Authorizing History: Victimization in
A Streetcar Named Desire

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In a remark characteristic of judgments passed on modern drama, a critic notes that if Shakespeare had written A Streetcar Named Desire, it would have been called a "problem" play.¹ Like Elizabethan and later "problem" plays, themselves so dubbed because "the term gives least offense," A Streetcar Named Desire raises questions about genre and ethics, as well as about performance and audience response.² While the ideology of dramatic genre conceals the victimization inherent in tragic and comic form, both the "problem" plays of earlier centuries and the "crisis" plays of the twentieth tend rather to unmask the violence involved in victimization. This unmasking has disturbed critics and audiences alike. The "problem" comes from the strategies that these plays deploy to implicate the viewer in their violent processes of historiography—the processes of constructing a narrative of the characters' pasts—instead of purging the viewer of emotions associated with crises. A Streetcar Named Desire makes explicit an issue announced, but still undeclared, in earlier "problem" plays, namely, the narrative authority of history-makers and story-tellers versus the dramatic representation of the victims of that authority.

Academic criticism of A Streetcar Named Desire has been directed primarily toward the ethical and generic aspects of the play, and has focused on whether the play can be classified as a tragedy. In general, critical interpretations that take generic forms as

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normative attempt to contain the disturbances produced by generically liminal plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, plays in which the values that lead to the installation of genre as norm come into question. For instance, in a sweeping indictment of twentieth-century drama, Raymond Williams argues that the "rhythm of tragedy"—which in the classical age made the sacrifice of the hero regenerative—is gone; what we have instead is a resignation to general guilt among audiences who identify with a victimized hero. This nostalgia for the regenerative sacrifice of classicism overlooks the hypocrisy of catharsis both on stage and off: the crisis on stage resolved by murderous unanimity, the audience purged of the very emotions that might lead to rejecting violence as a means of regeneration.

Most of the criticism of *A Streetcar Named Desire* concerns itself either with Tennessee Williams's failure to achieve a unified generic tone or, more obsessively, with the main character as a separately functioning unit of the performance. The generic and ethical yardsticks used to measure the play's success show that *A Streetcar Named Desire* fails either because it has no ethics (i.e., no moral instruction for the audience), or because it is a "modern tragedy," in the terms of Raymond Williams, rather than an Aristotelian tragedy. Critics who regard the play neither as typical of the failure of tragedy in the modern age, nor as an anomaly among modern plays, nor yet as a successful tragedy attempt to domesticate the violence at the center of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by treating the play as realistic drama. They propose that the course of history makes the main character's displacement inevitable and that her violation and expulsion are "natural."

Apart from the generic unintelligibility ascribed to the play, the portrayal of the hero, Blanche, has led to readings based on standards other than aesthetic ones, judgments which, though violently opposed in their reactions to Blanche, concur in their exclusive focus on the hero as the moral key to the play. Perceptions of Blanche as the sole representative of sensibility destroyed by a callous society stand side by

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4 My use of the word "hero" rather than heroine emphasizes the active centrality of Blanche Dubois to *A Streetcar Named Desire*. 
side with descriptions of her as sexually immoral or as a prostitute and nymphomaniac. Some critics feel so strongly about Blanche that they envision her death at the end of the play, even if the plot only allows us to see her carried off to the asylum. Responses to performances, as reported by directors and reviewers, are not as one-sided as the academic responses to the text because they contain a deep ambivalence: the savage rejection of Blanche combines with the discomfort of identifying with her destroyer and accepting the circumstances that make him triumph.

Although purists unquestionably differ from the audiences who enjoy the play "for the wrong reasons," the responses of both groups point to certain deficiencies in the generic and ethical approaches that have been taken toward A Streetcar Named Desire. If generic criticism has tended to remain neo-Aristotelian, it has conveniently discarded Aristotle's caution about the limitations of women heroes and the implications of his remarks. Consequently, the single-minded concentration on the personality of the hero and the search for a flaw that explains his/her downfall, which have been applied to A Streetcar Named Desire since its first performance in 1947, and the Aristotelian focus with its constricted view of women have brought to the fore only certain aspects rather than the central concerns of the play. The larger context of the ethics represented by the play has also suffered from a critical standpoint dominated by a firm faith in the progress of history. Thus, instead of being examined critically, the violence in A Streetcar Named Desire becomes symbolic of the necessary and inevitable evolution from past to present.

By bringing literary applications of anthropology as well as deconstructionist and feminist methods of reading to A Streetcar Named Desire, criticism can move beyond the urge to classify the play generically, toward a questioning of the desire for control

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8 Jordan Y. Miller in his "Introduction" to Twentieth Century Interpretations writes of Blanche's end. "the destruction of one whose rich humanity can only be recognized in death," 12: in a 1947 review entitled "Masterpiece," in Twentieth Century Interpretations. 45. Irving Shaw writes, "she [Blanche] is as real to us as if she were a living woman put to the torture and done to death in our own front parlor."

