Edward Albee's Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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A relatively new term in the critical lexicon, *ludonarratology* theorizes the intersection of games and narrative structures in a particularly apt formulation for the theatrical world. Of the intersection of gaming and literary art, Astrid Ensslin explains that "narrative, dramatic, and/or poetic techniques are employed in order to explore the affordance and limitations of rules and other ludic structures and processes."[1] That is to say, ludic, literary, dramatic, and poetic themes and structures often overlap, with kaleidoscopic refractions of form, structure, and story. From this new perspective, ludonarratology allows a clearer eye on the ways in which the theatre encourages its actors, producers, and audiences to engage in the rituals of play. Certainly, as a site simultaneously recreational and professional in its ambitions, the theatre multiplies the ludonarrative potential of characters qua players, in that actors must adopt the personae of their roles, with these characters then assuming complementary or contrasting stances toward one another as the plot unfolds. Such a dynamic is strikingly evident in Edward Albee's masterpiece, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), the first act of which alerts viewers to its ludic themes through the subtitle "Fun and Games." The actors undertaking the parts of Martha and George and of their late-night guests, Honey and Nick, must bring to life the antagonism expressed in the protagonists' mutually tormenting games, with these sadomasochistic structures challenging viewers to consider the inherent ambiguity of Martha's and George's relative positions to each other.

Much formalist, structuralist, and even poststructuralist narratology assumes that a given text's protagonist is clearly identified, and much ludology similarly envisions a sharp distinction between the competitors of a game, yet sadomasochistic ludonarratology, as an interpretive and eroticized dynamic, complicates these simplistic views. Indeed, sadomasochism dismantles the certainty of many narratives because it implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—blurs the categories of sadist and masochist, leaving interpreters of the ludic story unsure of its overarching direction and thus capable of identifying with the players only through an ephemeral sense of relation that might waver in the scene's next beat. When a game's players continually shift in their respective positions toward one another, how can one win, how can the other lose, and how can viewers pierce through the dissolution of ostensibly antagonistic roles to determine the game's meaning? Sadomasochistic ludonarratology envelops characters, players, and interpreters in complex wrangling over the very meaning of desire, with striking repercussions to the play of the game for all involved, particularly when plotlines reveal the characters and structures hidden from view that nonetheless guide the game's unfolding. Under such circumstances, absence and inaction function as meaningfully as presence and play, alerting interpreters to the structural secrets hidden yet subversively in effect in sadomasochistic narratives.

Theatre, Character, and Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology

As a whole, the theatre creates a ludic world in and of itself, one that is defined by its lexicon of play, in which playwrights pen plays brought to life by actors playing roles. The theatrical experience is by definition an immersive one, and Sebastian Domsch posits the necessity of immersion for ludonarrative experiences: "Playing games and reading fiction are both activities that involve the temporal and partial neglect of knowledge in order to function."[2] We know the gameworld differs from the real world, but it proceeds apace into the ludonarrative pleasures at hand. Beyond this creation of a playful zone, the theatre approximates a game in the tension between the guidelines of performance codified in a script and the inherent potential to disrupt these expectations. Building on Elizabeth Bruss's foundational work in literary ludonarratology, Lynda Davey theorizes that theatrical narratives exhibit ludic features both in the interactions of playwrights and spectators and in the additional elements introduced through the narrative's inherent performativity, which must be realized by actors, mise-en-scène, lighting and other requisite elements of a theatrical production.[3] Blanket statements about the theatre's ludic aspects cannot cover all plays and all performances, yet sufficient overlap between theatre and game arises for ludonarratology to illuminate their mutual pleasures. Surely Tom Bishop is correct in his statement that "one does not need a fully worked-out theory of the nature and place of play in human life to perceive or discuss the ludic in drama."[4] It is the objective of this essay, if not to propose a universal theory of drama, to flesh out a theory of sadomasochism in a particular theatrical artifact while suggesting its utility throughout a range of ludonarrative forms.

Games require players, plays require characters, and characters require actors (i.e., players) to play them, with the overlap among these terms highlighting the ludic potential in dramas that stage agonistic and antagonistic relationships among their characters. Many formalist and structuralist theories of narrative envision characters primarily as essential functions of a story deployed to advance its plot, such that they retreat from any sense of organic individuality into a strictly utilitarian position. Aristotle, in his foundational assessment of narrative and drama, asserts that characters must align with a given plot's ambitions: "In the characters too, exactly as in the structure of the incidents, [the poet] ought always to seek what is either necessary or probable, so that it is either necessary or probable that a person of such-and-such a sort say or do things of the same sort."[5] Extending this Aristotelian view, Joel Weinsheimer points to the ways in which narrative structures envelop and thereby erase characters: "As segments of a closed text, characters at most are patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualized in other motifs. In semiotic criticism, characters dissolve."[6] Characters become subsumed as their narratives progress, acting in a particular fashion so as to adhere to the expectations of the plotline's unfolding. Both narratives and games are almost universally established upon a bedrock of conflict, and Baruch Hochman pinpoints the utility of antagonism for discerning a given character's motivation and identity: "we tend to think of character—of people, to begin with—in terms of conflict, which may be moral, social, or psychological in nature."[7] Viewers understand the rudimentary structure of many ludonarrative artifacts simply by identifying the characters' relationship to one another through this lens of conflict.

