S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

———————————

9:2 2023

The Country Wife.
Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

Contents

The Country Wife. Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

Miscellany

Special Section

Serena Demichelis*

Claire Gleitman. *Anxious Masculinity in the Drama of Arthur Miller and Beyond: Salesmen, Sluggers and Big Daddies*[1]

Abstract

This is a review of Claire Gleitman's *Anxious Masculinity in the Drama of Arthur Miller and Beyond: Salesmen, Sluggers and Big Daddies* (2022). The volume represents an insightful study of the figure of the 'anxious breadwinner' and its legacy in American drama up to the late 2010s. *Anxious Masculinity* offers theatre and literary scholars the opportunity to look at classic and contemporary American authors from a new angle, but it also significantly contributes to the broader cultural debate around gender dynamics.

Keywords: masculinity; drama; Arthur Miller; anxiety; gender dynamics

In the introductory pages of his 2015 edited volume, *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, Stefan Horlacher, quoting Vera Nünning, claims that "especially when discussing a potential crisis of masculinity, literary discourses become a privileged site for registering patriarchy's 'loss of legitimacy' and how 'different groups of men are now negotiating this loss in very different ways'" (2015, 4). He goes on to state that "in literary texts, we find both . . . self- as well as externally-determined or enforced configurations of masculinity as well as the very mechanisms of their production or enforcement" (2015, 6). While not a volume strictly concerned with the concept of masculinity (and masculinities) in literature at large, Claire Gleitman's *Anxious Masculinity in the Drama of Arthur Miller and Beyond* seems to start from similar assumptions on gender representation:

> [T]his book confronts the suited figure of the 1950s breadwinner – respectable, responsible, and distinctly anxious – as he makes his way across the American cultural scene and the American stage, both in the widely produced plays of Arthur Miller and, in varied fashions, in the plays of some of Miller's most notable playwriting contemporaries and descendants. (2022, 5)

Gleitman thus sets forth to investigate a crisis (to quote the term used by Horlacher) – specifically, that of "dissatisfaction" coming from "ideals of masculinity that are largely unobtainable . . . and that place males and females intractably at odds with one another in terms of their values, their hopes, and their self-perceptions" (2022, 4).

According to Gleitman, Miller's characters represent some sort of prototype of anxious male breadwinner – a figure that, throughout those decades and into the new century, has been faced with multiple and continuous challenges in his self-perception. By following an order that is both chronological and thematic, Gleitman's volume is thus articulated along the axis of masculinity and its representations, which are divided into macro-categories defining the historical and sociocultural frames the works and characters investigated belong to.

The book opens with an introduction entitled "The Prison House of Gender" – the image, particularly apt to describe males inhabiting (and struggling with) the worlds described by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, delineates the spatial and symbolic dimension of captive domesticity in which anxious masculinity is inscribed. This domesticity is to be meant in literal and broader terms – encompassing families, homes and societies at large. In a way, in fact, Gleitman's journey across various stages of anxious masculinity is one across stages of 'establishment'-anxiety – i.e. the fear of losing grip on power, typical of social categories traditionally associated with the maintenance of the status quo: white, heterosexual, privileged males. This is why, throughout the chapters, the author enlarges the scope of her analysis by engaging with issues pertaining not only to gender representation, but also class, sexual orientation and race.

Gleitman opens her volume with a quotation from a letter Miller wrote to Marilyn Monroe shortly before their marriage. The quote perfectly outlines the tensions and complexities of "domestic space and a male's relationship to it" (1), which were thoroughly explored in post-War theatre and left "a lasting mark on the American drama of the ensuing seven decades" (ibid.). Emblematic Miller characters like Willy Loman, Eddie Carbone and John Proctor, in fact, all struggle, though in different terms, with both their identity as males and with their relationship with women and "the feminine" at large. This is partially the result of a gendered polarisation whose "linchpin", according to Gleitman, and as she explains in chapter one ("Strudel and the Single Man"), "is a philosophical conflict between idealism and practicality" (21) – a conflict that is never resolved, no matter how much such a resolution is desired by characters, in Miller's plays. In these works, breadwinning men, traditionally associated with practicality, start losing their role and developing homosocial idealistic fantasies, thus incurring an overturning of values and mores that they do not find easy to deal with. After