9 In a statement of remarkable moral ambiguity recorded in his "Notebook for A Streetcar Named Desire," in Twentieth Century Interpretations, 22, Elia Kazan, the famous first director of the play, writes that audiences first identify with Stanley in wanting to tell Blanche off, but then realize that "they are sitting in at the death of something extraordinary"; Clurman. p. 78, who considers Stanley a proto-fascist figure, detects a more sinister attitude on the part of the audience when he suggests that Stanley triumphs "with the collusion of the audience, which is no longer on the side of the angels"; Falk. p. 175, reports that during the rape scene "waves of titillated laughter swept over the audience."

of the canon that underlies such urges. The play’s generic indeterminacy results not in a distancing, but rather in an inability, almost a refusal, to crystallize emotions on either side of the issues raised. While the oppositions set up in A Streetcar Named Desire between past and present, soul and body, and death and life have been examined exhaustively, it is the conflict between two versions of history struggling for authority that should be salient for us in the light of twentieth-century historical experience. The lucidity of Williams’s representation appears in the impartial view of the combat which he gives us between two antagonists and in a resolution that does not sentimentalize the victimization of the loser as an ascension to a more glorious world. Swayed by alternating sympathetic identifications, audiences arrive at a sense of the arbitrariness involved in history-making and its attendant victimization. They perceive that historical discourse depends on power, not logic, for its formation.

For all the struggle for authority over the interpretation of past and future that takes place in the more generically normative Oedipus Rex, the plot has been determined by the Delphic oracle, and no amount of Sophoclean subversion could shake his audience’s faith in the divinely authorized version of the story, hence in its predisposition to pity and terror. Williams, on the contrary, predisposes us for nothing so much as uncertainty. Some may argue that Blanche’s Southern accent and plantation origins mark her inescapably for victimization, given the turns taken by American history, as does Oedipus’s name. Yet the hidden determinism ultimately uncovered by Williams’s play has less to do with the history of the South as we now have it than with gender-determined exclusion from the larger historical discourse.

I

From the perspective of a conflict between different versions of history, scrutinizing Blanche at the expense of the other characters and of the theatrical context gives as lop-sided a picture of the play as would looking for Oedipus’s flaw without regard to the oracle. The ultimate measure of the struggle represented in A Streetcar Named Desire is the opposition of reason to unreason, of sanity to lunacy. Blanche’s fall from authority, her subjection, is masterfully captured by Williams in her being turned over to the supreme authority in charge of language, in charge of interpreting the past and predicting the future in the twentieth century: psychiatry, the scientific judgment of the soundness of the soul. Yet unlike the gods and their decrees, this final arbiter does not overtly envelop or determine the plot, so that the weight of authority oscillates throughout the play from Blanche to Stanley, giving it the seeming incoherence or

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generic indeterminacy that has troubled critics and audiences. Critics have noted astonishing similarities between these two antagonists, such as their love of costume, their charged sexual presence, their tendency to aggrandize themselves.\footnote{Normand Berlin, in “Complementarity in A Streetcar Named Desire,” \textit{Tennessee Williams: A Tribute}, 97–103, and June Schlue, “Imitating an Icon: John Erman’s Remake of Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire,” \textit{Modern Drama} 28 (1985): 139–47.}

In the crisis precipitated by questions of possession—of Belle Reve, of Stella’s loyalty, most importantly of oneself—the shifts of authority from one character to another carry with them the audience’s sympathy, so that perhaps the most disquieting revelation of the play is the audience’s willing submission to a character’s mastery of a situation, and in the end to that character’s version of events. But Williams intends to subvert the story-tellers, the history-makers, an intention that becomes clear in the stage business, such as the backdrop which becomes transparent at crucial moments and the contest between types of music and jungle noises. The visual and aural effects contradict the triumph of the narrative version accepted by all the characters but the one who is stripped of authority, dispossessed of authorship.

\textit{A Streetcar Named Desire} is made up of acts of “reading,” of interpretations of texts that range from documents and inscriptions—the Belle Reve papers and the words on Mitch’s cigarette case—to pictures and people. As they contest each other’s interpretive authority, Blanche and Stanley resort to similar emotional and linguistic strategies in order to gain ascendency. Why does Stanley’s act of reading win out over the more literate Blanche’s? Only here perhaps does Williams provide a clue about the outcome of the play: the name Blanche. Meaning both “white” and “blank,” the name seems predetermined to succumb to inscription, to be made other than itself. Not surprisingly, at the point at which the authority seems clearly to have shifted from Blanche, Stanley declares that Blanche is “no lily.” The pun of course does not explain, but merely foreshadows, Stanley’s ultimate triumph. Having been shown in the beginning as incapable of telling the difference between real and fake among Blanche’s remaining possessions, Stanley is finally given complete authority over his sister-in-law’s true colors.

Within the scope of the readings performed by characters in the play and by the audience, Stanley Kowalski moves from being a text for Blanche, even a cipher, to being an author of history. Blanche, who is an equally unknown quantity to Stanley, enters with limited authority which she alternately enlarges and loses throughout the first scene, and which she then regains in the second, during her confrontation with Stanley about Belle Reve. Although the mediating character, Stella, presents herself as an authority on both Stanley and Blanche, her passionate assertions about the true nature of each are disregarded by both, and are disproved at least in one instance by the plot. The other characters function as a chorus, a fairly undifferentiated unit that is swayed by the exercise of authority. Though more fully characterized, Mitch nevertheless serves as a normative measure of the gain and loss of ascendency of the two rivals.
Stanley's first appearance is mediated by two "readings": his wife's gentle reprimand for his manners, and the explicitly sexual interpretation that his throwing raw meat at Stella elicits from the two neighbor women. Blanche, by contrast, remains to be read by the audience. (Unlike the spectator, the reader is presented with Williams's stage directions that shape a perception of Blanche as a stage presence.) In the first scene Blanche reveals more directly than Stanley her strengths and weaknesses, and thus the sources of both her authority and her eventual loss of it. She comes inappropriately dressed, and, because she seems unable to merge the information written on a slip of paper with the place in which she finds herself, she seems lost.