And certainly, such a binary relationship pitting protagonist against antagonist is encoded into the characters of myriad narratives and games, both in the theatre and beyond, such that the assumption of a sharply defined antagonism bleeds into critical perspectives on narratology and interpretation. The binary of protagonist/antagonist, nearly ubiquitous as a narrative and ludic device, predetermines a story's outcomes, as Ronald Jacobs details: "By arranging the characters of a narrative in binary relations to one another, and doing the same thing with the descriptive terms attached to those characters, narratives help to charge social life with evaluative and dramatic intensity."[8] Interpreters can anticipate much of the

developing action of a drama simply by understanding the characters' relationships to one another through the oppositional logic of protagonist versus antagonist, in much the same manner as spectators of a game.

Whereas formalist and structuralist insights into characters focus on their positions in an overarching storyline, poststructuralist insights have expanded an understanding of their necessity beyond the paradigmatic and functionary. James Phelan discerns characters performing in a trifold fashion as mimetic (representing a personality), thematic (representing a central idea), and synthetic (representing a narrative construct).[9] The theatre productively complicates the concept of character, and Brian Richardson, in terms similar to Phelan's, argues that dramatic characters fulfill mimetic, formal, and ideological functions, as he further theorizes the necessity of a "performative fourth dimension" in light of the fact that "when a play is enacted on stage, the characters' portrayal by actors can greatly affect the representation and its reception; dramatic representation by its very nature tends to complicate, enhance, or dissolve the unity of a character."[10] A particular character bears the potential to shift markedly when performed, as the actor undertaking this role might strengthen or undermine its defining aspects through the vagaries of performance, and although it is more likely that a performance would alter a character's mimetic features, shifts in its thematic and synthetic functions are possible, too. As Thomas Malaby proposes, games are inherently processual—"Every game is an ongoing process. As it is played, it always contains the potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself"—with this assessment readily applicable to the ways in which plays and the characters within plays shift according to the codes of performance.[11]

Ludonarrative characters liberated from zero-sum formulations of victory/loss operate within a similar framework, for in these instances they transcend the default archetypal positions of protagonist or antagonist. Typically, to play a game involves seeking to defeat one's opponent yet not concomitantly to view one's opponent as the co-protagonist of this joint endeavor. In many texts, whether ludonarrative or not, the protagonist and antagonist share the goal of victory over the other, no matter how loosely this victory might be defined, with disruptive potential emerging when their wrangling implicitly troubles any narratological assumption of a single protagonist journeying through various plot points to the climax and then concluding with the dénouement. Whereas in many instances the protagonist and antagonist represent simply the flip sides of the same coin, in other circumstances the "protagonist" and the "antagonist" inhabit roles defined by their mutual aggression but also by the potential for their mutual overlap such that the binary dividing them crumbles. For the interpreter of such a ludonarrative artifact, one's sense of kinship with a protagonist is always provisional, and no end of interpretive alliances could be formed with characters assigned an antagonistic position that they nonetheless evade.

As a hermeneutic relevant to desire, narrative, and game, sadomasochism enlightens the fruitful possibilities of disentangling the protagonist/antagonist binary and instead locating characters qua players in fluctuating relationships to one another. At first glance, sadomasochism would appear to represent yet another instantiation of binary logic: sadist versus masochist, in an erotic ritual pitting protagonist versus antagonist under a veneer of cruelty. Indeed, Leopold Sacher-Masoch's foundational text of masochism, *Venus in Furs*, ends explicitly with a moral based on antagonism: the protagonist Severin, humiliated and defeated following his affair with the alluring Wanda, realizes that "woman, as Nature created her and as man up to now has found her attractive, is man's enemy; she can be his slave or his mistress but never his companion."[12] *Venus in Furs* delineates masochistic ritual as a game to be won or lost, yet this is only one potential ending of a sadomasochistic encounter, particularly when the binary of sadist versus

masochist is reassessed as a complementary positionality accessible to both players. These archetypal positions need not stand in direct opposition to each other but might instead enable fluctuating, orbiting points of contact. In sadomasochism's most profound contradiction, a masochist typically seeks out a sadist, thereby initiating the scripts that they will fulfill in complementary service to each other, yet in so doing, the masochist, at least implicitly and if only temporarily, assumes the dominant position. In a cash-based, capitalist economy of desire, those who write the checks control the scenarios, even while casting themselves as the abject and pitiable site of desire's unchecked degradations. In this light, sadomasochism shatters the logic of much formalist and structural narratology, for most narratological theories presume a clearly identified protagonist. Within a sadomasochistic framework, the linearity of the protagonist's quest gives way to undulating gyres of desire, with the sadist and masochist contributing unpredictably to the form and structure of the plot.

The narratological aspects of sadomasochism are readily apparent, with Gilles Deleuze, in his iconic work *Coldness and Cruelty*, declaring that both masochism and sadism "tell a story."[13] More so, masochism is inherently dramatic in its roles and staging, with Deleuze outlining its theatrical characteristics: "Masochism is above all formal and dramatic; this means that its peculiar pleasure-pain complex is determined by a particular kind of formalism, and its experience of guilt by a specific story."[14] The masochist and the sadist ostensibly inhabit radically opposed roles yet this presumption falters in its very enunciation, particularly when the masochist initiates the encounter. In these instances, the purported victims orchestrate the erotic episode that concludes with the consummation of their desires, and so masochists and sadists do not stand against each other in fixed poles but engage in endless negotiations about the very meaning of desire, as Deleuze further explains: "Dialectic does not simply mean the free interchange of discourse, but implies transpositions or displacements of this kind, resulting in a scene being enacted simultaneously on several levels with reversals and reduplications in the allocation of roles and discourse."[15] In this manner, sadomasochism, rather than enforcing strict binaries, subverts them, and applying this insight to the ludonarrative realm complicates spectators' understanding both of any game afoot and of the respective positioning of its players.