all, Miller's protagonists are notoriously divided in binomial conflicts: by his own admission,[2] what the playwright tried to represent in his works was the struggle of men trying to be whole – "psyche and citizen, individual subject and social actor" (Murphy 1997, 12). Perhaps, however, Miller failed to see how intrinsically gendered this perspective was.[3] The generalised turmoil he strives to represent, in fact, is channeled and thematised in different ways throughout Miller's plays via categories which Gleitman aptly summarises, employing images such as witchcraft, clearly related to the interpretation of male/female relationships in *The Crucible*, and "the weird", the adjective used to describe Rodolpho in *A View from the Bridge* and which unveils Eddie's – and, in a way, a broadly "male" – attitude towards queerness.

The theme of subverted heteronormativity emerges in and permeates Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which Gleitman devotes her third chapter to. While she claims that she does not wish to identify instances of "influence" (83) between Miller and Williams, she is nonetheless confident that the shared context in which the authors wrote necessarily contributed to the elaboration of characters (and plays) resonating with one another. For the purposes of this analysis, it is worth mentioning that one core difference in Williams's works when compared to those of his fellow playwright is that characters like Stanley Kowalski are significantly more capable of performing – and, consequently, affirming – their masculinity in the context they live in. Taking the example of the protagonist of *Streetcar*, we see how Stanley manages to overcome several obstacles and establish the dominion of white heteronormativity in his exploitation of Blanche's hostility and in denying the degree to which being Polish can impair his whiteness. His success, in short, almost *depends* on the challenges he meets along the way, because they represent an opportunity to perform. Similarly, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* the instability affecting masculinity is "papered over" (110) by an act of performance – namely, openly "embracing heteronormativity" (ibid.) and hypermasculinity (111).

In the decades following the immediate post-War period, elements challenging masculinity and its prerogatives started characterising plays and protagonists in an increasingly marked way. With chapter four, Gleitman opens what we may consider the second part of her volume; the last three chapters of the book are in fact devoted to as many macro-themes, which can

[2] Miller gives a full account of his outlook on this subject in "On Social Plays", the essay included as preface to the first edition of *A View from the Bridge*.

[3] As Gleitman notes, Miller was fairly reluctant to acknowledge the relevance of gender inequality in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (24), despite the Norwegian playwright being one of his models; in a way, it is as if Miller wanted to represent this gendered conflict or divide without recognising its toll on the female characters of his plays.

be summarised as class, queerness and race, in playwrights active between the 1960s and our present times.

Focusing on the works of Lorraine Hansberry, Sam Shepard and August Wilson, chapter four ponders the weight of economic disadvantage and marginalisation as playing a central role in shaping anxious masculinity in the decades starting from the 1960s. In Gleitman's words,

> [c]ulturally, of course, a great deal changed in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as many Americans engaged in a struggle to create a society whose opportunities could be available to a greater range of human beings. Still, historically disadvantaged groups struggled to find a foothold in a nation whose privileges continued to skew strongly toward white males. (113)

The male father figure in the domesticities represented by such playwrights is not immune to the charm of power and patriarchal ideology. However, he is no longer able to play the part of the troubled yet successful breadwinner – on the contrary, these fathers and husbands' dysfunctional attitude towards their feelings, work and finances brings them and/or their families to the verge of (or to) economic collapse. To better understand the kind of character inhabiting these plays, let us take a look at stage directions in *Fences*: "Troy is fifty- three years old, a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with. Together with his blackness, his largeness informs his sensibilities and the choices he has made in his life." *Fences* is part of Wilson's *American Century Cycle*, a series of ten plays meant to cover every decade of the twentieth century. Set in the 1950s, the play depicts a *milieu* reminiscent of Miller and Williams's works, but it displays a much more acute awareness about the implications of both racial *and* class struggle. Troy Maxson is presented as a working-class Black man, and spectators immediately hear and see him discussing work *and* race issues together:

> TROY Now what he look like getting mad 'cause he see the man from the union talking to Mr. Rand?
> BONO He come talking to me about . . . 'Troy Maxson gonna get us fired.' I told him to get away from me with that. He walked away from me calling you a troublemaker. (*Anxious*) What Mr. Rand say?
> TROY Ain't said nothing. He told me to go down to the commissioner's office next Friday. They called me down there to see them.

Troy is thus immediately characterised as a "troublemaker", someone who turns to unions and tries to defend his rights. At the same time, he knows that his wishes and desires as a working-class man are inextricably linked to his being Black, as the very next scene in the play testifies: "You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck? That ain't no paper job. Hell,

anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all the whites driving and the coloreds lifting?". As Gleitman puts it,

> Wilson's Troy expresses no nostalgia for the lost American frontier, never a locus of freedom for African American writers. Yet he does display a restlessness rooted in a journeying impulse that his wife arguably seeks to contain—or, more aptly here, to fence—as well as heroic longings that his status as a Black man inhibits. Troy thus becomes a bully because of the frustration engendered in him by his inability to be what he calls at one point "a different man"—by which he means a man unimpeded not only by racism but also by domestic expectations. (131)

The markedly liberal dream chased by prototypical anxious breadwinners is shared by Troy, though with necessarily different premises dictated by his racial and social status.

Chapter 5 moves on to the topic of the intersection between anxious masculinity and queerness by focusing on plays such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Paula Vogel's *How I learned to drive* and Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron's *Fun Home*. Gleitman's focus, here, is not so much on positive queer characters such as Louis and Prior in *Angels*, but on negative ones, and specifically on father or semi-father figures struggling with what they (or societal and ethical norms) regard as unacceptable desires. While in one of the cases the unacceptability is universally recognisable and agreeable upon (*Fun Home*'s Uncle Peck is, in fact, a pedophile), in other instances characters are denying their homosexuality and living with the ensuing turmoil and confusion. Emblematic in this respect is the fictionalised Roy Cohn we find in *Angels in America*: "Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys" (Kushner 1995, 46). The quote, which Gleitman also uses to exemplify Cohn's closeted identity (146), is indeed symptomatic of a whole mindset – one that acknowledges the terrible truth: *what one is* may end up establishing *who one is*, but we can change that by denying our identity.[4] This clash between *what* and *who* results from the fear of losing privilege and authority, which can only be maintained if everything stays the same. Cohn finds a chance to deny the inevitable collapse of his status, caused by his deteriorating health due to AIDS, in reinstating a father-son relationship with Joe Pitt, another closeted homosexual man and a more positive character in the play. Moreover, he denies having AIDS and lives (and dies) in the pretense of suffering from liver cancer, a disease with a more

---

[4] A point that Cohn makes in the same context. Indeed, he clearly refuses to be called homosexual on the grounds of his own self-hatred and shame, but he also makes it very clear that homosexuality is incompatible with his political identity as a man in and of power.

markedly 'heterosexual' connotation. This condemns him to a stasis soon to become irreversible – Cohn in the play dies, just like Cohn in real life, shortly after retiring from the public sphere. In the plays investigated in this chapter, as in others presented elsewhere in the volume,[5] the immobilism *vs* mobility scenario corresponds to a masculine *vs* feminine one: as Gleitman notes,

> it is a female who achieves some degree of liberating mobility that permits her to leave a more static male figure behind. All three plays link psychological progression with sexual and aesthetic fluidity, in the characters' lives, their art, and the plays' own forms. By contrast, the chief patriarchal figures in each play—Roy Cohn, Uncle Peck, and Bruce Bechdel—are paralyzed, on "Hold," and haunted by demons whose origins they are determined not to see. (168)

