



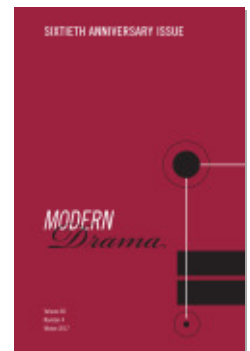
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Tragedy and the Common Goat: Deperformative Poetics in Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*

ANDREW SOFER



ABSTRACT: *While The Goat is notorious for its subject matter, the force behind Albee's tragic poetics is less unorthodox sexuality than (de)performative language. The play hinges less on Martin's offstage affair than on the devastating effects of particular speech acts in the theatrical now, which by turns produce and undo a reality they seem only to label. Goat lover Martin Gray is a queered martyr, beyond heterol homonormative boundaries, whose acts of coming out unravel Stevie as a woman and as a wife. By dramatizing a couple's potential to unmake a loving marriage through acts of speech, Albee queers tragedy through "deperformativity": a violent undoing of the fabric of the real by words alone. The Goat thus characterizes tragedy as the unmaking of a world through utterance, irrespective of the (supposed) acts that precede it. And because Sylvia the goat is denied both utterance and subjectivity, she remains a victim of abuse, excluded from love and tragedy alike.*

KEYWORDS: *performativity, queer theory, speech act*

Edward Albee's 2002 play *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* is subtitled "(Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy)," and it slaughters its titular goat on the altar of tragic form. Sylvia is the amorous object of protagonist Martin Gray's affections, and part of the queasiness the play initially inspired was due to its theme of bestiality, even though Albee insisted that the play was not about "goat-fucking."¹ Another shocking dimension for early audiences was the play's undeniable yet uncomfortable humour, despite its marital break-up plot. The play divided New York critics and audiences – there were regular walk-outs – yet received a raft of awards, including the Tony Award for Best Play, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. *The Goat* later earned final place in the *Norton Anthology of Drama*, which appeared in 2009.² This canonization, together with Albee's recent death, invites a fresh look at what effects

The Goat produces in performance: less its “meaning” than its performative impact. A coming-out play framed as comitragedy, *The Goat* is an imitation of an action that is (in Aristotle’s terms) witty *and* serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude. By the end of the action, Martin Gray’s life lies in ruins, his family destroyed and his beloved Sylvia murdered by his vengeful wife, Stevie. If this isn’t strictly tragedy – Martin survives his downfall – it is certainly “peritragic,” in the neighbourhood of the tragic. What has been destroyed is a structure of “straight” relations (marriage, family, friendship) as much as individuals. I argue that the force behind Albee’s tragic poetics is less unorthodox sexuality, which has dominated critical discussion of the play thus far, than queer (de)performativity. *The Goat* defines tragedy as something queer that happens in and through language itself: the unmaking of a world through acts of speech.

Albee includes his mock-pedantic subtitle in the print edition of *The Goat* to alert readers, if not spectators, to the play’s queer poetics. Albee does not formally claim tragic status for Martin and/or Stevie; he is too cautious for that, though surely aware that the equally scrupulous Beckett subtitled *Waiting for Godot* “A Tragicomedy in Two Acts.” Albee glosses his subtitle in an interview: “A definition [of tragedy]. Not *the* definition, or a redefinition. ‘Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy’ [. . .] It’s not part of the title – it’s a parenthetical comment, which is why it’s in parentheses” (“Borrowed Time” 278). Although Albee refuses to pin himself down definitionally, the word “tragedy” comes from the Greek *tragos*, “goat-song,” and it can be no coincidence that this updated classical tragedy, which is also a bourgeois adultery play, makes one of its scapegoats a literal goat. But whose tragedy might this be? Sylvia the goat is the only “character” who dies, and although her carcass eventually appears on stage, it would be a stretch to claim that *The Goat* is Sylvia’s tragedy. Sylvia is destroyed through no fault of her own, which makes her death, like Ophelia’s, more pathetic – scapegoatish – than tragic. Rather, *The Goat* is a marital tragedy, and that tragedy is as much Stevie’s as Martin’s. Stevie changes and learns more than the passive and largely oblivious Martin. Structurally, Martin is the catalyst for Stevie’s descent into atavistic violence, a recovery of her animal nature that parallels her husband’s, just as Sylvia is Stevie’s sacrificial victim. Whence *definitional* tragedy, then?

Whether we see Martin or Stevie (or the marriage) as the play’s tragic protagonist, *The Goat* feels much closer to Arthur Miller’s theory of tragedy than to Aristotle’s. It exemplifies Miller’s claim in “Tragedy and the Common Man” (written for the *New York Times* upon the opening of *Death of a Salesman*) that “[t]ragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” in the face of indignity (4). The hero, who for Miller is always male, is inevitably destroyed in this attempt by “the condition

which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct" (5). Miller adds that we experience "the terror and the fear" of tragic response as a result of witnessing a "total onslaught by an individual against the seeming stable cosmos surrounding us" – a total questioning of what we took for granted as unchangeable (4). Shifting the gender focus, one might think of Stevie's smashing of her living room and killing of her romantic rival as a heroic battle, in Miller's terms, to "secure [her] rightful place in [her] world" by claiming her "whole due as a personality" ("Tragedy" 6–7). Similarly, Martin's love for Sylvia, which expresses his true yet repressed erotic nature, blasts social convention and precipitates crisis. The otherwise conventional Martin cannot deny that nature, even when it would save his marriage and his career, because to do so would vitiate his essential selfhood and hence, in Miller's terms, his dignity. If it is in fact Martin's existential dignity that is at stake, his right to love as and what he loves without shame, *The Goat* would seem to be a quintessential Milleresque tragedy.

Seeing Albee as less concerned with individual ethics than cultural critique, some critics have questioned this framework. For Michelle Robinson, *The Goat* rejects Miller's "liberal" (in Raymond Williams's terms) conception of tragedy, which emphasizes the private suffering of the ethically challenged individual, and instead harnesses tragedy to "unseat liberalism as the predominant paradigm of American political life" (63). And for J. Ellen Gainor, who reads *The Goat* as an ecological tragedy and Martin as a neo-Nietzschean hero, the play takes characters and audience "beyond their individual lives and into a more politicized exploration of some profound and far-reaching questions for the Western dramatic tradition and modern civilization itself" (203). But however radical its ideological commitments, *The Goat*, like all Albee's plays, remains deeply humanist, albeit queerly so. At the end of the day, it is the individual who must take responsibility for his or her bad faith and break through to truthful experience at whatever cost.

The Goat begins, deceptively, in the mode of domestic realism. Its three scenes take place in a bourgeois living room; the play observes the unities of time, place, and action. The fourth wall is never broken, fairly unusually for Albee. The play concerns the fall of a "great" yet essentially middle-class Everyman. Martin is a fifty-year-old Pritzker-winning architect at the height of his powers whose race is never specified (he was portrayed by two white actors during the Broadway run). Hinting that this is tragedy on a bourgeois scale, more Miller than Sophocles, Martin's *hubris* appears at first to be nothing more than middle-aged complacency. He has a good marriage and professional success, and he feels he has done well accepting his seventeen-year-old son Billy's homosexuality, an assumption tested by the play's action.