As a ludonarrative construct, sadomasochism applies particularly well to the theatrical realm, for although in many instances a game's parameters are clearly demarcated, the theatre facilitates a more porous sense of play and game, one in which its players stand on unequal footings. In his description of theatre's *dark play*, Richard Schechner underscores how play dissolves its own borders and how play's protean force summons potentially dangerous situations. The traits of dark play include that it: "(a) is physically risky, (b) involves intentional confusion or concealment of the frame 'this is play,' (c) may continue actions from early childhood, (d) only occasionally demands make-believe, (e) plays out alternative selves."[16] Dark play intriguingly approximates many of sadomasochism's most complex psychological and erotic factors: in the possibility of physical harm; in the unsettling reality of sexual play at hand; in the potential for a sadomasochistic impulse to have its roots in childhood desires; in the dissolution of the construct of "make-believe" through its insistent, brute enactments; and in the sadist's and the masochist's adoption of their roles that allow them to access alternate aspects of their quotidian personas. Schechner further explains: "Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out. . . . Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed."[17]

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? exemplifies these dynamics, in that the audience must "live in this meaning" of the theatrical experience, as they are simultaneously ensnared in Martha and George's

sadomasochistic game that expands ever outward, catching Honey and Nick within its web. Narrative and metanarrative merge as Honey and Nick model the audience's reaction, with spectators, watching from the promised safety of their seats, becoming entwined in the unfolding game. As a ludonarratological hermeneutic, sadomasochism disrupts the ostensible clarity of players as adversaries, compelling interpreters to forgo the standard binary of victory/defeat for a looser, more ambiguous sense of the game's boundaries and aims. Martha and George complicate the very meaning of game as they fiercely struggle over their marriage and their phantom child, with Albee collapsing the dualistic force of protagonist and antagonist and leaving only an oscillation of desiring characters in his wake.

Martha and George's Sadomasochistic Games

The plot of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is stunning in its apparent simplicity: after attending a faculty party, Martha and George host their new acquaintances, Honey and Nick, for a round of drinks. For the three acts of the play—"Fun and Games," "Walpurgisnacht," and "The Exorcism"—Martha and George bicker viciously, frequently ensnaring Honey and Nick in their hostilities, while playing four so-called games: "Humiliate the Host," "Hump the Hostess," "Get the Guests," and "Bringing Up Baby."[18] The titles of these pastimes allude to Martha and George's mutual attempts to humiliate each other, to George's fear of (but potential desire for) cuckoldry, to their joint aggression against Honey and Nick, and to the phantom child that symbolizes their joyless marriage. Each game, C. W. Bigsby notes, "clearly act[s] as a substitute for sexual excitement."[19] With its classic form, adhering to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* marches inexorably to its conclusion, as Martha and George divulge each other's devastating truths, while their guests both observe this debacle in horror and are conscripted into its play.

As Walter A. Davis avows, "Aggression is the force that structures [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*] by ripping through all masks and roles."[20] On the narrative's surface, aggression abounds: Martha's antagonism toward George positions her as the sadist to his masochist, and she inhabits this role with zest and pleasure, reveling in the humiliation she metes out to him. Before proceeding further into this discussion, however, it should be noted that Albee questioned a sadomasochistic interpretation of their marriage, declaring, "I think [Martha and George] love each other very much. It's not an 'S and M' relationship. I mean there's some problems there. They've had a lot of battles, but they enjoy each other's ability to battle."[21] Here Albee appears to envision sadomasochism as incompatible with love, but many would dispute this presumption. Also, Albee graciously conceded to an interviewer pursuing the gender dynamics of his oeuvre, "I don't observe my plays the way you and other . . . critics observe them. I don't think about them in those terms, so I can hardly talk about them that way."[22] As Albee suggests, the fact that he would not discuss his play within a sadomasochistic framework—or likely within a ludonarrative framework as well—does not discount the insights gleaned from these complementary theories.

Martha's sadistic impulses define her character and her relationship with George, particularly when she insults his manhood, pointedly telling Nick and Honey "that maybe Georgie-boy didn't have the *stuff* . . . that he didn't have it in him!" She climactically concludes that he is a "FLOP! A great . . . big . . . fat . . . FLOP!" (210), with her words clearly alluding to his impotent penis. With George symbolically castrated, Martha stands as the more virile of the two, a dynamic further evident when he comments on her masculinity, telling Nick that "Martha is the daughter of our beloved boss. She is his . . . right ball, you might say" (184). Martha agrees, "I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because

somebody's got to" (260). Violence, often staged yet painful in its consequences, belongs in the sadist's repertoire, and Martha recounts an incident of physical abuse when her father was teaching George to box and she sucker-punched him: "I yelled, 'Hey George!' and at the same time I let go sort of a roundhouse right . . . just kidding, you know? . . . and he was off balance . . . he must have been . . . and he stumbled back a few steps, and then, CRASH, he landed . . . flat . . . in a huckleberry bush!" (191). Martha's qualification that she was "just kidding" fractures the binary of play and seriousness, as her punch purportedly launched in jest proves her aggressive physicality with George.