Throughout the play Blanche's displacement isolates her. Her confidence is undermined by a setting in which she is unsure of the social conventions, the successful manipulation of which is indispensable for gaining and maintaining authority. Not only does Stanley dismiss her genteel protest, "Please don't get up," with "Nobody's going to get up, so don't be worried," but Stella, who has warned her about the inapplicability of her customs to the present setting, finds her sister's "superior attitude" "out of place." In effect, Blanche's relation to "place" resonates from the first scene, in which "this place," owned by Eunice and Steve, is contrasted with Blanche's "home-place, the plantation" (pp. 248, 249), the picture of which is variously interpreted by Eunice and Stanley. Blanche's affair with Mitch centers on her needing a place away from Stella and Stanley, and Mitch's rejection of her expresses itself in a refusal to bring her "home." Stanley's birthday present to her, the bus ticket to Laurel, serves only to underline his declaration "She's not stayin' here after Tuesday." Like Stella, he knows Blanche can return to no home.

If Blanche's displacement leaves her at a tremendous disadvantage when it comes to establishing her authority, her strengths are equally apparent. Her wit and learning allow her to express bewildered merriment over the names of New Orleans streetcars and their destination, Cemeteries and Elysian Fields. She situates herself within Stella's "place" by expanding the literary allusions when she refers to the L & N tracks as Poe's "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" (p. 252). Her insistence on defining the "conditions" according to which Stella has agreed to live gives her enough authority to put Stella on the defensive: "It's not that bad at all. New Orleans isn't like other cities" (p. 252). Like some of Stella's other assertions, this one is disproved in the course of the plot, in which New Orleans is shown to be very much like other cities, like other towns, and notably like Laurel, Mississippi.

Nowhere do Blanche's strengths have greater weight than in her confrontation with Stanley over the loss of Belle Reve. Having forced Stella to accept her story of how she lost the plantation by pitting her privations ("I...bled for it, almost died for it") against Stella's sensual satisfactions ("In bed—with your Polack"), Blanche remains off-stage for the first part of Scene Two, in which Stella feeblly attempts to convince Stanley of the truth of Blanche's account. Blanche's absence from the stage is less damaging than her presence in Scene One, which closes with her becoming ill in the

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13 Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams (New York: New Directions, 1971), 1, 290. All further quotations are from this edition.
presence of Stanley. In Scene Two, Stella repeatedly cautions Stan against making Blanche ill again: “she’ll go to pieces” (p. 273). Once more, Stella’s assertions are disregarded by the other characters, and she is disproved by plot developments. While Blanche is absent from the scene except as a singing voice, her physical being is replaced by her wardrobe trunk. It occasions the dispute about Blanche’s veracity that continues throughout the play. And curiously, it defends itself against Stanley’s attacks as successfully as Blanche does when she comes on stage, chiefly because it contains more than Stanley can fathom and resists his attempts at reduction. Blanche declares, “Everything that I own is in that trunk” (p. 281), and for the time being both owner and object successfully tell their story.

The violence against inanimate objects foreshadows the later victimization of the hero. In answer to Stella’s warnings about Blanche’s state of health, Stanley forces the trunk open and ravages its contents in an attempt to convince Stella that his suspicions about Blanche’s fraud are well-founded. But his physical strength is useless at this point, since his authority is undercut by his obvious and avowed ignorance of anything outside the immediate sphere of his experience. Twice Stanley is forced to invoke the authority of “acquaintances” who would be able to appraise Blanche’s furs and jewelry, already recognized as “inexpensive” and old by Stella. The third time, Stanley acknowledges directly to Blanche his incompetence in legal matters by announcing that he would consult a “lawyer acquaintance” about the Belle Reve papers.

Having begun as a stranger who is being discussed behind her back and whose possessions are being rifled for a clue about her criminality, Blanche rises in Scene Two to a position of authority vis-à-vis both Stella and Stanley. She rejects Stella’s protection and invents an errand for her in order to confront Stanley on her own. Despite Stanley’s attack on the trunk, she remains indisputably its owner, for at the same time that she places the Belle Reve papers in Stanley’s “big, capable hands” (p. 284), she proves to be the sole possessor of Belle Reve’s history and its end. More importantly, instead of going “to pieces,” she manages to regain the integrity that she herself has felt slipping away (“I’ve got to keep hold of myself”), an integrity that has been assaulted by Stanley and ill-defended by her sister.

The struggle for mastery between the two rivals begins as soon as they share the stage. Blanche attempts to subdue Stanley through her Southern-belle flirtation, a convention which he does not entirely understand but through which he is easily able to cut. She uses even more provocative behavior when he begins his speech about the Napoleonic code, and again Stanley counters her move with the crude but effective “Don’t play so dumb” (p. 281). Since Stanley’s experience with flirts, women who overvalue their good looks, and those who give men “ideas” about them seems vast, Blanche’s tactics fail. She begins to gain ascendancy over him only when she uses a language to describe her past and the history of Belle Reve that takes her out of Stanley’s ken, that makes her the woman about whom Mitch confesses, “I have never known anyone like you” (p. 343).