For *The Goat* to work as comitragedy – a play that begins with comedy and ends in tragedy – we must sympathize and identify with its protagonists, and they *are* fairly likeable, at least by Broadway standards. At the play's opening, Martin and Stevie are witty and urbane, more Nick and Nora than George and Martha. Yet like any furtive adulterer, the highly distracted Martin is living in bad faith. He has been having clandestine sexual relations with a goat that he encountered while searching for “a real country place” (40), a rural retreat that is to the suburbs what the suburbs once were to the city, the illusion of a pastoral idyll. Sylvia's name is, of course, a sylvan cliché, and Albee puns obscenely on the privileged Martin's “country needs.” Moreover, there is a serpent in the play's garden: Martin's best friend, Ross Tuttle, a parasitic television journalist envious of Martin's success and unconsciously determined to bring him down under the guise of loving concern. When Martin confesses his affair with Sylvia to Ross, Ross informs Stevie by letter of Sylvia's existence, and Stevie's world collapses.

The play's performative core is less Martin's affair with Sylvia, which happens off stage, than language *about* it and the devastating effects of that language in the theatrical now. (It should be noted that the word “affair,” while used intermittently by the characters, inaccurately describes Martin and Sylvia's relationship, since it presumes two willing parties on equal terms.) The plot unfolds almost entirely through speech acts, many of which are performatives that produce what they seem to name: parody, apology, promise/threat, insult, naming, shaming, oath, mimicry, praise, congratulation, and so forth. Among these, the play's signature figure for performativity itself is *coming out*. Coming out is an explicit self-declaration: one can equally come out as an atheist, Republican, homosexual, vegetarian, goat-lover, and so on. Scene one, the prologue, is structured around two instances of such a declaration. As the couple prepares the living-room “set” for the arrival of Ross, Stevie finds herself playing the suspicious wife after Martin finds a business card in his pocket, about which he purports to be mystified, with a classy female name on it promising “basic services.” “Does she smell funny?” (14), asks Stevie, who, as in a bad play, has inhaled an unfamiliar female scent on her husband. Playing the scene “*offhand*,” Stevie asks Martin point blank if he has found another woman. According to the stage directions, the couple then slides into exaggerated Noël Coward repartee, as Martin “confesses” not only that “I've fallen in love!” but that “[s]he's a goat; Sylvia is a goat!” Martin then abruptly drops his Cowardly tone and says flatly, “She's a goat” (16–17).

After a long pause, Stevie chortles. Martin's confession has misfired. In so doing, it exemplifies J.L. Austin's notion of the inefficacious performative speech act. Because the couple is camping it up, Martin's confession is, to paraphrase Austin, peculiarly “hollow,” as if it were spoken on the stage

(Austin 22). Martin comes out to Stevie in parodic style at first, but once the truth slips out, he immediately performatizes for real. “She’s a goat” *seems* to be what Austin terms a constative, a statement of fact. But as Judith Butler points out, to come out to someone else is not to state a fact of which the addressee may already be aware but to alter the relationship between speaker and addressee through the very act of utterance: “When one declares that one is a homosexual, the declaration is the performative act – not the homosexuality” (*Excitable Speech* 22). If what Austin calls an “illocutionary” act is the intentional deed performed by the speaker in speaking his or her words, the “perlocutionary” consequences of that act depend on the listener’s unpredictable responses (Austin 101). To the extent that it traces the disastrous effects of Martin’s speech, *The Goat* might rightly be called a perlocutionary act in three scenes. And as a performative speech act whose perlocutionary effects are unforeseeable, Martin’s line “She’s a goat” is a verbal grenade lobbed into the living room – albeit one that fails, for now, to explode.

Once Stevie leaves to answer the doorbell, still chortling, Martin muses on the inefficacy of his declaration: “You try to *tell* them; you try to be *honest*. What do they do? They laugh at you” (17; emphasis in original). Close to soliloquy, Martin’s speech seems directed as much to the audience as to himself, for, like Stevie, we have presumably hollowed out Martin’s painful performative by laughing at it. Here Albee tests the situation’s theatricality. If *no* performative illocution can ever be for real on stage, as Austin insists, then the audience is insulated from perlocutionary harm and can relax – it’s only a play with which we can laugh along. But within the world of the play, as in life, words do real damage. Moreover, language’s perlocutionary force threatens to topple the reassuring fourth wall between mimesis and kinesis that we expect in the playhouse. The performers’ words can shock and alter us by making us flinch or gasp or protest, and Albee’s caustic performatives, which spill over the stage into the auditorium (“You’re sicker than I thought” [103]), indict our complacency. They dare us to walk out of the theatre in disgust or else degrade ourselves by treating the spectacle as a dirty joke. And, of course, they dare us to laugh.

The rest of scene one unfolds in a comic register as the unctuous Ross tries and fails to get a proper interview out of the distracted Martin. When Ross hears a whooshing sound, Martin responds, “It’s probably the Eumenides.” Ross counters bathetically: “More like the dishwasher” (22). How can the Eumenides invade a living room literally next door to kitchen-sink drama? Here Albee ironically references not just the *Oresteia* but also T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*, whose Eumenides-ridden protagonist Harry, Lord Monchensey, moves from guilt to redemption instead of the other way around. Wryly insinuating that he is similarly pursued by Furies, Martin

casts himself less as Orestes than as the protagonist of a clunky verse melodrama. Like Harry, Martin is about to face a reckoning. He knows the story is not yet over, despite Stevie's in-joke about stopping by the feed store, a joke that rehearses what Robinson accurately calls "a slew of comedic pathologizing and really unforgiveable puns" on the part of the play's critics (62).

Albee uses Ross's abortive television interview, for which Ross tells Martin to "[p]ut on your public face" (23), to satirize shallow media culture. Glib Ross cues Martin's public persona: the successful architect who has won the Pritzker Prize – a performative award that counts for nothing unless people know about it – and who has been chosen to build "the dream city of the future, financed by U.S. electronics technology and set to rise in the wheat-fields of our Middle West" (24). Martin proves comically inept at this elementary piece of acting. When Ross abandons the interview and prompts Martin to confess his troubles, he reminds him that "I'm your oldest friend" (28). Friendship, not unlike gender in Judith Butler's influential conception, is produced by performative acts that create the illusion of an essence preceding them. Martin questions Ross's "rights" as his oldest friend, and aptly, for Ross's acts are anything but loving and supportive. "I'm your oldest friend" is a hypocritical performative. Ross's interest in Martin's troubles is as much salacious as sympathetic, and the penny drops when he blurts out, "You're having an affair!" (30).

This line is virtually in quotes, for dead language colonizes Ross like a virus attacking an unwitting host. Language "mortifies" Ross, just as it wickedly names his son Todd after the German word for death (so much for what critic Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" [2], a threat to truly radical queerness). Yet Ross is far from alone in this linguistic colonization, since a key figure for performativity throughout Albee's work is unconscious repetition. For Albee, language itself queers the speaking subject, who – like Ross – mistakenly believes that his or her essential selfhood somehow precedes its performative articulation in words (a delusion shared by virtually all dramatic characters, who assume they *have* a body before and beyond that of the actor incarnating them). Examples of such performative queering abound. The word "crest," for instance, asserts itself more than once in *The Goat* (41, 79), to the characters' surprise, and Martin automatically corrects "who" to "whom" ("*It just comes out*" – language as ejaculation! [45]). At one point in scene two, Albee playfully inserts a reference to a fairly obscure Arthur Kopit play that is a farce in three scenes, a recondite in-joke lost on the characters themselves (51). Language speaks Albee's characters into being as much as vice versa, and at times they catch its "free-range" performativity in action, much to their own bafflement.