Furthermore, in her role as sadist Martha stands symbolically impervious to penetration of any sort, such that it would appear impossible to act upon her or otherwise to overturn the roles of the sadist/masochist dyad. This aspect of her character is evident in her retelling of her schoolgirl days at "Miss Muff's Academy for Young Ladies." Through this institution's crude yet obvious allusion to female genitalia, Martha synechdochally represents herself through her vagina, as she then explains how she was "revirginized" following her brief marriage to the institution's lawn mower (206). Through the impenetrability of her hymen—registered both in its purported reconstitution following this aborted union and in the phantom child who was never born (and who thus necessitated hymeneal penetration neither in its conception nor in its delivery)—Martha symbolizes the impermeable, imperious woman whose lovers cannot act upon her during even their most intimate encounters.

Deleuze tersely comments, "The masochist is morose," with this assessment applying well to George and his longsuffering, hangdog affect.[23] The hapless victim of his wife's sadistic torments, George presents himself as emasculated and metaphorically castrated, acquiescing to her sadistic ploys. When Martha asserts that "*Some* men would give their right arm for the chance" to marry the daughter of a college president, George replies sardonically, "Alas, Martha, in reality it works out that the sacrifice is usually of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy" (171). George accepts his masochistic role in the play's opening act, yet he resents it as well, telling Nick: "Do you think I like having that . . . whatever-it-is . . . ridiculing me, tearing me down, in front of . . . *(Waves his hand in a gesture of contemptuous dismissal)* YOU? Do you think I *care* for it?" (214). Explaining to Nick that he has "been trying for years to clean up the mess I made"—referring to his marriage to Martha—he reveals his coping strategies to be the masochistic triad of "accommodation, malleability, adjustment" (222). In this merciless game in which they have entangled themselves, George relies on a strategy of accommodation, apparently having lost any hope of shifting roles with his tormentor.

Notwithstanding the appearance of Martha and George's oppositional roles as firmly established, Albee adumbrates the inevitable erosion of the sadomasochistic binary. In a crucial revelation of the interlocking and mutually undercutting identities of sadist and masochist, George admits the pretense of their outwardly antagonistic relationship: "Now, on the surface of it . . . it looks to be a kind of knock-about, drag-out affair, on the *surface* of it" (223). Also, at several moments throughout the evening, George stages small rebellions against Martha's sadistic tyranny, pettily insulting her. "Well, that was probably before my *time*" (157), he declares in response to Martha's questions about Bette Davis's films, and when discussing the condition of her teeth, he again needles her about her age (163). Such scenes corrupt the logic of sadomasochism as based upon fixed positions, a theme amplified when Martha delights in George's staged murder of her. He "shoots" her with a gun from which "a large red and yellow Chinese parasol" blossoms, and she asks him, "Where'd you get that, you bastard?" with the stage direction noting she does so with a joyous intonation (192). Indeed, this mock-violent ploy clearly arouses her, as she soon intones, "Yeah . . . that was pretty good. (*Softer*) C'mon . . . give me a kiss," and

then escalates this erotic encounter by placing his hand on her breast (193). George spurns her advances—"What are we going to have . . . blue games for the guests?"—and it is evident that his words wound Martha, as it also evident that he has seized momentary advantage in their sadomasochistic sparring. Martha encourages George to leave aside his masochistic posturing—"I like your anger. I think that's what I like about you most . . . your anger" (162)—yet it is her sadistic treatment of him that sparks his anger, in a repeating circle of abuse and attraction.

The cruelty of Martha and George's game is balanced out by its pleasures, and several moments suggest that George not only approves but enjoys Martha's humiliating tactics, thus pointing to the gratification he finds in their sadomasochistic rituals. In one of her salvos against his masculinity, Martha begins, "George hates Daddy . . . not for anything Daddy's done to him, but for his own . . ."; as her words trail off, the stage directions indicate that George is "*Nodding . . . finishing it for her*" as he then declares "inadequacies" (205). This moment depicts George's participation in his emasculation, his guiding of the sadist who torments him yet does so at his behest. A telling sign that George understands his masochistic role appears in his ready acceptance of cuckoldry, or more accurately, his insistence on his masochistic role such that cuckoldry becomes nearly unavoidable. Adultery and cuckoldry can be likened to a zero-sum game in which the lovers win and the cheated-on spouse loses, but George bleaches cuckoldry of its zero-sum dynamics by embracing his masochistic role. When Martha begins seducing Nick, George observes them, with the stage directions indicating not merely his awareness but his enjoyment of his wife's actions: "*George enters . . . stops . . . watches a moment . . . smiles . . . laughs silently, nods his head, turns, exits, without being noticed*" (266). When Martha warns him, "We're going to amuse ourselves, George," he agrees, "Unh-hunh. That's nice." She further cautions, "You might not like it," but he genially accedes, "No, no, now . . . you go right ahead . . . you entertain our guests" (269). This encounter might appear to contribute to the gradual unraveling of the sadomasochistic roles that Martha and George have assumed in their marital games, yet it would be more accurate to observe that they underscore the paradoxical and chimerical intransigence of these positions while also admitting the masochist's latent power.