The final chapter in *Anxious Masculinity* deals with plays which "all ask their (likely predominantly white) audiences whether Blacks in America can ever be freed from performing for a simultaneously uncomprehending and appropriating white gaze" (171). Of the three works considered in this chapter, *Fairview* by J.S. Drury is perhaps the one which more explicitly dramatises this question. In it, it becomes evident that the status quo, which has apparently enlarged to accommodate people traditionally left on the margins – as the Frasiers, the African American protagonist family – is still more powerful than any apparent progress. Moreover, it is clear that it weighs unbearably on the shoulders of marginalised people – as is expressed quite literally by one of the characters, Keisha, who laments that she feels held back in life by some unspeakable force. The Black characters of the play seem to have reached that level of neoliberal wealth that their earlier, working-class fellow characters had been barred from (as in *Fences* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, both analysed in chapter four); however, this is not enough for them to be considered 'full-fledged human beings' by white people, who keep fetishising, appropriating and colonising their lives. This process becomes literal in the play, where previously invisible white characters appear in the final act to take over the role of absent members of the Black protagonist family. Chapter six hence emphasises all the more powerfully what has been briefly stated at the beginning of this review, something that, in Gleitman's words, "make[s] starkly visible what will have been covertly evident before" (6) – i.e., that "anxious masculinity cloaks an anxious whiteness" (6). The immobilism resulting from the anxiety of the establishment emerges here as one of the most problematic issues of American society – namely, that of race and the legacy of slavery.

In conclusion, *Anxious Masculinity in the Drama of Arthur Miller and Beyond* successfully reaches its aim of showing how preoccupations which

---

[5] As for example *The Crucible*.

characterised the immediate post-War years in the United States were absorbed and re-elaborated by Arthur Miller in his works, and how his prototype of the anxious breadwinner reverberated in the following decades. The book devotes comparatively less space to the analysis of Miller's characters in and of themselves, with only two chapters explicitly dealing with four plays – *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*. However, Loman, Proctor and Carbone are constantly resurfacing in other chapters; far from being misleading (after all, Miller's is the only name appearing in the title), this choice helps avoiding the traps awaiting anyone choosing to deal with a classic (i.e., critical repetition and redundancy). The author successfully manages to show her expertise on the subject while at the same time bringing forward fresh and captivating insights on American drama – one example being, for instance, a re-reading of *The Crucible* which barely touches upon the political interpretation of the play (chapter 3).

While the main linking thread in the volume is undoubtedly represented by the analysis of characters, Gleitman manages to maintain a strong argumentative coherence also thanks to a thorough investigation of shared themes, as for instance by recognising the problematisation of race relations in Miller's *The Crucible* as well as Kushner's *Angels*, or that of male homosexual desire in Williams, outside of chapters explicitly connected to such issues. The author's knowledge and multidisciplinary expertise as both an academic and drama teacher surfaces in her understanding of the subtle nuances and layers of performance, which are clearly the result of an eye not limited to scholarly scrutiny. *Anxious Masculinity* is thus both a valuable resource for researchers in drama and theater studies *and* a fascinating investigation into a specific cultural and literary phenomenon, addressed in a clear and approachable manner. At the same time, the volume contributes to a debate which goes beyond the immediate context of theatre and drama and involves contemporary, relevant issues more broadly. Discourses around masculinity and masculinity studies, when conducted in these terms, are indeed necessary to develop a full-fledged criticism of patriarchal systems and their representations. In an age ever more concerned with dismantling and debunking toxic discourses around gender, Gleitman's volume represents an insightful resource for carrying awareness practices in the world of literature and literary studies.

Works Cited

Horlacher, Stefan, ed. 2015. *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice.* Leiden, Boston: Brill / Rodopi.

Murphy, Brenda. 1997. "The Tradition of Social Drama: Miller and His Forebears." In *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, edited by Christopher Bigsby, 10-20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.