The men discuss a failed performance in their shared past: Martin's inability to perform sex with a prostitute during a college reunion because of his commitment to Stevie. Through the sad notion that the two men could bond only through "pumping away" with prostitutes in neighbouring beds, a tradition that began when they were undergraduates, Albee indicts not only homosexual panic but also compulsory heterosexuality (38). Ross reduces everything to sex at its crassest, normalizes the sexual objectification of women, views Billy's homosexuality as a stepping stone to "straighten[ing] out" (22), and derides Martin for subordinating sex to love. In short, Ross is perverse, and one departure from realism in the play is that a progressive couple like Martin and Stevie would remain friends with such a patent emblem of "what's hideously wrong in what most people accept as normal" (88). Pushing through Ross's leering innuendoes, Martin gropes toward an expression of his first sight of Sylvia: "(Sad) You *don't* understand. (Pause) I didn't know *what* it was – what I was feeling. It was . . . it wasn't like anything I'd felt before; it was . . . so . . . amazing, so . . . extraordinary! There she was, just looking at me with those *eyes* of hers, and . . ." (43; emphasis in original). Language fails Martin, and he sinks into the clichés of *coup de foudre*. As so often happens in this play, Martin quotes without knowing it. His mundane description of happening upon Sylvia ("it was then that I saw her" [79]) unwittingly cites Mr. Milos (Titos Vandis), the Armenian shepherd, explaining his love for a sheep to a scandalized Doctor Ross (Gene Wilder) in Woody Allen's film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*. By conflating the language of the two confessors, and even giving their interlocutors the same name (yet another instance of performativity), Albee layers two instances of coming out as a lover of animals – the first time as farce (Milos), the second as comedy on its way to being tragedy (Martin).³

Meanwhile Ross feeds Martin lurid truisms ("You're having an affair with her"; "You're *screwing* her"; "And you're in love" [43]) in an attempt to get him to confess his infidelity. Then, in a performative confession that re-plays his Cowardly one in a new key, Martin begins to cry: "Yes! Yes! I am! I'm in love with her. Oh, Jesus! Oh, Sylvia! Oh, Sylvia!" (44). At this point, Martin's pain cuts through the play's winking self-irony. For the play to work, Martin's passion must be real as he pictures himself in the act of love with Sylvia. When Ross asks, quoting Shakespeare, "Who is Sylvia?" (44), Martin wordlessly hands him a photograph.

It is an interesting stage moment. Is holding up a picture of a goat an act of what the semioticians call ostension, in which an object uplifted to the view becomes a sign of the class of objects to which it belongs ("goat")? Or does Martin mean to pick out his beloved from the class of all beloveds, as one does when one shares a picture of a new love with an old friend, hoping

the friend will instantly see what is magical? Ross, like Stevie earlier, at first treats the revelation as a joke; he guffaws and splutters as if the moment were a classic spit-take moment for the actor playing him. Then the scene darkens. Ross insists that Martin has to tell Stevie because “[y]ou’re in very serious trouble” (45) – as much a threat as an observation. When Ross yells, “YOU’RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU’RE FUCKING A GOAT!” (46), Martin simply replies “Yes,” a performative that serves as scene one’s climax.

Played for laughs, that scene is both prologue and decoy, for Albee will pull the comedic rug out from under us between scenes. Stevie, like any unwitting injured party in an adultery, does not yet know what play she is in, and nor, perhaps, does the audience. But scene one is less about character than about the ways in which the characters comically fail to get language to do what they want. Martin wants to confess his love for Sylvia instead of living a lie, but his clumsy attempts misfire because his wife and best friend frame those speech acts as comic. Only at the very end does somebody take Martin seriously – and it is the envious friend who threatens to tell Stevie himself. The scene dramatizes distinct, sequential reactions to the same performative revelation: amusement (Stevie) and prurient outrage (Ross). In their different ways, both Stevie and Ross respond to the notion of sex *with* a goat rather than love *for* a goat – the very thing Martin struggles to communicate. In Ross’s topsy-turvy morality, extramarital sex threatens the bourgeois order only when it is mixed with love. To underscore the point, Ross’s wife and “hooker” are both named April.

If scene one limns the comedic possibilities of misfiring performatives that elude the speaker’s illocutionary purposes, *The Goat*’s central scene foregrounds the world-destroying power of language: its deperformative capacity. I define a “deperformative” statement as a performative speech act that explicitly reverses a state of affairs created by a prior performative. Formal examples include recanting, forswearing, disowning, renouncing, repealing, defrocking, and so on. But even the devastating words “I don’t love you anymore,” uttered sincerely, can be construed as deperformative. Here, everything hinges on words. Martin’s narrative unravels Stevie because the truth of his love for Sylvia and the truth of his love for *her* cannot coexist in her mind. Figured here is the explosive consequence of a performative act whose outcomes are unpredictable and uncontrollable. If the end of scene one glossed Ross’s transition from snickering humour to aghast acceptance, *The Goat* must now muster all its intelligence so that Stevie accepts the love-triangle situation as Martin presents it. To label Martin as ill and in need of treatment would short-circuit tragedy. According to Miller, “[O]ur lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or

the purely sociological” (“Tragedy” 5). Albee is well aware of this pitfall; hence Martin’s therapeutic group is canvassed only to be dismissed as an inefficacious “solution” to his (tragic) problem.

As the scene opens one day later, the family gathers on stage for the first time. Stevie clutches Ross’s letter. It is a fateful prop, a Greek messenger of sorts, and Ross’s physical absence underscores the letter’s perlocutionary force. Like the concealed listening device in Miller’s *The Archbishop’s Ceiling*, which forces the dissident eastern European writers beneath it to twist their speech for an invisible, godlike listener, Ross’s letter ineluctably produces bad theatre. Only the emptiest theatrical gestures are available as the situation teeters between tragedy and absurdism. Thus Stevie stands at the window facing out, something one does in plays. Thunderstruck and incredulous, Billy sounds like a broken record: “You’re doing *what!*! You’re fucking a *goat!*!” (47; emphasis in original). Echoing Ross, who continually uses “Jesus” as a verbal tic (along with the debasing intensifier “fucking”), Billy mechanically swears “Jesus Christ!” (47), while Martin’s defeated “Oh, God,” repeated four times, becomes increasingly “*hopeless*” (51–52).

Martin’s cry echoes Christ on the Cross (Matthew 27:46), and his character may plausibly be named after Pope Martin I (r. 649–655), saint and martyr. The closest Albee has come to explicitly Christian tragedy is *Tiny Alice* (1964), which features another martyr figure at its centre. But *The Goat* feels decidedly non-Christian, as if Christianity and (pagan?) tragedy were incompatible. No one in this dramatic world – certainly not his betrayed wife and son – is going to suggest that Martin seek absolution from a priest. Yet a few lines later, before he is banished to his upstairs room, Billy will repeat Martin’s “*arms wide*” gesture (52), followed by “For Christ’s sake, I . . .” (53), casting himself, too, as a martyr. Albee thus makes it virtually impossible not to read the domestic scene as Trinitarian parody: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Goat, with the on-stage Mother as the recent recipient of an Annunciation.