This theme continues as George refuses to step out of his masochistic role—or in other words, he insists that the game continue despite the fact that doing so might compel Martha to cuckold him—and this refusal ironically highlights his agency in the game through his insistent and unwavering passivity. Indeed, when Martha tries to shock him with her adulterous liaison—"Never mind that. I said I was necking with one of the guests"—George encourages her, "Good . . . good. You go right on" (270). As the scene continues, he soon tells her with a touch of exasperation: "Lord, Martha, if you want the boy that much . . . have him . . . but do it honestly, will you? Don't cover it over with all this . . . all this . . . footwork" (272). George insists on his masochism in this scene, insists that his wife cuckold him, and in so doing, asserts the agency latent in passivity by ascribing this agency to his wife's staged desires. In such moments, sadomasochism undercuts the presumed telos of ludology in the victory/defeat dyad, for George's victory over Martha would arise in his refusal to abandon his status as masochist, thus compelling her to remain in her sadistic and cuckolding role despite her hesitance to assert her dominance to this degree. For Martha, any ostensible victory over George by cuckolding him would entail a latent acknowledgment of the force of his passivity, and for George, his erotic defeat through his wife's betrayal would entail the cuckold's ultimate victory in the pleasure of abjection.

The fluctuating erotics of cuckoldry are further confused by George's expressed desire not to be cuckolded, evident when he recognizes Nick as a threat and cautions him, "You realize, of course, that

I've been drawing you out on this stuff, not because I'm interested in your terrible lifehood, but only because you represent a direct and pertinent threat to my lifehood, and I want to get the goods on you" (228). In her reading of the play's homosocial dynamics, Clare Virginia Eby proposes that Albee "shows how competitive masculinity sustains marriage," further positing that the playwright depicts the manner in which "homosocial rivalry serves to underwrite heterosexual stability."[24] George seeks to preserve the sanctity of his union with Martha while simultaneously pushing her to cuckold him through his insistent masochistic posturing. The games of "Humiliate the Host," "Hump the Hostess," and "Get the Guests" would appear to necessitate varying strategies to achieve their eponymous objectives, but Martha and George's sadomasochistic marriage effectively responds to the shifting ludic engagements of the evening, for it is the very adaptability of the sadomasochistic dyad that proves its utility in each round of their evening of games.

The play's façade of sadist versus masochist cracks further at numerous points, as Martha and George expose the contradictions inherent in the sadomasochistic dyad. In a striking exchange, George acquiesces to his masochistic role as Martha confesses her exhaustion with sadism:

> GEORGE: You can sit there in that chair of yours, you can sit there with the gin running out of your mouth, and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart . . . ALL NIGHT . . . and that's perfectly all right . . . that's OK. . . .
>
> MARTHA: YOU CAN STAND IT!
>
> GEORGE: I CANNOT STAND IT!
>
> MARTHA: YOU CAN STAND IT!! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!!
>
> *(A silence)*
>
> GEORGE (*Quietly*): That is a desperately sick lie.
>
> MARTHA: DON'T YOU KNOW IT, EVEN YET?
>
> GEORGE (*Shaking his head*): Oh . . . Martha.
>
> MARTHA: My arm has gotten tired whipping you. (257-58)

In many ways, this scene represents the critical crux of interpreting Martha and George's sadomasochistic relationship, and thus of interpreting the play as a whole: is Martha correct that George married her precisely for her sadistic talents, of which even she has grown tired, or is he correct that such an allegation is a "desperately sick lie"? It is noteworthy that these lines come shortly after a moment of domestic harmony between the two, when Martha compliments George: "It's the most . . . life you've shown in a long time," to which he genially replies, "You bring out the best in me, baby" (256). In this moment of concord, masochist and sadist agree on their mutually satisfying relationship, yet such a moment cannot last given the pressures of their relationship based on the pleasure of conflict.

As Martha and George's games entangle Honey and Nick, the audience witnesses the interpretive disarray created by sadomasochism, for this young couple can neither comprehend nor meaningfully participate in their hosts' ludic pastimes. Nick disavows any masochistic tendencies in himself, declaring to George that "I just don't see why you feel you have to subject *other* people to it" (215). He also states that "flagellation isn't my idea of a good time," although he concurs when George suggests that he "can admire a good flagellator . . . a real pro" (215). Honey and Nick denounce the games their hosts are playing: "I don't like these games," Honey intones, with Nick agreeing, "Yeah. . . . I think maybe we've had enough of games, now" (249). Significantly, Nick understands that any games he plays with George and Martha are unwinnable, that their ludic structures preclude meaningful intervention by outside agents. When George demands Nick's response to his mock declension of "good, better, best, bested," Nick explicates his host's rhetorical trap: "All right . . . what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny. You can play that damn little game any way you want to, you know!" (175). As a ludic experience, sadomasochism establishes a framework that obscures rather than enlightens, and although Nick stumbles upon this truth early in the storyline, he is unable to extricate his wife and himself from the evening's dark play. George, speaking with feigned awe, approves of Nick's perceptiveness—"Very good! Very good!" (175)—yet Nick's comprehension of the game's traps does not allow him to participate in it and simply emphasizes his role as a bystander ensnared in events beyond his ken.

