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Vestis virum reddit: The Gender Politics of Drag in Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*

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“The problem is clothes.”
—Blanche to Stanley, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

“Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me.”
—Song to Gallimard, *M. Butterfly*

In his play *Bondage* (1991), David Henry Hwang explores the political frontiers of desire in racial as well as in sexual terms. Set in an S & M parlor, Hwang’s “two-character play” is about how human interrelations are culturally preformatted by gender and ethnicity. Covered entirely from head to toe in leather clothing, the actors (one male and the other female) are completely hidden from the audience, freeing them to assume various character roles of conflicting race, sex, and gender throughout the play which the audience is forced to accept since their blindness to the actors’ real identities cannot influence any biased prejudgments they might have of them. Tennessee Williams had explored a similar theme in his short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” (1946), where bondage in a massage parlor is expressed in the sadomasochistic rituals enacted between the milquetoast Anthony Burns, a white man discovering his homosexual desires, and his gigantic black masseur, whose racist desires to punish the white race are equally satisfied in the physical beatings he metes out religiously on his
white clients. Though not physically covered from head to toe so as to hide their true ethnicity from each other (or from the reader) as Hwang does in Bondage, Williams’s camouflages his characters’ identities nonetheless, for though white, Anthony Burns shares the name of the last slave caught under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, with his black masseur assuming the role of the white bounty hunter who brought him to justice. Williams, too, is playing with the idea that skin color, like clothing, is a poor signifier of the human heart, and that human bondage passes through the racial to achieve the sexual, or at least through the traditional fantasies that uphold the myths of race and sex.

Perhaps nowhere is this race/sex nexus expressed more convincingly in American drama than in Williams’s Streetcar and Hwang’s M. Butterfly. whereas Williams challenges the South’s myth of the pure white woman and potent black sexuality scripted in Blanche and Stanley, respectively, M. Butterfly deconstructs East/West stereotypes of desire, with Hwang exposing the West’s illusions of Oriental women as submissive pleasure goddesses and Oriental men as effeminate yes-men. In deconstructing the cultural fetishism symbolized in clothing and nakedness, Williams and Hwang dramatize in their plays how gender performance helps to masquerade the Phallus, both the penis as instrument of patriarchal power and the cultural imperative it wields in Western (sexual) politics. In Streetcar, while dress codes are never used to signify the gayness of the poet Allan Grey, they are certainly used to construct the play’s heterosexual characters’ identities, where class, gender, race, and sexuality are all rendered, and consequently challenged, through what characters wear or do not wear, put on or take off. Such is Hwang’s dramatic strategy in M. Butterfly, where he uses clothing and nakedness (or a desire for it) to oppose East against West, homosexual against heterosexual, and Communist against capitalist. To be sure, both plays explore and subsequently explode the “Chinese philosophy” (1:314) of sexual pleasure and the “narcotized tranquility” (1:310) that Oriental desire is said to produce for the West; in other words, both plays’ claim that clothing does and does not make the “man” are reflected in how drag masquerades the winning and the wielding of the Phallus.
I

Taking as its central argument that, like Foucault's "sex," gender is not a stable signifier but a socially-enacted phenomenon that carries little or no truth value about the perceived notions of identity, Judith Butler's Gender Trouble posits that the human body does not contain "a signifiable existence prior to the mark of gender" (GT 13) but rather reflects the individual's sexed or gendered action that through time carries "a performatively enacted signification" (GT 43-44). As a result, gender cannot verify the "identity behind the expression of gender" since "that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be the results" (GT 33)—a non-teleological approach to the study of alterity. In other words, a woman's heterofeminist exterior (such as Blanche DuBois's in Streetcar or Liling Song's in M. Butterfly) is in no way proof of her resultant heterosexual identity since it is all just an act anyway; rather, her heterosexuality is a social assumption resulting from her performing the necessary gender signs to assure such a reading, to which her clothing greatly contributes.

Such gender performance is not an isolated act, Butler adds, but precisely demands "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (GT 44). Consequently, both sex and gender produce "regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (GT 44) and thus lack inherent scientific truth-values on even the biological level. Working to legitimate each other's existence, which, in turn, reinforces the social identity for whom they ultimately serve, sex and gender, then, open themselves up to postmodern scrutiny bent on exposing the political motives luring behind the mask of their everyday use. To be sure, this notion of "performativity" is central to Blanche and Song where their performed genders are not always truthful representations of their sexual identities, let alone the most productive one. Any failure—unintentional or otherwise, isolated or repeated—for a female to perform a gender consistent with the "regulatory fiction" of what a
lady is, or should be, opens that woman up to signification via society’s gendered reading. But when that lady performs multiple versions of a woman, as is the case with Blanche and Song, society is put to task to find harmony in the gender it wishes to read in them through their performances.