How is Billy figured in the scene’s noisy overture? Albee’s portrayal is affectionate and gently ironic, as if assuming that his audience would be inclined to lend a sensitive and self-dramatizing teenage boy its sympathy without too much dramaturgical prodding. In scene one, Martin characterized his only child to the skeptical Ross as confident in, if defined by, his sexual identity: “Real cute kid, Billy, bright as you’d ever want, gay as the nineties. [. . .] Says he’s sure; loves it, he says” (21). But in scene two, Billy is much more the hurting and vulnerable adolescent, and for all his reputed brightness, words usually fail him. The capacity of even dead language to injure comes into focus when Martin parries Billy’s accusation “Goat fucker!” with “Fucking faggot!” (48). Martin’s accusation is yet another performative disguised as a constative. Martin’s words *produce* Billy as abject and unlovable, even as they

reduce him to a scapegoated category. The cruel epithet just comes out of Martin; as Judith Butler has pointed out, “it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts ‘queer!’” (“Critically Queer” 18). The same is true of “faggot,” for both insults take their shaming force “precisely through the repeated invocation by which [they have] become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult” (18). Albee’s characters are intermittently aware of their own citationality, but in the case of Martin’s insult, Albee underscores the power of automatic, unthinking performativity. In Butler’s words, “a performative ‘works’ only to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized” (19; emphasis in original). Martin’s insult channels the full force of socially sanctioned heteronormative jeering, and the hurt is unmitigated by Martin’s lame apology (“I’m . . . I’m sorry” [48]), a performative whose efficacy is compromised rather than confirmed by Martin’s repetition of the words.

For his part, Martin is outraged by Ross’s act of outing him. His own agency has been usurped, his sexuality turned against him by a jealous betrayer. Ironically it never occurs to Martin that his question “How could he do such a thing?!” might equally be said of animal rape (49). Once the truth registers on Stevie, Albee positions Martin as a queered martyr outside hetero/homonormative boundaries, complete with crucifixion imagery and Christological rhetoric:

STEVIE: (*Abrupt; cold*) Stay away from me; stay there. You smell of goat, you smell of shit, you smell of all I cannot imagine being able to smell. Stay *away* from me!

MARTIN: (*Arms wide; hopeless*) I love you!

BILLY: (*Softly*) Jesus.

[. . .]

STEVIE: How can you love me when you love so much less?

MARTIN: (*Even more hopeless*) Oh, God.

BILLY: Fucking a goat?! (52; emphasis in original)

Albee plays somewhat dangerously with the notion of bestiality as a metaphor for, or equivalent to, homosexual sex *for Stevie*. Her disgusted line “You smell of shit” (later referred to as “the funny smell” [58]) suggests how a wife who discovered her husband’s secret penchant for men and (presumed) anal sex might have been expected to react, at least in lurid popular imagination, in the decades before the widespread acceptance of homosexuality as natural. Stevie feels herself sexually and existentially degraded by the scandalous equivalence between Martin’s love for her and his love for the disgusting “other.” Such a parallel seems bolstered by her line “How can you love me when you love so much less?” (52). Compare: “How can you love me when you also love a *man*?”

The explanation for this parallelism lies in the changing mores of Albee's audience. For the play to approach tragedy, Stevie must be not only outraged but also shattered by the revelation of her husband's authentic sexuality and capacity to love the unthinkable. Martin's act of coming out undoes Stevie as a woman and as a wife, and Robinson accurately describes Stevie's demolishing of the domestic scenery as "acts of self-demolition" (72). (Conversely, Stevie's identity as a mother is not threatened by Martin's sex with an animal, which may be why Stevie and Billy never share a scene by themselves.) But this undoing is a dramaturgical challenge, for the revelation of her husband's gayness, say, simply would not accomplish this undoing in 2002. To Albee's Broadway audience, there would be nothing remotely surprising or even shocking, let alone tragic, about an urbane middle-aged man coming out as gay to his family. Yet Albee, whose interest in bestiality is minimal, wishes to dramatize the tragic power of performative speech acts to unmake a world. In Deborah Bailin's apt words,

The boundary Martin crosses goes far beyond bestiality; his words are as transgressive, if not more transgressive, than his behavior, for the way he understands and communicates the nature of his relationship destroys his world, more so than what he actually does with Sylvia in the barn. [. . .] If language normally civilizes and humanizes, here it uncivilizes, dehumanizes, and animalizes. (17)

How, then, to shock Albee's (presumably) sexually enlightened audience into questioning the limits of its tolerance? How "queer" does the play have to be?

For David M. Halperin, "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer,' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (62; emphasis in original). No necessary connection exists between queerness and sexual orientation, although Albee, like Tennessee Williams, takes sexuality to be a key site of queerness. Martin's sexual transgression must be beyond the pale of recognizable – even cognizable – love from Stevie's perspective, even as Martin experiences it as authentic and life-affirming. Unlike homosexuality, bestiality is guaranteed to shock and/or titillate Albee's audience as transgressive – queer in Halperin's sense. Bestiality, the play's guiding metaphor for queerness in the erotic realm, poses this question: who are we to judge what forms of love are perverse, and what life-enhancing?

Martin's queer identity has been trammelled by the normative values embodied by the crude and homophobic Ross. (Martin even echoes them in peremptorily shaming his son; he cannot help himself.) If compulsory heteronormativity and its corollaries – prostitution, sexism, bigotry, and so forth – are for Albee the real perversity, then Martin's union with Sylvia becomes not

mere barnyard rutting but life-affirming and even transcendent. Unlike Ross, Martin is satyriized rather than satirized, even if his dream of mutual love with Sylvia is delusional. In John M. Clum's diagnosis, "Martin seems attracted sexually and spiritually to the goat's lack of human consciousness, which he confuses with innocence," in "a bizarre form of the midlife crisis faced by many of Albee's characters" (187). But within the play's erotic mythography, the Nietzschean union of man and goat embodies the potential recovery of man's animal nature – Albee's desideratum – that was Jerry's parting gift to the repressed and emasculated Peter in the playwright's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1958). On this reading, Martin has found the transcendent love that he sought, but his insistence that Stevie, whom he still loves, understand and accept him for who he is dooms his marriage and family. Martin's alternative course, to live a double life in bad faith like a shabby philanderer, would render him cowardly (or Cowardly), pathetic rather than tragic.

It is true that Albee undercuts the tragic heroism of Martin's act of coming out to his wife and son by allowing the traitorous Ross to spill the beans. This would seem to dilute Miller's notion that "the tragic feeling is invoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity" ("Tragedy" 4). Perhaps, as Gainor contends, Martin tragically "embodies the Nietzschean dualities of creativity and decadence" and "the agony of this cultural division of man and nature" rather than Milleresque heroism (206, 210). Or might Albee want us to see Martin as an antihero and reserve what one might call the Gravedigger's right to wrest irony from the jaws of tragedy? While Martin must be outed before he can bravely profess his extraordinary love for Sylvia, we misread Albee by treating that love as an irony or joke (Kuhn 4). Martin refuses the philanderer's tired excuse that his relations with Sylvia are "just sex," either a recreation to be enjoyed or a sickness to be cured, both claims that are open to him. Instead, Martin insists on his unabashed love for Sylvia, and as Albee has emphasized, the audience must engage with Martin's "true, emotional love affair with a goat" in order for the play to work (Olsen). In a world dominated by the dictates of compulsory heteronormativity, Albee implies, it is not (just) sex that is policed but love itself.