One of the chief tactics in this sadomasochistic game that further destabilizes the identities of its players arises in its allegorical registers, for both the audience and Honey and Nick must pierce through the veil of Martha and George's blurred accounts of their desires and their lives. In this vein, when George plays "Get the Guests," he attacks Honey and Nick with an allegorical account of their marriage—"Well, it's an allegory, really—probably—but it can be read as straight, cozy prose . . . and it's all about a nice young couple who come out of the Middle-west. It's a bucolic you see" (250)—as he proceeds to describe Honey and Nick's marriage and its discontents. According to the stage directions, George ends this part of the game "*abruptly and with some disgust*," as he concludes, "And that's how you play Get the Guests" (254). In its doubling of storylines, allegory surrounds a deeper truth with an outer fictional layer, but George ultimately strips the outer layer from the inner, revealing the couple's humiliating secrets inside. Allegory aligns with ludic sadomasochism in this exchange, for the positions of sadist and masochist establish an interpretative valence for the game that are then radically deconstructed as the game evolves. As allegory encourages interpreters to digest the narrative before them, it also corrupts the potential of interpretation, for the poles of interpretation inevitably shift, and often they do so in light of the savage strategies of the game afoot.

As Albee's conjoining of ludonarrative sadomasochism with allegory corrupts the antagonistic positionality of characters as players, so too does his storyline obscure essential players from view, cloaking their significance to the game's play and resolution. In particular, the allegorical surface of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* obscures the role of Martha's father as the instigator of the play's dysfunctional games. This man, never depicted onstage, lurks in the background of Martha and George's marriage, with the couple both haunted by his influence and employing him as a totemic weapon. Owing to these inescapable and tortuous family dynamics, they act as children perpetually stunted by living in this man's shadow, such as when Martha says, "I'm firsty," with the stage direction stressing that she is "*Imitating a tiny child*" (164). George plays along, calling her his "little yum yum" (213) and suggesting that he will make "a gweat big dwink" for her, his "little mommy" (185). With the epithet

“little mommy,” George creates the paradox of an infant parent, one who ostensibly bore him yet who remains preternaturally young and dependent on him for nurturing.

Contrasted with these images of Martha and George as developmentally crippled, Martha’s father represents the player who cannot be played against, the character absent from the narrative yet critical to its narrative structure, for his actions have sparked the play’s plot. Martha and George’s marriage and even George’s career have been ordered to his measure; likewise, Martha and George would not have met Honey and Nick if not for his intervention, as George reminds his wife: “If your father didn’t set up these goddamn Saturday night orgies all the time” (158). In defending her invitation to Honey and Nick despite the lateness of the hour, Martha avers, “Because Daddy said we should be nice to them, that’s way,” as she then repeats this rationale in quick succession (160). Enhancing this theme, Albee establishes Martha’s father as an allegorical representation of an arbitrary and callous deity, not just her father but The Father. George states sardonically, “He’s a god, we all know that” (170). In Martha’s account of her father—“Jesus, I admired that guy! I worshipped him . . . I absolutely worshipped him. I still do” (206)—Albee deploys the ambiguity between “Jesus” as a mild exclamation and as a direct address, allowing the conflation between her human father and the Christian deity to deepen the play’s allegorical consideration both of intergenerational and of marital family dynamics.

And thus a key critical crux in interpreting *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* emerges in the meaning of a character who shapes the plot but who cannot be held accountable for his actions, who eludes the binary both of antagonist and protagonist and of sadist and masochist while sparking the antagonism that necessitates some sort of resolution. Although one might presume the father/Father corresponds with the sadist—and in Albee’s play it is Martha’s father whose psychic force traumatizes the couple—Deleuze details how this father figure embodies masochistic desire:

> So when we are told that the character who does the beating in masochism is the father, we are entitled to ask: Who in reality is being beaten? Where is the father hidden? Could it not be in the person who is being beaten? . . . What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father’s likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father.[25]

Aligning Martha’s father with George admits a perverse logic to the psychosexual dynamics unfolding throughout this torturous evening: Martha avenges herself against the patriarchal authority that controlled her life to the extent of annulling her first marriage and “revirginizing” her, and George allows himself to be humiliated in the effort to humiliate the father who orchestrated his humiliation. Such an interpretation gives psychological clarity to a play whose fraught emotional dynamics have long enthralled viewers, yet the shifting tides of sadomasochism complicate even this logic. As the poles of sadist and masochist inevitably shift, so too must any allegorical vision of Martha’s father as the antagonist of their marital game.

This dynamic is evident in the fact that, as much as Martha’s father stands as the narrative’s invisible character, the omnipotent father who haunts and directs the players’ actions, George reveals that this figure can also be strategically deployed in his games with Martha. To invoke the father is to invoke his uncontestable authority, as in George’s cool reply to Martha’s request for a “big sloppy kiss”:

> GEORGE (*Too matter-of-fact*): Well, dear, if I kissed you I’d get all excited . . . I’d get beside

> myself, and I'd take you, by force, right here on the living room rug, and then our little guests would walk in, and . . . well, just think what your father would say about *that*. (164)

George evades Martha's demands for affection, and even in this early moment of the play, destabilizes the sadomasochistic binary upon which their relationship is presumably established. The father/Father is thus a conscriptable character within their antagonistically ludic marriage, one who may be deployed to advance their individual strategies while standing removed from the play at hand.