In Streetcar, Blanche with her trunk is a traveling stage actress, performing so many roles in the play that it is difficult to determine who she really is. And while there is a tenuous argument to be made (in spite of Williams) that Blanche does recapitulate the Albertine Strategy as a male in drag, such criticism is reductive to her character and to the play in general. Whoever Blanche is and at whatever point in the play she is that character, however, her clothing does play an essential role in determining her several gender performances. Her fluidity of character, in fact, seems dependent upon the traditional signifiers of her clothing, and were she naked, she would seemingly lose all social or political significance. That is not to say, though, that Williams does not also use Blanche—and every character in Streetcar—to precisely challenge these traditional signs of femininity and masculinity, of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and of white bourgeois morals and black working-class hedonism; but how he does so is more complex than Stanley E. Hyman’s simplistic theory of inverted sex roles and prepares us in many ways for the complexities of drag Hwang addresses in M. Butterfly.

Blanche’s trunk, with its costume jewelry, fake furs, and summer print dresses—all seemingly taken from theatre dressing rooms—serves as a metaphor for her social constructionism as much as it does a functional stage prop for Williams. From it, she can do or become whatever she wants, duping not only herself and the men who cross her path on stage but also those sitting in the audience. As we are conditioned to read sex and gender from the outside in—that is, what one wears or how one talks or gesticulates—when that outside is never fixed, as is the case with Blanche, we become suspect of what the inside actually contains. In other words, Blanche, who has confided in Stella that she has “brought nice clothes” and will “wear them” (1:257), defines and is defined by the clothes she wears, strips off, or packs neatly into her trunk, but those definitions lie with us first.
Thus, when she tells Stanley that “clothes are my passion!” (1:278), not only Blanche but ostensibly Williams himself is speaking, for among the many non-diegetic devices he uses in the play to project meaning (such as music, sound effects, lighting, pantomime, etc.), Williams refers constantly to all of his characters’ clothing, where colors, textures, designs, and materials provide layered and ironic shades of meaning upon each of them.

Blanche’s “solid-gold dress” (1:274) thus signifies her obsession with wealth and social status. Stanley’s brass-adorned Master Sergeant’s uniform (1:258; cf. 1:320) establishes his need for giving and creating order in his life, just as his “undershirt and grease-stained seersucker pants” (1:322) confirm his working-class identity at home or his “knot[ting] his tie” (1:329) demonstrates his need to perform bourgeois respectability at work. Stella’s eventual loose-fitting clothing announce her pregnancy, just as her “light blue satin kimona [sic]” (1:293), which she wears during the poker party, prefigures both her “Chinese philosophy” (1:314) and “narcoitized tranquility” (1:310) after Stanley’s lovemaking, and her newborn baby, “wrapped in a pale blue blanket” (1:418) at the play’s tableau. Similarly, Mitch’s “light-weight alpaca” (1:345) jacket hides not only the embarrassing perspiration stains on a shirt that is “sticking to [him]” (1:345) but also his awkward physique in general; and his first coming to court Blanche dressed as a gentleman is offset against his later abuse of her on her birthday, dressed in “work clothes: blue denim shirt and pants” (1:379), which Blanche calls “uncouth apparel” (1:380). Even the poker players’ shirts—“colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green”—are meant to reflect men “at the peak of their manhood” (1:286), though Eunice’s henpecking of Steve would suggest otherwise.

Hwang similarly challenges the traditional signification of Western clothing in M. Butterfly with respect to the myths of race and gender, but performance becomes much more problematic in the play since Liling Song is an actress by trade and understands her role in the duping of Rene Gallimard, while her sexual motives in the affair are left unanswered. When Gallimard first meets Song, for example, she is dressing as Puccini’s Butterfly to perform the suicide scene from Madame Butterfly: “Suzuki helps Butterfly change. Helga enters, and helps
Gallimard change into a tuxedo. [. . .] Suzuki makes final adjustment of Butterfly's costume, as does Gallimard his tuxedo" (MB 14). Juxtaposing the Western male clothing that signifies, as it had for Stanley with his knotted tie, not only class and social standing but masculinity as well, with the femininity of the Eastern kimono Song (like Stella) wears, Hwang reproduces stereotypical dress codes, which will be debunked as the play gradually merges with and then departs from Puccini's opera. In having the woman Chin, playing the female girl Suzuki in the opera, help the male Song into Butterfly's feminine costume, Hwang already begins the sex/gender deconstruction that the play promises, evidenced further in Helga, Gallimard's sexually-unfulfilled wife, fitting the effeminate (and potentially gay) Gallimard into his masculinely-sig-
ified tuxedo.