Billy stages a tearful exit, his own maudlin language ("my little eight-year-old heart will for certain be breaking – in twain, as they say") hollowed out by a theatricality that turns his parents into distracted critics ("Very good; very good") (54). The aptly named Billy is a mordant chorus figure in the scene. While this is to some extent a family drama, the play must continually contrive ways to keep Billy off stage so as to keep the focus on his parents. Why then does the play's characterization of Billy centre around his gayness, so conspicuously *not* the queer "problem" the play is addressing? Billy's

homosexuality is certainly a foil to Martin's bestiality and perhaps underscores the different sexual paths and shifting sexual politics available between generations. Yet *The Goat* is not Billy's coming-out play but Martin's. Since Billy is already out, that story, and whatever perlocutionary fallout resulted from his initial declaration to his parents, is over before the play begins. It is only to Ross that Billy has not (yet) come out, thereby lending an ironic twist to Ross's breezy assurance to Martin that "Billy'll *come out* of it; he'll be OK" (22; emphasis added).

Billy's coming-out story, an unseen prequel, has ended not in tragedy but in a deepened if "worrisome" love (Martin's term) (11). Instead of rebelling against their values, as he might have in a drama from an earlier era, Billy praises his liberal parents for resisting bigotry: "you've figured out that raising a kid does *not* include making him into a carbon copy of *you*" (100; emphasis in original). By the time the action takes place, Billy's sexual orientation seems a constative fact. Perhaps worried it might rub off on his own son, Ross chalks it up to experimentation on the road to heterosexuality (typically, Ross can think of homosexuality only in terms of sex, not love). While Billy may be no less troubled by sexuality than any other adolescent – "I want to sleep with everyone," he ruefully admits (104) – his gayness does not threaten the "straight" institutions of marriage, friendship, and family in the same way that Martin's love confession does (and again, it is Martin's performative *confessions*, not the acts he performs with Sylvia in private, that jeopardize them). Billy never defiantly comes out to Ross; Albee resists the temptation to politicize Billy's gayness as identitarian statement, just as he controversially refused to accept the label of "gay writer" when accepting a 2011 Lambda Literary Award. To paraphrase Albee's self-characterization: Billy is not a "gay character"; he is a character who happens to be gay (Follard).

Indeed, Billy's sexuality may be more performative than it at first appears. Billy attends what he calls a "[g]ood private school. All guys, too; thanks" (99). The offhand comment warrants attention. Might Albee slyly be suggesting, in line with anti-identitarian strains of queer theory, that same-sex boarding schools produce not so much homosexual subjects as homosexual *acts* that retroactively create the impression of a homosexual subject who precedes them? After all, at an all-boys boarding school, there is no one else to sleep with. For all his avowed gayness, Billy comes across as sexually confused, his emotional needs labile enough to respond sexually to his own father during an affectionate kiss. Such queerness, the play implies, like language, might erupt from any subject – gay, straight or other – at any time. Billy's avowed homosexual identity, awkwardly embraced and hence reinforced by his liberal parents, may yet prove to define and constrain him in much the

same way that his father's hardened identities as heterosexual husband and father foreclosed queer possibilities until he met and fell in love with Sylvia.

Gainor, too, notes that Billy's sexuality may be queerer than he knows. It challenges the audience "to rethink not only these categories [gay/straight], but also the impossibility of making clear-cut distinctions among the manifold, polymorphously perverse expressions of sexual desire" (213). Yet as an affirmed identity position, Billy's self-proclaimed gayness lacks the world-destroying power of Martin's queer love for Sylvia. Transgressive but not subversive in the play's scheme of things, it merely discomfits homophobic bigots like Ross who fear contagion. Like so many conventional sons in American drama, Billy must come to terms with a beloved, lost father, even as "Martin [. . .] must come to accept his son's desires with equanimity, applying his newly gained insights on dominant and marginal practices" (Gainor 212–13). Billy's suffering is both real and touching, but it is not of his own making, nor is it Albee's focus. Not unlike Sylvia, Billy is "the collateral damage, shattered by the breakup of his family" (Clum 187). Billy is not, finally, implicated in the tragic action. His one "crime" (and only from Ross's perspective) is to lovingly embrace his traitorous father.

Albee adroitly uses Billy's callow interjections to comically punctuate the marital confrontation that opens scene two. But once Billy storms out in a burst of self-pity, having been sent to his room by his exasperated parents, the dramatic atmosphere turns muted and tense. For the second time in the play, Martin and Stevie are alone together; the discordant trio is now a tonally uncertain duet. Stevie chooses to repeat aloud the letter the audience has already heard her read once. Albee again shows that language, as much as sexuality, is running the show. Ross's written words ventriloquize Stevie, just as Albee replaces the actors' own speech with his dialogue. Martin even interjects "bullshit" at exactly the same point in the letter (50, 56), this time only going through the motions of indignation. Ross's letter is comically devoid of aesthetic interest: like Ross himself, it is a tissue of clichés. It would seem that adultery is to marriage as cliché is to writing.

Stevie now delivers her longest monologue thus far, and it is *about* performative infelicity. She realizes that she failed to take Martin's initial confession seriously: "You said it right out and I laughed. You told me! You *came right out* [emphasis added] and fucking *told* me, and I laughed, and I made jokes about going to the feed store, and I *laughed*. I fucking laughed! Until it stopped; until the laughter stopped" (58). Stevie reassesses, and the emotional core of her experience is not concern for Martin's health, as we might expect, but existential indignation: "if there's one thing you *don't* put on your plate, no matter how exotic your tastes may be is . . . bestiality" (59; emphasis in original). Stevie demands a reckoning: "If I'm going to kill you I need to know exactly why –

all the details” (61). Here Martin’s confession of goat love stands for *any* confession of non-normative love – indeed, any queer deperformative – that undoes at one stroke a painstakingly built-up marriage: “Make me not *believe* it! Please, make me *not believe* it” (62; emphasis in original).

In her grief and rage, Stevie asks Martin about Sylvia’s name. She then launches into a bitter parody of the “Who is Sylvia” song from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which Martin compliments. The weird citationality of language hijacks the dialogue again. Here Stevie deploys what Albee terms “[*b*]road parody” by parroting Martin’s empty circumlocutions (“As I said to Ross” [63]; “In any event” [64]; “our country needs” [64]). For the second time in the play, Martin gropes his way toward his narrative of meeting Sylvia. The very repetitiveness of the story, superfluous from a plot perspective, signals that it is not the illocution but the perlocution that interests Albee – that is, the effect of the *same* narrative on Ross (who treated it as comedy) and Stevie (who experiences it as tragedy). And what of the audience?