The two levels of discourse, Blanche’s evocative, diffuse, evasive language and Stanley’s direct, seemingly factual speech, point to a distinction based on gender and class that for a time works in Blanche’s favor, but ultimately defeats her. In Scene
One, Stanley admits that he “never was a very good English student,” but he immediately tries to erase that failing by making Blanche feel its irrelevance to his dominant position versus his higher-class, English-teaching sister-in-law: “How long you here for, Blanche?” (p. 267). In Scene Two, Stanley’s interpretation of the contents of Blanche’s trunk attempts to reduce them to the swindle that he suspects Blanche to have perpetrated on Stella—and more importantly, on him. Each item he examines becomes another piece of evidence in the case against Blanche: “a solid-gold dress,” “genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long,” “the treasure chest of a pirate,” “pearls! Ropes of them!” “And diamonds” (pp. 274–75). Stanley’s conclusion is that “there’s thousands of dollars invested in this stuff here” (p. 274), and that “here’s your plantation, or what was left of it, here” (p. 275). Neither Stella’s expertise (rhinestone is “next door to glass”) nor her repeated protests (“Don’t be such an idiot,” “you have no idea how stupid and horrid you’re being”) have any effect on Stanley because they merely counter his propositions, instead of changing the level of discourse.

Blanche, however, almost inadvertently seizes mastery from Stanley during their confrontation about Belle Reve. Her fierce defense of her “love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy” (p. 282) brings in a complexity that Stanley is at a loss to fathom, hence to reduce. Instead of the cold facts of legal papers into which Stanley thinks he will instantly read an indictment of Blanche, he is faced with scattered “poems” from the dead, texts of such evocative power that Blanche articulates directly the terms of their relationship: “I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can’t” (p. 282). Compared with this passionate defense of her inmost core, the intimate nature of which cannot permit another’s touch, the exchange of the legal papers becomes an anti-climax. Blanche is very much in control of Stanley as she relates the history of Belle Reve, one which he cannot hope to encompass as a comprehensible text: “There are thousands of papers, stretching back over hundreds of years” (p. 284). This text, like the New Orleans streetcar, leads, as Blanche puts it, to the “graveyard to which now all but Stella and I have retreated” (p. 284). To Stanley’s avowal of incompetence—“I have a lawyer acquaintance who will study these out”—she responds with grim humor, “Present them to him with a box of aspirin tablets” (p. 284), thereby deflating whatever remains of Stanley’s accusations. The dignity with which Blanche concludes this climactic confrontation with her antagonist makes Stanley later refer to her, repeatedly and enviously, as a “Queen.”

Stanley moves from bafflement over the love letters to sheepishness about his suspicions and attempts to retrieve lost ground by introducing another history, another ending, to Blanche’s account of Belle Reve—one to which he knows Blanche as a woman cannot remain insensible. He excuses his attack on her as the necessary action of the provider, since he and Stella will have a baby, who presumably will continue the story of Belle Reve beyond the graveyard. The respite following his announcement represents the harmony of an authority equally poised, for the moment, between the two rivals.

Blanche’s vying with Stanley for Stella, for a “place,” for the authority by which to assess life’s worth becomes more explosive in Scene Three (The Poker Night) and Scene Four, as each perfects his or her reading of the other and tries to enlist supporters for his or her own version of history. Just as Blanche’s anticipation of
courage — "Please don’t get up" — appears ridiculous and antiquated when applied to Stanley’s poker buddies, so Stanley’s exercise of authority over the women of the household seems irrationally excessive. Yet Stanley’s loss of self-control in the violent break-up of the poker game merely concludes the gradual seepage of authority from him to Blanche throughout the scene. When he orders Stella to “hush up,” she replies, “This is my house and I’ll talk as much as I want to” (p. 294). Soon after, as he perceives Mitch’s possible defection to Blanche’s side and becomes enraged by it, Stanley orders Blanche to turn off the radio. Even his remaining allies protest, “Aw, let the girls have their music,” “Sure, that’s good, leave it on” (p. 295).

As in the matter of Blanche’s trunk, physical violence becomes the response by which to subdue the female adversary. The increasing dissent makes Stanley try even harder to keep control over Mitch and the women. Repeatedly he bellows for Mitch to take his place in the poker game, while Mitch is magnetized by the feminine sphere of the bedroom, so defined by Stella and Blanche’s retreat to the inner room where they exchange confidences and laughter. When his commands to Mitch and Blanche fail and Blanche turns the radio on again, he throws the radio out the window. Despite the earlier slap that served both as warning and as a reminder to Stella of Stanley’s rights to her, her defiance of Stanley, by calling him “animal thing, you” and by demanding that the poker players leave (p. 302) provokes him into striking her. Contrary to Blanche’s lament that “there’s so much — so much confusion in the world” (p. 309), his explosion restores his authority. His male friends make amends for him and take care of him, respectful of his capacity for violence, and Stella returns to Stanley, accepting his mastery over her. Blanche’s reading of the night’s events, “lunacy, absolute lunacy” (p. 303), is easily set aside by the others. Eunice even makes it clear that this night has ended less dramatically than similar nights in the past: “I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as the last time” (p. 306). To Blanche’s “I’m terrified,” Mitch replies, “Ho-ho! There’s nothing to be scared of. They’re crazy about each other . . . Don’t take it serious” (p. 308). For the characters who are at home in the Quarter, the explosion is merely a crisis peak in a cycle in which crises lead to reconciliation and temporary harmony, and eventually to other crises that are easily contained.