For a drama with only four characters, it is striking that two additional absent fathers contribute to its plotline, with George's and Honey's fathers similarly entering the narrative as spectral figures whose influence cannot be evaded. George tells Nick of an incident in which a boy—presumably George himself—accidentally killed his father, with George recalling the aftermath of the fatal car accident: "And in the hospital, when he was conscious and out of danger, and when they told him that his father *was* dead, he began to laugh, I have been told, and his laughter grew and he would not stop" (218). George escapes his father's influence by this man's untimely death, with his hysterical laughter indicating his liberation from this patriarchal regime and an incipient panic induced by this newfound freedom. Nick says of Honey's father that he "was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich," detailing this man's rise to fame and his accumulation of wealth: "He spent God's money . . . and he saved his own" (226). In these paternal storylines, the fathers direct their children's and their in-laws' lives, constraining their choices and identities, such that the father must be surpassed in the quest for self-determination. The marital game, Albee suggests, cannot be played only by wife and husband, for they are ensnared in erotic rituals established by the preceding desires of the patriarchy. The childlessness of both couples then emerges as a definitive rebuff of patriarchy's claim to futurity, with the children forever scarred by the previous generation ending this game that cannot be won. As Lee Edelman provocatively argues, "The Child . . . marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism."[26] Within the fictions of Albee's play, the couples' joint childlessness represents an anti-erotic strategy in the overarching sadomasochistic game that constitutes the American family, as they deny the Father's power by cutting off the roots of social reproduction.

The play's final game—"Bringing Up Baby"—thus illuminates the potential of a ludic escape from the ruts of familial disharmony. Whereas Martha and George's sadomasochistic games allow for some ambiguity in its strategies, the game concerning their phantom child requires their mutual and strict adherence to its rules. This child symbolizes both the pleasure and the hollowness of their marriage, yet many viewers have expressed disbelief over this aspect of Albee's play, such that he defended his choice, declaring that "it always struck me as very odd that an audience would be unwilling to believe that a highly educated, sensitive, and intelligent couple, who were terribly good at playing reality and fantasy games, *wouldn't* have the education, the sensitivity, and the intelligence to create a realistic symbol for themselves. To use as they saw fit."[27] The phantom child imbues their marriage with meaning as it also establishes rules for their interactions. By mentioning the child to Honey and Nick, Martha corrupts the game, piquing George's anger: "I mean, you can make your own rules . . . you can go around like a hopped-up Arab, slashing away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world if you want to. But somebody else try it . . . no sir!" (257). And whereas sexuality provokes eddies of humiliation and desire in their marital games that prove mutually satisfying, if also fraught, Martha appears truly to torment George by suggesting that he is not the father of their phantom child. "He's not completely sure it's his own kid," she impugns, as

George replies in shock, "My god, you're a wicked woman" (202). Even within the realm of fantasy, in which George could be envisioned if not as a virile lover then at least as a genial father, Martha portrays him as impotent to the point that he could not ejaculate the phantom seed of a nonexistent child.

The promise of anti-futurity, registered in the refusal to cede to the Father's authoritarian impulses, entails the end of Martha and George's game. Some critics have viewed *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as ultimately conservative in its sexual politics, as evident in Rachel Blau Duplessis's observation that in the play's conclusion, "the humiliated, weak, unsuccessful man is shown to be stronger than the brutal, emasculating woman. The family problems are solved not by investigating their ultimate source . . . but by regulating family relations in a highly normative manner."[28] From another perspective, however, their sadomasochistic marriage fractures the meaning of traditional gender roles, and through their nonexistent offspring, they have radically reformulated the meaning of family and of narrative closure. Complementing this sadomasochistic reading of the play, it is worthwhile to note that George repeatedly refers to Martha's and his phantom child as a "little bugger" (201, 210), with this deft allusion to sodomy further highlighting the fruitlessness of their marriage. Indeed, several critics have viewed Albee's play as a queer allegory. Richard Schechner excoriates it as "perverse and dangerous," declaring that its theme of "sexual perversity [is] there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre and audience."[29] Sky Gilbert avows that George is a "gay man . . . with certain obvious, stereotypical gay characteristics" and that Martha "is really a part for a drag queen."[30] John Clum acknowledges the potential for this queer allegory but argues in contrast, "In a way, it's a good thing for gay men that [Albee] didn't [write queer scenes]; for a gay *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* would also be antigay."[31] These various, contradictory readings testify to the protean force of a queer subtext in Albee's play, one that corresponds well with its themes of sadomasochism and anti-futurity that, to some degree, transcend the genders of the roles. For in the end, Martha and George's childlessness is the only effective strategy available to them in their jointly sadomasochistic struggle against the Father, a battle that has left them emotionally hollowed yet capable still of feeling, a condition aptly encapsulated in Martha's assessment of their icy tears: "I cry alllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And Georgie cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what do we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put 'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays *(Begins to laugh)* until they're frozen" (273). The play's conclusion may suggest a slight thaw in their frozen interiors, but the sadomasochistic strains of their marriage and their family hinders any such interpretations from fully recuperating their lives into the range of the heteronormative.

Within Albee's ludonarrative assessment of the American family and its discontents, the pleasure of Martha and George's marriage arises in their games, as Martha divulges in a rare statement of her affection for her husband: "who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad" (277). This enigmatic dynamic, evident in the shifting poles of sadist and masochist that embody a core logic that simultaneously falters in its enunciation and enactment, leaves Nick and Honey unsure of how to interpret a marital game that they uncomfortably observe but cannot decipher: "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what," Nick resignedly declares (283). The ultimate game against the Father, Martha and George's sadomasochistic rituals allow them the pleasure of a game that can never be declared, such that it must end when the one inviolate rule is crossed, as George tells Martha: "You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him . . . you mentioned him to someone else" (307). As Jesper Juul posits of games and their rules, "rules can cue the player into imagining a world," an apt assessment of the ways in which Martha and George's rules animate their marriage.[32]

Within the rule structure they have created, to speak of the game is to destroy it, yet it is only through speech that Martha and George can enact their rage against an exterior force that has corrupted the very core of their being. Within this instance of sadomasochistic ludonarrativity, the enemy within is the enemy without, with Martha and George striking blindly at themselves, at their guests, and at Martha's father, playing a marital game that undulates in its play and strategies yet builds to a climax of a child who will never be born, and thus of a Father who cannot initiate another round of the game against Himself through his children.