To forestall the idea that he needs professional help, Martin admits having already attended AA-style therapy sessions for people having sexual relations with animals. Yet Martin found the others’ shame and distress puzzling: “I didn’t understand why they were there – why they were all so . . . unhappy; what was wrong with . . . with . . . being in love . . . like that” (70). Martin, himself free from sexual shame, views his fellow animal lovers as seeking comfort out of habit or trauma or loneliness. Purified by his new love, Martin looks at the world through an innocent’s eyes – he sees more queerly now – and what he sees reflected in Sylvia’s eyes is innocence (80). Farm boys having sex with animals now seems “*natural*[]” (71; emphasis in original), and Martin refuses to condemn such acts. Albee implicitly contrasts the farm boys’ bestiality with what passes for normal sexuality under heteronormative regimes: hiring a couple of “[*b*]imbi” (36) during a college reunion weekend for old time’s sake (prostitution, infidelity), and even the “lady with the Shepherd” (72) raped by her father and her brother when she was twelve (sexual violence, voyeurism). (That the lady takes comfort in her “Shepherd” following the trauma of incestuous rape suggests that finding God – or Christ – for Albee may mean a healing reconnection with one’s own animus.) Martin even admits being shamed by other men for *not* having extramarital affairs (75), philandering being the “natural” corollary of compulsory heteronormativity. At least on the farm, “No one got hurt” (71). Animals evidently do not count as somebodies in Martin’s mind here.

Albee punctuates Martin’s narrative, which quotes his confession to Ross almost verbatim, with Stevie’s smashing of plates and vases – the collected bric-a-brac of their marriage. According to Albee’s stage direction, “*There is chaos behind the civility*” of her clenched dialogue (69). Stevie feels besieged

by Martin's matter-of-fact description of emotional attachments between people and animals. Part of her humiliation is that, as the "wronged wife," her hysteria is a melodramatic cliché. If Stevie sees Martin's "goat-fucking" as an existential assault, she can answer it only with words ("Fuck you, by the way" [75]). Another source of Stevie's horror is Martin's evenness of tone as he discusses human-animal sex. "Pardon?" she asks, "[a]s if the language were unfamiliar" (70). Stevie is unaware of her own pun. To her, Martin's transgression is unpardonable.

Stevie presents *herself* as a martyr, sobbing and retreating to the wall in a crucifixion gesture, daring Martin to "Cut me! Scar me forever!" (77). Martin undercuts her hysteria with a dry wisecrack about her mixed metaphors, and Stevie sardonically compliments him. Then the narrative of Martin's discovery of Sylvia replays for the audience, even down to Stevie repeating Ross's correction of the word "top" with the word "crest." "What!? Who *are* you!?" says Martin, incredulous at Stevie's autopilot correction (79; emphasis in original). For an instant, like a Lacanian patient, Martin grasps that language is running the show. This time, however, Martin's narrative is played in the key of tragedy. Martin refuses to accept his love for Sylvia as perversity or illness; it is simply love. Martin has been ravished by Eros in an erotic epiphany: "It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it . . . took me with it, and it was . . . an ecstasy and a purity, and a . . . love of a . . . (*dogmatic*) un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing *whatever*, to nothing that can be *related* to!" (81; emphasis in original). Martin verbally recaptures his state of initial wonder and his bafflement that others cannot *see* his transformation, thanks to the beloved, which transcends words. "Epiphany" (from *epiphaneia*, appearing) is Martin's own term (82), and he uses it in two senses: the revelatory manifestation of a quasi-divine being (here, the union of man and goat – the satyr) and a sudden manifestation of meaning. Martin's true self, as well as his true sexual nature, is disclosed *through* the goat, which is only medium or avatar. And although Stevie attempts to undercut Martin's love epiphany with irony ("I bet a psychiatrist would love all this" [81]), Albee needs Martin's feeling to be genuine in order to undo Stevie, and her cruelly parodic impersonation fails to diminish him. The strip of behaviour that fascinates Albee – the *act* of coming out – repeats in a single exchange that distills the action thus far:

STEVIE: (*Shaking her head; oddly objective*) How much do you hate me?

MARTIN: (*Hopeless*) I love you. (*Pause*) And I love *her*. (*Pause*) And there it is.

(*Stevie howls three times, slowly, deliberately; a combination of rage and hurt*)
(82; emphasis in original)

It is here that the play runs into dramaturgical trouble, and Billy re-enters in part to divert the audience. Why doesn't Stevie insist that her poor,

deranged husband immediately see a doctor? Because a goat cannot reciprocate human sexual love, Martin, who insists on Sylvia's ensoulment as well as the mutuality of their love, must be "sick" indeed (but in a different way than Ross will later accuse him of being – that is, disgusting). Stevie voices the critique that Martin, and the play, cannot tackle head on and remain peritragic: "You take advantage of this . . . creature!? You . . . *rape* this . . . animal and convince yourself that it has to do with *love!*?" (87; emphasis in original). Martin is indeed guilty of human–animal rape, as well as of having delusions of reciprocal desire. But Stevie's rage at this point is unmixed with concern for her husband's sanity and/or animal welfare; rather, she experiences his queer infidelity as narcissistic wound. For the play to acknowledge that Martin has a potentially curable illness would undercut the tragedy, taking it from *pharmakos* to pharmacy, as it were. Whatever happens next between them, Stevie is felled: "You have brought me down to *nothing!*" (89; emphasis in original). She feels debased by the *idea* of queer love, by the thought that Martin's sexual organ has also been inside an animal: "But tell me you love me and an animal – both of us! – equally? The same way?" (88). Struck by hunger for revenge, Stevie storms off at the end of scene two to hunt down Sylvia.

As for the goat, Albee has no interest in Sylvia's desires except as Martin (mis)interprets them. She is the object of desire in the play but not its subject. For Albee, Martin's love for Sylvia represents any queer taboo that heteronormativity (and in this case, marriage) cannot accommodate and survive. To underscore this very point, *The Goat* flirts with another, arguably riskier taboo: incest between Martin and Billy ("You'll be fucking Billy next," remarks Stevie [85]). Billy is the "kid" who, as a baby on Martin's lap, probably once provoked an erection and who shares an onstage kiss with Martin that briefly turns erotic. Had Billy been the object of Martin's new affections instead of a goat, and had that love been reciprocated, the problem of animal rape would disappear while leaving intact Albee's provocation: what are the limits of our own tolerance? Unlike a goat, a seventeen-year-old can at least verbally accede to, or protest, sex with an adult. Mutual eroticized love between father and son, even when construed as child abuse, is credible, if deplorable; mutual love between man and goat is delusional. *The Goat* substitutes bestiality for incest (or else why double the Billy/goat?) but ultimately skirts the implications of the latter because a husband falling for his own son, and vice versa, is not as existentially threatening to a wife as another woman (or goat).⁴ For the play to escape melodrama and become tragic, Albee must cast Sylvia not as mute rape victim (like, say, Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*) but as scapegoat. Disturbingly, Sylvia's right to be left alone by Martin *and* Stevie never takes precedence over the couple's obsessions. For the play to take Sylvia seriously would be to make it about animal abuse,

which it de facto is. The play's humanism is speciesist, if by that term we mean that human interests count more than animal ones and that animals are granted dignity only to the extent that they serve or illuminate human needs and fantasies.