In the continuing struggle for authority, Blanche must impose her reading of reality on her sister or lose all. Whereas before the poker night Blanche’s historical revisionism seems almost unconscious and motivated largely by affection, in Scene Four it becomes emphatically intentional. When Blanche first comes to New Orleans, she asks for “my sister, Stella DuBois,” then corrects herself, “I mean Mrs. Stanley Kowalski” (p. 246). She frequently refers to Stella as the “baby” sister and as a “child.” The morning after Stella and Stanley’s passionate reconciliation, she attempts once more to place Stella back into the past they share, a past that excludes Stanley, by throwing herself on the bed next to her sister “in a rush of hysterical tenderness” and addressing her as “Baby, my baby sister” (p. 310). Her tenderness proves no match for Stanley’s embraces, and Stella distances herself from her. Blanche then tries to awake Stella to her past, to the tradition of gentility in which they were both raised and which she cannot possibly find in her present life: “I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players im-
possible to live with”; “You can’t have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just suppose that any part of a gentleman’s in his nature!” (pp. 320, 322).

Since Stella remains insensible to these appeals, Blanche moves from an interpretation of their particular circumstances to an overview of the history of humanity and its hope for progress. Just as Stanley tries to reduce Blanche to a criminal, she tries to reduce him to a beast. Yet whereas Stella openly rejects Blanche’s reading through gesture more than speech, Stanley, who overhears Blanche’s attempted coup, chances upon the opportunity to plot secretly in order to make Blanche’s historical revisionism boomerang against her.

Escalating the rivalry for the authority of the historical voice, Blanche launches into her reading, in which Stanley is reduced to a specimen from a primitive phase of evolution that must be abandoned in order for humanity to move forward. She begins by calling him “bestial” (p. 322), and supports her interpretation with the authority of anthropology:

There’s even something — sub-human — something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something — ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I’ve seen in — anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is — Stanley Kowalski — survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!

[p. 323]

Although she has seen the inefficacy of her caresses in light of Stanley’s lovemaking and heard from Stella about her loyalty to the man who makes “things . . . happen . . . in the dark,” Blanche proclaims the superiority of “tenderer feelings” over “brutal desire.” She places her sister among the “apes,” subject to their will: “And you — you here — waiting for him! Maybe he’ll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet!” (p. 323). On the opposite side stands all that is best in humankind, “art,” “poetry and music,” “new light” in the “dark march” of progress. Her final plea to Stella has reduced Stanley to those who need to be left behind for the sake of culture: “Don’t — don’t hang back with the brutes!” (p. 323).

If Blanche’s argument, her view of Stella’s life with Stanley, and, especially, her reduction of Stanley to an evolutionary throwback seem self-serving and cliché-ridden, Stanley Kowalski’s language, if more direct, is also more impoverished, and his version of history is equally distorted by clichés and by his own desire for mastery. Because the action of the play undermines her discourse rather than Stanley’s, we tend to fall under the spell of the language of power, of the discourse that wins out, regardless of its poverty. As late-twentieth-century intellectuals become uneasy about the privileges that Blanche’s speech claims for art, poetry, and music as the light guiding humanity in its dark march, so an increasing number of people have begun questioning the clichés that help Stanley triumph over Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire.

14For instance, Ruby Cohn, in “The Garrulous Grotesques of Tennessee Williams,” Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1977), 49, argues that Blanche “is trapped by the poverty of her imagery” and that linguistically Stanley is “a strong antagonist.”
Only when Stanley taps into the dominant discourse of patriarchy and is thus able to reduce Blanche's story to an all-too-common denominator can he vanquish her. From the end of Scene Four to the climax of Scene Ten, Stanley proceeds to gather the evidence he needs for an interpretation of Blanche which is as reductive of her as her evolutionary claims have been of him. That Stanley begins to discredit Blanche even before he gets "proof from the most reliable sources" (p. 359) becomes evident in Mitch's hesitation to give Blanche a hint about how Stanley discusses her. In Scene Seven, in which Stanley comes home with the "dope" on Blanche, he has already won Mitch to his side. It remains for him to win Stella and the "place" indisputably back from Blanche, for despite Stella's seeming rejection of her sister when the latter attacks her husband, Blanche has made inroads into Stella's loyalty in the same way that she has partly redecorated the Kowalskis' apartment to suit her own "dainty" tastes. Clearly, Blanche's presence has made Stella feel a small sense of displacement as well. She declares, for instance, that she likes to wait on Blanche because "it makes it seem more like home" (p. 333) -- the lost Belle Reve rather than the New Orleans flat. Stanley notes Blanche's rise in status: "you run an' get her cokes, I suppose? And serve 'em to her Majesty in the tub" (p. 358). Stella's reproof to her husband contains precisely the sense of a shared past with Blanche that Blanche was earlier seeking to revive in her sister, and from which Stanley is excluded: "Blanche is sensitive and you've got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did." Stanley's reply, "So I been told. And told and told and told!" (p. 358) emphasizes his sharpened sense that he is being supplanted. Hence the necessity that his version of history fill in the "true colors" of the "lily-white" Blanche.

Stanley's "most reliable sources" prove as authoritative as the "anthropological studies" Blanche has gleaned. Stanley repeatedly assures Stella, who resists the "lies," that he has checked his sources carefully, but he offers no evidence, and his success with her is that she asks for none. In fact, she haltingly corroborates his story by indicating that there may have been problems with Blanche's behavior in the past. Yet Stella attempts to round out his account by taking a larger view of history, one that would exculpate Blanche, at least in part. She tells Stanley the story of Blanche's marriage and of her husband's homosexuality, and she implicitly questions the reliability of Stanley's source: "Didn't your supply-man give you that information?" Stanley proclaims the supremacy of his version: "All we discussed was recent history. That must have been a pretty long time ago" (p. 364).

