less of an exaggeration than it sounds (85).
 - 14 For two especially opposed readings, see Finkelstein; DuPlessis. In her astute reading of the play for its “brilliant portrayal of 1950’s sex stereotypes,” Bonnie Blumenthal Finkelstein concentrates on how Martha is trapped in the available roles for women, reads her sympathetically, and sees Albee as criticizing gender roles (51). In a very judgemental reading, DuPlessis arrives at opposite conclusions: Martha is the biggest problem in the play and Albee affirms sex/gender stereotypes. Indeed, according to DuPlessis, “The re-establishment of these norms . . . is the play’s object” (135).
 - 15 As Gayle Rubin remarks of triangulation, “individuals are engendered”—that is, males transformed into men, females into women – “in order that marriage be guaranteed” (180).
 - 16 As John M. Clum puts it, Albee “stage[s] a version of heterosexuality from the ‘other side’ that was theatrically vibrant, more so than many pictures of heterosexual life created from within” (189).

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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on the relationship between George and Nick, who represent two competing but interdependent models of heterosexual masculinity. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stages, in addition to its famous battle between the sexes, an equally urgent battle within masculinity. The verbal combat between George and Nick illustrates not only Albee's understanding of gender as discursively constructed but also that the legendary marriage delineated in *Who's Afraid* depends both structurally and psychologically on the competition between the two men. Albee presents postwar heterosexual masculinity as fundamentally competitive, a gender identity that must be proven as well as performed. The play suggests that,

if competitive masculinity produces a victor, it also demands a loser. As it takes one man to prove another's masculinity, an attentive and ultimately vanquished male audience is necessary to complete the performance. Moreover, *Who's Afraid* shows heterosexual masculinity as constituted through a particular form of triangulation: George and Nick compete to see which is the better man and fitter mate for Martha.

KEYWORDS: masculinity, triangulation, gender, performance, competition, homosociality