Scene three returns us to utterance as queerly performative, at once transformational and tragic. An hour has passed, and Billy comes upon Martin sitting in the ruins of their living room. Billy's line "You guys really had it out, hunh" (91) takes a clichéd idiom and interrogates it. For what exactly can be brought "out" between two "guys"? In answer to Billy's query about whether he has killed Stevie, Martin says, "No, I did not kill her – of *course* not – but I think I might as well have. I think we've killed each other" (92; emphasis in original). The spouses, like the play, now occupy a queer linguistic space in which words have become deeds. As Bailin observes, Martin is in a kind of linguistic free fall (or, perhaps, Gray area): "He can neither deny nor refute the 'wrong' language other people use to talk about his situation, but neither can he find the 'right' language to represent it" (19). The couple's deperformative acts are irreversible, and Martin's irritated "Stop asking me what I mean!" emphasizes that it is what language does and not what it means that matters here. Martin explicitly frames Stevie's recent performance as a definitive speech act: "She said what she wanted to say; she finished . . . and she left. She slammed the front door and left" (93). Martin seems to assume that, by slamming the door, Nora-like, Stevie has completed her performance and left the doll-house of marriage, ending the action. But to see Stevie as Nora is to fatally miscast her. She has embraced her new role as tragic heroine with a vengeance.

As if to prove the point that performativity speaks character into being, Martin "[c]an't help saying" that the "[f]urious" Billy mixes his metaphors (Billy has become Martin's castigating Fury, descending like Freud's superego from his upstairs room) (94). When Billy insists that Martin repeat Stevie's curtain line, Martin significantly omits her "Christ": "You have brought me down, and . . . I will bring you down with me" (96). As Butler notes, a threat is a quintessential performative: "Although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language, a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force" (*Excitable Speech* 9). Reinscribing Stevie's Christian oath as pagan threat, then, Martin glosses Stevie's line as the very definition of tragic justice: "It means . . . (*fails*) it means what it says: that you have done to me what cannot be undone and . . . and you won't get away with it" (97). Stevie's line means what it says because it *does* what it says. "You won't get away with it" plants us firmly in the genre of revenge tragedy, where justice requires that the avenger become the deed's creature. Despairing Martin makes notes toward a definition of tragedy for Billy's

benefit: “That’s English, too: one of your courses!” (93). Yet he adds, “I don’t know that there are any rules for where we are” (97) – Aristotle no longer being a reliable guide to the Gray landscape.

Billy’s pain builds to the moment when he embraces Martin and kisses him on the lips, an action secretly witnessed by Ross. Martin allows the kiss to turn erotic but then shoves Billy away. When Billy repeats “Dad! I *love* you! Hold me! Please!” Martin holds and strokes him, inviting further (non-sexual) embrace (102; emphasis in original). Ross makes his presence known, and it is Martin’s turn to be furious, defending the father–son kiss as a tender, if confused, expression of filial love. Here Martin emblemizes queer tolerance, voicing the love for his son that Miller’s Willy Loman never manages (could a queer kiss between Biff and Willy Loman have saved them, as it damns Eddie Carbone in *A View From The Bridge*): “This boy is hurt! I’ve hurt him, and he still loves me! You fucker! He loves his father, and if it . . . clicks over and becomes – what? – sexual for . . . just a moment . . . so what? So fucking what!? He’s hurt and he’s lonely and mind your own fucking business!” (103). Billy’s “incestuous” kiss tested the limits of Martin’s tolerance, as it now tests that of the audience.⁵ Martin’s love for Sylvia has taught him to accept love in all its forms, no matter how shocking or threatening. Billy’s reference to his fellow male pupils as “kids” underscores father–son incest and man–goat relations as parallel markers of social intolerance (102). Martin heroically refuses shame in the face of Ross’s revulsion, and he tries to free Billy from shame as well – his finest moment as a parent in the play.

In this particular passion play, Martin casts Ross as “Judas!” (103), and Ross shows his true colours as he beats the bounds of sexual correctness with a queer-shaming performative: “You’re sicker than I thought” (103). Ross even succumbs to a textbook case of homosexual panic: “Jesus! Sick! What is it . . . contagious?” (104). To reassure Billy, and to educate Ross, Martin tells the story of the “friend” who was given an erection by the squirming “kid” on his lap. Once his involuntary erection subsides, the man realizes that “nothing was connected to anything else” (105). Sexuality – or the sexual response in the putative absence of sexual desire – becomes less a matter of identity than of performativity, the discontinuous moments that create the illusion of a firm sexual identity behind one’s acts.

At this point, Albee turns didactic. Martin responds to Ross’s caricatured bigotry with a truism of queer theory:

ROSS: Getting hard with a baby! Is there anything you people don’t get off on?
[. . .]

MARTIN: Is there anything anyone doesn’t get off on, whether we admit it or not – whether we *know* it or not? (105–6; emphasis in original)

Since the Unconscious is pansexual, it makes no sense to proscribe certain desires as unnatural, nor to divide humanity into the straight and the gay, as do all the characters in the beginning of the play. Martin's defence of Billy's kiss – and of all non-normative desire, including the erotics of the Cross – is, from the play's standpoint, queerly ennobling. (At this point, one might add, Martin has little left to lose by calling out Ross's bigotry; one might as well be hung for a kid as a goat.)

Undercutting his own heroism, Martin still blames Ross for his own disaster and refuses to take responsibility for it. Had it not been for Ross's letter, he claims, he could have "worked it out" (106). Now "nothing can *ever* be put back together! *Ever!*" (107; emphasis in original). But Ross is agent rather than cause of tragedy. Martin has faced a stark choice since the action began: to stay in the closet and live the lie of his marriage or to come out as loving Sylvia and blow it up. Ross defends outing Martin by telling him that he would have been caught sooner or later and not just disgraced but imprisoned. A lightbulb goes off: Martin realizes that, for hypocritical Ross (i.e., society), all that matters is not getting caught. Since Ross's "don't ask, don't tell" ethics extend to the limits of whatever one can get away with, Ross is outside the tragedy. He lays nothing on the line. An enemy of the people, as it were, Martin is now "*alone . . . all . . . alone!*" (109; emphasis in original).

Martin's insight into social hypocrisy – that he has staked all on honesty, when society only cares about decorum – is an ironized anagnorisis, and the tragic climax duly commences with a sound at the door. Stevie enters "*dragging a dead goat. The goat's throat is cut; the blood is down Stevie's dress, on her arms. She stops*" (109).⁶ It is a dangerous stage moment that risks the audience's laughter and even derision. "What have you done!? Oh, my God, what have you *done!*?" Martin implores, and then howls in agony (110; emphasis in original). His Nietzschean god – the transcendent, Dionysian, erotic union of man and goat – is dead. Stevie's rationale is simple: "She loved you . . . you say. As much as *I* do" (110; emphasis in original). Tragic justice has been served: Martin is doomed by his fidelity to a queer love that refused the closet. Stevie comments evenly, "Why are you surprised? What did you expect me to do" (110). Stevie has followed the play's performative logic to its tragic end. Martin's transgression demands, if not his own death, then that of a scapegoat. Martin cries "What did she *do!*? What did she ever *do!*?" and repeats his hollow "I'm sorry" (110; emphasis in original). Billy ends the play with a question that puts the family's survival in doubt: "Dad? Mom?" (110).

Perhaps Billy is questioning whether Martin and Stevie are in fact his "real" parents in the play's final line. If Billy is adopted, he himself is the scapegoat, or changeling, taking on the burden of his parents' suffering, like the imaginary child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* According to Boróka

Prohászka Rád, the play subverts the idea of a single scapegoat by dispersing the role of tragic victim among all three Grays, thus destabilizing “any interpretation that would try to force this elusive work within the limits of a set theoretical system” (151).