Whereas Blanche wants to write Stanley out of history by relegating him to the savage, distant past of pre-history, Stanley is not satisfied with a reductive reading of Blanche; he moves to inscribe, to author, not only her past, but her future. He has already selectively authored her past by choosing only her "recent history." He then blocks her escape to Mitch's home at the same time that he presents her with a bus ticket not to send her back to Laurel, where he himself has acknowledged that she cannot return, but to exile her from his home. When Stella asks, "What on earth will she do," extending Blanche's exile to a planetary scale, Stanley responds, "Her future is mapped out for her" (p. 367). The passive construction of that sentence masks Stanley's active part as cartographer. In Scenes Eight and Ten, he proceeds to strip Blanche of her disguises, of the illusions given her by the costumes that he had so overrated when he raided her trunk. But even that seems insufficient, since Blanche still
manages to regain something of the strange dignity that makes Stanley refer to her as "royalty." Because she refuses to become the woman in the traveling-salesman joke, the stereotype of the nymphomanical upper-class girl, he rapes her. His famous line rationalizing the rape, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning" (p. 414), summarizes both the struggle for mastery in which he and Blanche have engaged, leading to the crucial combat, and his ultimate reduction of her to the whore of his history who provokes and enjoys yet another encounter.

II

The struggle over history in which the two main characters of A Streetcar Named Desire are locked already lifts the play above domestic drama. Had it ended with the rape, the play might have been regarded justifiably as a representation of post-war life in the South, where the most provocative problem was the shift from the aristocratically dominated tenor of social intercourse to the first-generation, lower-middle-class urban mores brought to the fore by the returning soldiers. But the troubling focus of A Streetcar Named Desire is not that a drunken man, left alone in a two-room flat of the French Quarter with his drunken sister-in-law, subdues and violates her, but that the act becomes public and the woman is punished. She is taken away under the consent-ing gaze of all the characters on stage, who constitute most of the characters in the play. The sense of unanimity is partly broken by Mitch's momentary resistance and by Stella's qualms, but in effect the unanimity about Blanche's destruction prevails.

The shift from the private, readerly quality of the contest for textual authority to the public nature of societal victimization places A Streetcar Named Desire in the context of sociopolitical crisis. The audience watches the sentencing of Blanche to the asylum that is to be her "home" while sharing her perception that she has been victimized by Stanley's -- and implicitly patriarchy's -- historical discourse. In addition to making Blanche's expulsion public by having almost the entire cast on stage in the final scene, Williams subtly prepares for the climax by introducing elements of sacrificial rituals into the text. Following the pattern of ritual, Williams has Blanche the victim be both exalted and defiled, so that both her greatness and her ignominy take her out of the range of common experience and dehumanize her, making her seem a monster. Even before Stanley's getting the "dope" on her, Blanche's past contains details that raise her life above that of an ordinary being and into the realm of myth.

First, in her account of the loss of Belle Reve Blanche sets herself up as the besieged antagonist of the "Grim Reaper," who "had put up his tent" on the doorstep (p. 262). The deaths she recounts acquire mythical dimensions; there seems to be a great deal of bleeding on Blanche's part as well as on the part of those dying. None of the old people seem to have had an easy time of it. They died "that dreadful way," one of them even in a grotesque inversion of Stella's pregnancy: "so big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish!" (p. 261). Blanche herself declares she "fought and bled," and "took blows on my face and my body" (pp. 260-61) in the process of keeping death and the dissolution of the inheritance at bay. Stella accepts the mythical dimensions drawn by Blanche, since she tells Stanley that the plantation "had to be -- sacrificed or something" (p. 270).
In the second place, Blanche is associated with the mythical figure of Daphne. She clings to her maiden name, describing it as “an orchard in spring” (was Williams thinking of Chekhov’s ill-fated cherry orchard, since for an unaccountable reason Blanche the widow of Allan Grey is known as DuBois?). She also comes from a town called Laurel. But Williams inverts the myth of the chaste Daphne by having Blanche tell yet another story about her past, this time after Stanley has firmly established his narrative authority. Knowing she has lost Mitch, Blanche tells him another variant of her fight with Death, the death chosen by her young husband and desperately fought off by her old relatives. This time, she invokes an image of herself as votary of Aphrodite, satisfying the desire of the multitudes gathered before the temple at night. With admirable irony, the text reminds us that these worshipers at Aphrodite’s shrine are themselves fighting death. They are young soldiers, gathered up “like daisies . . . the long way home” (p. 389). One cliche recalls another; many of these young men are destined to push up daisies a long way from home, and their escapes, drink and sex, are as ephemeral as those of Blanche the moth. Yet by means of her myth of limitless sexual fulfillment, Blanche attempts to reshape for the future the uncontrollable decay and death of the past and fuse them with their opposite, “desire.” Thus she envisions an easyful death, caused by an almost insignificant pollution, “an unwashed grape.” At her side will be the ship’s physician, “a very young” and “nice-looking” one. The struggle for breath, the bleeding, the soiled bed clothes, the head blown away, the “it” that couldn’t fit in a coffin and had to be burned, all are purged in her vision of the “clean white sack,” the “blaze of summer,” and the ocean “blue as . . . my first lover’s eyes” (p. 410).