Ludonarrative Theatre and the Masochistic Audience

As Martha and George's marriage demonstrates, sadomasochism illuminates the ways in which hostile play diffuses other, often more threatening acts of violence, providing a release mechanism through the ludic structures implicated by desire. On a narrative level, these dynamics affect the development of the play's characters, and on a metanarrative level, they affect the play's audiences as well. Certainly, Albee envisioned *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as ensnaring the audience to the point that they are actively involved in the psychological carnage depicted on stage. In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Albee detailed how conflict and aggression stand at the heart of the dramatic experience: "All drama goes for blood in one way or another. . . . Sometimes the act of aggression is direct or indirect, but it is always an act of aggression. And this is why I try very hard to involve the audience. . . . I want the audience to participate in the dramatic experience. . . . If the drama succeeds, the audience is *bloodied*."[33] Following this compelling image of a bloodied audience, Albee proceeded to explain how viewers must participate in the theatrical experience:

> If audiences approach the theatre . . . and are willing to participate; if they are willing to have the status quo assaulted; if they are willing to understand that the theatre is a live and dangerous experience—and therefore a *life-giving force*—then perhaps they are approaching the theatre in an ideal state and that's the audience I wish I were writing for.[34]

Theatre as a "live and dangerous experience" entails the dissolution of the border between stage and seats, the eradication of the safe space of viewing through the crumbling of the "fourth wall" that never existed except in the imagination of performers and viewers who desired it. An art form that bloodies, Albee's ludic theatre positions the audience as the masochist to the narrative's unfolding, enduring the discomforting storyline for the sake of the ultimate edification of its experience. And further aligned with masochism, playgoers initiate the sadomasochistic scripts of the theatre by purchasing their tickets, proving both their power within its commercial economy while also submitting to the powerlessness of their positions in their darkened seats.

What sadomasochism shares with Albee's sense of ludonarrative drama is the possibility for a safe space that feels unsafe, for the heady illusion of danger that unfolds within an ultimately protected milieu. Numerous theorists have demarcated play's mercurial flirtations with danger, such as in Clifford Geertz's classic study of Balinese cockfights, in which the illicit nature of this play, coupled with its potential to reopen and exacerbate latent hostilities, underscores the fact that games cannot always be marshaled into pre-authorized temporal and spatial boundaries.[35] So too with sadomasochism, in its erotic, its narrative, and its ludonarrative incarnations: it is only "play," yet it is play that allows conflicts to be waged between partners that destabilize their relative positions to each other. The sadist, the

masochist, and the complementary roles they inhabit inevitably bleed out from any attempt to cordon "play" from the reality of the ludonarrative event, and any observer of these interactions must likely become implicated as well, for there is no safety in simply observing, as Honey and Nick demonstrate in their blindsided reactions to Martha and George's vicious games.

And from this vantage point, sadomasochism serves as a particularly apt hermeneutic for thinking through ludonarratology's structures and secrets. Games require players, objectives, and rules governing their interaction, with narratives similarly necessitating characters pursuing an objective while observing various strictures (whether those of realism or fantasy or any other genre). Sadomasochism tweaks these paradigms and reminds players and interpreters alike that structures hide secrets. A sadomasochistic permutation of ludonarrativity may, in many instances, be designed to withhold pertinent structural information—missing characters, undeclared rules, self-destructive strategies—that undermine the promise of the text's telos. The game ends, as all games and all texts must, but only through the dissolution of key elements in light of the oscillating enactment of desires that plague a plot with aporias that ironically grant it its foundational meaning. For George and Martha, this aporia coheres in the image of the Father, yet the play of sadomasochistic ludonarrativity cannot be delimited to this one invisible antagonist. As it breaks the borders between characters and their desires, between audience and the perceived events, the game brews a heady concoction of desires that enable the players' identities to fracture and to unite against an Other with whom one could not otherwise contend, for both Albee's savaged characters and his bloodied audiences.

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[13] Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in *Masochism* 7-138, at 130-31. It should be mentioned that Deleuze argues against the possibility of sadomasochism, deriding it as “pseudomasochism” (124) and as a “semiological howler” (134).

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[16] Richard Schechner, “Playing,” *Play and Culture* 1 (1988): 3-19, at 14.

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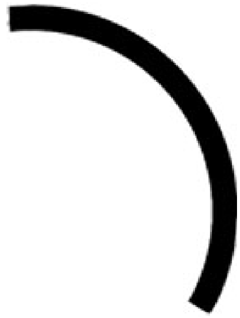
[34] Edward Albee, quoted in Matthew Roudané, "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," 51.

[35] As Geertz notes, "Fighting cocks . . . is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kin group rivalries and hostilities, but in 'play' form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggression (something which, again, almost never happens in the normal course of ordinary life), but not quite, because, after all, it is 'only a cockfight'" (*The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 440).



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