Albee’s decision to stage the dead body of a goat is disturbing. Is there even a flash of Stanley Kowalski’s notorious “Meat!” in Stevie’s “Here” as she dumps the goat’s carcass on the stage (110)? Since the audience will not take the property-goat, however verisimilar, as a real body, the carcass highlights Albee’s departure from realism. It is a metatheatrical moment: the dead goat recalls the skinned lamb carcass mistaken for that of a goat at the end of Sam Shepard’s 1978 play *Curse of the Starving Class*, as well as mad Ajax slaughtering the sheep (and himself) on stage at the end of Sophocles’ *Ajax*. For John Kuhn, “Sylvia’s corpse forces Martin to face the full consequences of his act” (23), whereas Una Chaudhuri argues that the play ultimately imposes “faciality” on Sylvia (Martin is obsessed with her gaze) only to reduce that face to a carcass, “the violent reduction of the animal to the condition of pure physiology” (16). According to this logic, the animal must again be animalized, “a manoeuvre made necessary by its endless figural transformations” (16). However emblematically we read the carcass, at the very moment Stevie finally genders Sylvia (“She loved you” [110]), the play literally objectifies Sylvia as a prop. As Gainor indicates, “Stevie ultimately cannot accept an equation of herself with another kind of animal” (214). Albee aims for pity and terror here, not farce. Concomitantly, he focuses our attention on Martin’s grief and contrition rather than on the innocent victim. There seems to be no sense that Stevie herself deserves to or will be brought to justice for slaughtering Sylvia. Fitting attention has been paid, and that is all. The play has left realism, and conventional notions of morality and justice, behind, except in the court of audience response.

Both sign and thing, Sylvia is Albee’s dramatic device to move Martin from furtive bad faith to tragic dignity, at the price of his family and his stature. Perhaps gender, which is what got Sylvia into trouble in the first place, is itself a performative imposition, for does Sylvia ever experience *herself* as female or feminine? How could one know? In its dramaturgical failure to reckon with the implications of animal abuse – rape by one human, slaughter by another – the play recalls Chekhov’s eponymous seagull, which, offered to Nina by Treplev as a token, pointedly fails to signify poetically. For Chekhov, as for Nina, the seagull refuses tragedy or even symbolism; it is simply a dead bird. In *The Goat*, Sylvia’s corpse arguably becomes the most inefficacious performative of all. A basic problem for taking Martin’s love seriously/spiritually, as Albee seems to want us to do if the play is to be more than an exercise in *épater le bourgeois*, is that a goat, whatever its capacity to love, lacks

language. Sylvia's eyes, rather than her mouth, must do the work of amorous consent and ratify Martin's attraction, obsession, addiction, delusion, or devotion – however we choose to read it.

If one reads the play as tragedy, however, Martin's love for Sylvia martyzes him and, perhaps, villainizes Stevie by the end – even if she discovers who she really is (more than the flower arranger she was in scene one). “Ultimately, Martin brings suffering upon his wife, his son, and himself, but Albee's work always maintains that with suffering comes growth,” Clum writes (186). A highly moralistic play, *The Goat* challenges us to suspend or at least question our negative judgments of all non-normative loving attachments and sexual practices, however painful or difficult our prejudices are to confront. To label *that* – whatever *that* is – as beyond the (sexual) pale is to become a Ross Tuttle. Martin's love affair symbolizes any and all queer forms of love that threaten social and sexual norms, including the “bedrock” institution of marriage, long a fascination for Albee. “The play is about love, and loss, the limits of our tolerance and who, indeed, we really are,” he concedes; bestiality was merely “a generative matter” (“About This Goat” 262).

As a device, the goat handily stands for whatever is beyond our liberal tolerance. Sylvia is at once metaphor and scapegoat. And to the extent that her very subjectivity is conjured into being only by becoming the named object of Martin's desire, “Sylvia” represents the magical power of performativity itself. Unfortunately, the play's ethical stance comes up against the limits of its own symbolism. Because Sylvia is an animal incapable of verbally consenting to sexual acts, Martin's affair with her cannot but be human–animal rape, and his belief that she returns his love cannot but be delusional. For what sort of man gazes into an animal's eyes and sees love – or at least desire – staring back? Sylvia's sexual exploitation and slaughter underscore the play's denial of Sylvia's subjectivity despite its efforts to name, gender, and queer her as tragic scapegoat. *The Goat* may ultimately fail as a tragedy of the (queer) heart because Martin is more sinning than sinned against. But then Albee has craftily set himself the task not of producing tragedy but of moving toward a definition of it, and the musical “notes” that compose his drama are explosive speech acts. “What if language has within it its own possibilities for violence and for world-shattering?” asks Butler (*Excitable Speech* 6). Albee queers tragedy through deperformative speech itself, a violent undoing of the fabric of the real. The destructive potential of those acts, rather than Albee's use of shocking sexual metaphor, is the play's true core. And even if the play fails on its own tragic terms by using animal rape as metaphor for queer love, it is what words do, and undo, that ultimately makes (and un-makes) all the difference to Albee's queerly deperformative poetics.

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NOTES

1. “That play isn’t about goat-fucking. What I wanted people to do is not just sit there being judges of the characters. I wanted people to go to that play, and imagine themselves in the situation, and really think hard about how they would respond if it was happening to them” (Albee, “Borrowed Time” 284).
2. The play was dropped from the anthology’s third edition (2017).
3. This intertextual echo – which, to my knowledge, no critic or reviewer has registered – indexes the distance travelled between the smirkingly farcical premise of *The Goat* (so seemingly close to the spirit of Allen’s movie) and its gathering tragic force.
4. It may also be that a focus on the incest taboo would too closely recall Eddie Carbone, Miller’s tragic longshoreman protagonist in *A View from the Bridge* (1955), whose repressed passion for his niece Catherine destroys his family. Eddie insists on the purity of his love for Catherine, while Alfieri, Miller’s Greek chorus, sees “something perversely pure” in Eddie’s death (72). The erotic kiss between Martin and Billy recalls the queer kiss between Eddie and his niece’s boyfriend, Rodolpho. Interestingly, Miller’s introduction to the revised play rejects “psycho-sexual romanticism”; it is as if he were afraid of being infected by the sentimentality of Williams or Inge (xii). Albee seems much less wary of audience empathy for Martin than Miller was of sympathy for Eddie, at least in the original staging. Unlike Martin Gray, Eddie Carbone self-destructs without ever coming out, even to himself.
5. In his *New York Times* video interview with Erik Olsen, Albee seems ruefully puzzled that the sexualized kiss provoked walk-outs. “I don’t know what they thought I’d done, they jumped up and kept leaving. And I said, ‘Really, is that the limit of our tolerance? Where are we as a civilization?’”
6. The play never explains exactly how Stevie locates and identifies the correct animal. The stage direction leaves open the possibility that she has killed a random goat (the scapegoat’s scapegoat) and that Martin, in his grief, cannot tell the difference. I have seen the play twice: at the Lyric Stage, Boston, in 2006 (dir. Spiro Veloudos) and Bad Habit Productions, Boston, in 2015 (dir. Daniel Morris). In neither case did the property-corpse convince *as* Sylvia.

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