If Blanche exalts herself in her encounters with death and sex, Stanley’s debunking of her myth as priestess of Aphrodite—he is equipped to deal with the issue of sex though not with that of mortality—places Blanche in yet another dimension, that of the male joke about insatiable fallen women. His discourse reduces Blanche to the stature of less exalted legend among males in her hometown of the chaste name:

Everybody in the town of Laurel knows all about her. She is as famous in Laurel as if she was the President of the United States . . . . The town was too small for this to go on forever! And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco . . . . That’s why she’s here this summer, visiting royalty, putting on all this act—because she’s practically been told by the major to get out of town! Yes, did you know there was an army camp near Laurel and your sister’s was one of the places called “Out-of-Bounds”?

[pp. 359-61]

Through their vast exaggerations, Stanley’s “everybody” and his “she’s practically been told by the mayor” throw doubt on the unanimity in Laurel about Blanche’s reputation. Yet Stanley is close to achieving unanimity within his sphere of influence, namely Stella and Mitch, and he knows that he needs to debase Blanche thoroughly if he is to transform her from strong antagonist to victim.

Stanley’s success in transforming Blanche into victim has less to do with the steady erosion of her authority than with the conventions of social discourse that discredit her speech while valuing Stanley’s. Labeled as an outsider by her costume from her very entrance on stage, Blanche is forcibly pushed to the margins as her escape routes—to Mitch’s house, back to Laurel, to Shep Huntleigh’s yacht—are blocked,
and as her position in her sister’s household becomes increasingly defined as that of an intruder. Both Mitch and Stella end up by accepting Stanley’s version of Blanche. The clearest signs that Blanche herself succumbs to Stanley’s version of her, to the incomplete recent history of the traveling salesman, appear in Scene Ten, which fittingly culminates in her being raped. The woman obsessed with cleanliness, who takes two baths a day, who becomes hysterical when she spills a drink on her white skirt, who will not think of wearing an outfit if it is “crushed,” appears in Scene Ten dressed in “a somewhat soiled and crumpled satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed slippers” (p. 391). Given Blanche’s obsessive fastidiousness, one wonders where she may have found a soiled dress and scuffed slippers, but the stage directions deal less with the probabilities of Blanche’s wardrobe than with a representation of her psyche, which has begun to allow for Stanley’s assessment of her soiled lily-whiteness and for Mitch’s echoing, “you’re not clean enough.”

Bereft of any alliance with power, even an imaginary one, Blanche as a no-longer-young single woman barred from her profession, with no home, no male relatives, and no prospect of marriage, has her destiny mapped out for her, but not exactly in the way intimated by Stanley’s prophecy. She joins the throng of the displaced, whom society disposes of by incarceration, expulsion, or death. Henceforth her discourse becomes ravings, and her presence an embarrassment.

To some extent, every act of victimization needs to be absolved if the crisis is to end in a particular sacrifice and not in generalized bloodshed. Anthropologists have documented the practices of looking for signs of acquiescence on the part of even an animal victim prepared for slaughter, and of public lamentation after the victim’s demise. In the twentieth century, when the victim is human, a whole arsenal of psychoanalysis is deployed in order to establish the complicity of the victim in its own destruction. We often hear of the fusion of Eros and Thanatos in such complicity, the union of which Blanche dreamed, but the execution of the sacrifice belies the wishful fantasy in Williams’s play, as it does in the sacrificial ritual itself.

Although there is no bloodletting and no actual death in A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche’s sacrifice is violent and ruthless. Aware of her vulnerability away from liminal times and spaces that allow her to exist outside patriarchal rule, Blanche designs her environment with extreme care. She attempts to control the lighting, the decor, and her costume, as well as that of her sister. She permits Mitch to see her only at dusk or night. She considers herself one of the “soft people,” whose only power is “to shimmer and glow.” As she is inexorably drawn into the sphere of male judgment, the shimmering colors are bled from her: lamps are turned on in her face, colorful lanterns are torn off naked bulbs, and she is repeatedly told, “Now, Blanche.” If we consider the play on blanche that recurs throughout A Streetcar Named Desire, we can easily hear the French phrase as an imperative addressed to the woman whom we have seen clothed in a bright red satin robe, especially as uttered both by the Matron and by the Echoes that Williams introduces into Scene Eleven: “(rising and falling): Now, Blanche – now, Blanche – now, Blanche!” (p. 416).

In Scene Eleven the private violence of the rape becomes the public violence of Blanche’s flight from the Matron and the physical struggle with her. The “inhuman cries and noises” and “lurid reflections” on the walls tie together the victimization of
Blanche in Scenes Ten and Eleven in a way that dismisses Blanche’s complicity in the rape and gives a sinister (rather than erotic) slant to Stanley’s claims about his “date” with Blanche. Yet in this final scene, at the same time that the characters gathered on stage significantly mark Blanche’s passing, they also accept their complicity in her expulsion by witnessing it without protest. Unlike the opening of Scene Three, in which none of the men at the poker table intends to stand to greet the returning women, Scene Eleven has the men standing when Blanche enters, despite her customary protest, “Please don’t get up.” Moreover, they stand “awkwardly” (p. 413), fully alerted to her presence and her fate. When Stanley rips off the lantern in the bedroom and Blanche screams, the men “spring to their feet” (p. 416). Mitch ends up sobbing at the table, and Stella breaks into “luxurious” sobs, “with inhuman abandon” (pp. 417, 419). Stanley, the inveterate poker player, leaves the game to which the others return in order to console his wife. Combined with Stella’s “luxurious” sobs, Stanley’s “sensual murmur” and sexual caresses suggest the ultimate indifference of participants in the forcible expulsion of Blanche, and hence the hypocrisy of their laments. As Eunice explains to Stella when the latter declares that she couldn’t believe Blanche’s “story” and go on living with Stanley, “Life has to go on. No matter what happens” (pp. 405–6).

But what happens to the viewers and the readers of Williams’s play? Why is there no unanimity of response to Blanche’s expulsion? If Stella can’t believe Blanche’s “story” and if some critics express doubts about it, the audience nevertheless sees the backstage wall become transparent, thus exposing the sordid violence of the streets that parallels the stage action in which Stanley overpowers Blanche; and it hears the jungle sounds that take over and drown out the blues piano. In the last two scenes especially, Williams forces the audience to participate in Blanche’s mental life by hearing the music, the noises, the echoes that she and no one else on stage hears. These stage effects ought to evoke enough sympathetic identification with Blanche to make us repudiate the little world of characters left behind.

But no such identification occurs, or at least not conclusively. Though few readers and viewers side with Stanley, many agree with Eunice’s assessment: life must go on, and the trinity of Stella, Stanley, and baby at the end represents life. This pragmatic posture turns away from the uncomfortable issues raised by the play. In comparing the “mad” Blanche of Jessica Tandy with Uta Hagen’s portrayal of a thoroughly sane Blanche, Bentley asks: “What is this? Can a sister just send someone to an asylum without medical advice? If so, which one of us is safe?” He concludes, undoubtedly for our safety, that an interpretation of Blanche as mad throughout is preferable. But the play proposes precisely what Bentley, along with others, rejects: that we are not safe so long as the measure of insanity depends on the powerlessness of the individual.

15 It is no doubt the sense of Blanche’s complicity in Stanley’s rape of her that prompts Gore Vidal to put quotation marks around the word victim in his discussion of A Streetcar Named Desire. “Immortal Bird,” The New York Review of Books, 13 June 1985, 5–10.
What makes Stanley triumph over Blanche? If Blanche appears evasive and shady in her use of lanterns and make-believe, Stanley, too, despite his protestations of simplicity, needs the magic of colored lights, smashed bulbs, and red silk pajamas to get things going. If Blanche lies about her past, about her "ideals," about who owns the liquor, Stanley, too, lies by omitting all but the wildest rumors from Laurel and, most dammingly, by denying his "date" with Blanche. Unlike Blanche's lies, which she uses to secure for herself a place in the world and to displace, not destroy, Stanley, his lies force Blanche not only out of his "place" but out of normal social intercourse and into the asylum.

Ultimately, Stanley's authority derives from the same sources which most of us are forced to acknowledge in one way or another all our lives: physical violence, intimidation, and above all economic domination. In the quest for authority, Stanley profits from staying within the parameters set for him by his sex and class, and Blanche loses because she fails to conform. Stanley is perceived as normal. His pleasures are sex, bowling, drinking, and poker. His loyalty is to his family, for which he is a good provider. Except for his rape of Blanche, nothing Stanley does threatens the social fabric. Blanche, on the other hand, is deviant in regard to her class and sex. Although she maintains the trappings of the aristocrat in her expensive and elegant tastes, she has allowed the rest to slip, like Belle Reve, away from her. In seeking emotional fulfillment, she has disregarded the barriers of "normal" female sexuality and of class. Her actions subvert the social order: she remains loyal to the memory of her homosexual husband, she fulfills the desires of young soldiers outside the very walls of her ancestral mansion, she is oblivious to class in her promiscuity, and she seduces one of her seventeen-year-old students. Having thus overstepped the boundaries of class and profession, she arrives in New Orleans to attempt to split up the Kowalskis, even after she learns of Stella's pregnancy. She explicitly makes plans to take Stella away from Stanley, to have Shep Huntleigh set the two of them up in a "shop" in which they can earn their living together, and apart from Stanley.

Despite the fact that Blanche represents only an illusory threat to the Kowalski union while Stanley's rape has the power to destroy the marriage, the man's act is more easily forgiven than the female's desire. Thus, Williams mustersthe most cliché-ridden conventions about sexuality and makes them work in A Streetcar Named Desire, demonstrating that not only in the theatre but in our lives we recognize the hierarchy of historic discourse selected on the basis of those cliché-ridden conventions. Which "story" do we believe in the end? The action we have seen on stage at the end of Scene Ten or Stanley's off-stage denials? The fact that audiences feel ambivalent about Blanche is not the problem Williams raises; the problem is rather the audience's pragmatic shrug at the end of the play: life must go on, even if only for those who escape victimization, who are "safe" for now.

Unlike generically pure tragedy, A Streetcar Named Desire leaves us unpurged of the emotions it elicits. We resist being sucked in by Blanche's stories, for that way

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18 For instance, Cardullo, p. 141, strenuously argues that Blanche is the victim of "an act of incidental, inadvertent cruelty," an act therefore more forgivable than a premeditated attack.
madness lies; while Williams makes us see and hear like Blanche, and perhaps feel like her, the authority of history is on Stanley's side. The power of *A Streetcar Named Desire* rests in our experiencing the ability of that authority to redact history and therefore to determine the future. The force of this "problem" play is to disquiet us so that perhaps we might hear, if not speak for, those whom history has silenced.