What the characters in Streetcar and M. Butterfly first wear, or are associated with wearing or having worn, is thus accepted by the audience as a consistent reading of those characters' sexual and gendered natures, since we have no reason yet to think otherwise. They are whom their clothing makes them out to be. Once having established these characters' functional identities through their references to clothing, Williams and Hwang can now begin deconstructing those identities, taking with them any certitude that the audience may have had about the characters from the start, including their gender performances. For instance, when Blanche enters the French Quarters dressed as "a moth" (1:245), she is likened to old Southern pragmatism entering new Southern exoticism, at least in terms of her clothing, and seemingly brings with her an ethereal femininity that will soften the more hardened masculine environment of the Quarter, depicted in the "roughly dressed" men "in blue denim work clothes" (1:244). She is not this woman, however, and her white dress hides her Phallus—the sexual dominance she has recently exercised over the seventeen-year-old high school student she seduced in Laurel and that she will later attempt to exercise over Mitch by not allowing him sexual license with her. But in order to maintain that Phallus, Blanche must perform it, and reperform it, in seducing men, which she attempts but fails to do in scene two with Stanley but successfully accomplishes in scene three with Mitch and scene five with the paperboy. Her clothing during these
scenes—a “dark red satin wrapper” (1:297; cf. 1:276, 1:379, and 1:406, where the robe follows “the sculptural lines of her body”) to attract Mitch, or a “large, gossamer scarf from the trunk [which she] drapes it over her shoulders” (1:338) to seduce the paperboy—becomes a costume within this seduction play-within-a-play, not only when she puts them on but also when she takes them off, which is done frequently in the play, as we will see later.

Song's seduction of Gallimard also begins in typical Western terms first, where just after Gallimard “begins to dress for work” in his suit, she dons a “black gown from the twenties [. . .] looking like Anna May Wong” (MB 27). While Gallimard's suit is meant to define his masculinity (Song even supports this when she says, “How often does a man in my audience come in a tie? [MB 20]), her Western gown is certainly meant to accentuate her feminine curves more than her traditional Chinese clothing would. But Gallimard's clothing in fact hides the man he projects himself to be: while he may have imperialist aspirations just as Puccini's Pinkerton does, it is out of metaphysical more than political reasons; thus, his masculine performance in the suit will be countered by his repeated epiphanies that reveal his fears of his sexual and gender alignment. Song, too, is not what she presents herself as here, for what Song does not realize is that Gallimard is not interested in her Western appeal but precisely rather, as Puccini's Butterfly, in her realization of his Oriental fetishism alone. Recognizing that it is not the West that Gallimard wants (or thinks that he does not want), Song later appears in the scene “dressed in a chong sam” and “curls up at his feet” (MB 43). Returning to the role of the mythical obedient Oriental woman that Gallimard desires, she serves him, just as Gallimard serves her by remaining the Western male she needs him to be.

Later in the play, their sexed and gendered identities are further stripped away, with Hwang now revealing that while clothing may give the impression of determining one's gender and sexuality, even the skin that the clothing is meant to be hiding lacks irrefutable signification. At the end of act two and the beginning of act three, for instance, Song transforms herself back into the man she was at the beginning: “Song goes to a mirror in front of which is a wash basin of water. She starts to remove her makeup [. . .]. As he promised, Song has completed the
bulk of his transformation [. . .]. He removes his wig and kimono, leaving them on the floor. Underneath, he wears a well-cut suit' (MB 79-80). As the drag costume is stripped away, revealing the sign of (Western) manhood inscribed in the Armani suit, so too is Song's feminine pronoun traded for a masculine one. The transformation continues when Gallimard "picks up the kimono" while traditional Chinese dancers "bring the wash basin to him and help him put up his face" then later his "Butterfly wig" and "kimono" (MB 91-92). The men swap genders and the political motivations Hwang attaches to them, but they are no more masculine or feminine for their actions (Gallimard is never given a feminine pronoun, for instance).

For Hwang, masculinity and femininity do not reside in the clothes they wear, or in the phallus or the clitoris that the clothes conceal (or at least claim to in Song's case). Sexuality and gender are instead presented as states of mind, which, though influenced greatly by the societies we live in (as Song says, "I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" [MB 83]), have more of a chance of being changed than the human body or body politic that defines it. When Gallimard finally kills himself, saying, "My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly" (MB 92), Hwang's troubled hero just does not have the desire to face the difficulties in discovering how one's mind and determination can change the cultural imperatives of sex and gender, which perhaps Song does. Her/his willingness to look beyond the social truths that bind her/him makes Song more like Stella in the end than Blanche, whom Gallimard in fact comes to represent, though he figured himself to a Stanley or at least a Mitch.

Streetcar, then, for all of its challenges to popular beliefs about sex and gender, is premised on the perfect lie of performance and of performativity that M. Butterfly brings to its troubling, albeit historically factual, conclusion. Williams makes this point clear from the start when Blanche reveals to Stanley during their first encounter that she "fib[s] a good deal" (1:281). All poker puns aside, her comment succinctly describes the woman's burden in Western society to bluff, either through the make-up she puts on or the seductive clothing she takes off, to announce her femininity. After all, as Blanche admits, "a
woman's charm is fifty percent illusion [. . .]." (1:281). Though the masculine figures in the play—Stanley and to a lesser extent Mitch—refuse such illusionary tactics, they do not recognize that they are performing their own illusionary genders to uphold the patriarchal economy to which they, and women like Stella and Blanche, fully ascribe. Mitch will eventually deny Blanche her plea for "what ought to be truth" (1:385), just as Stanley will use her magical realism to justify his raping her: "There isn't a goddam thing but imagination! [. . .] And lies and conceit and tricks!" (1:398). In M. Butterfly, though Gallimard, too, has "finally learned to tell fantasy from reality" when confronted with the truth of Song's phallus/Phallus, like Blanche he "choose[s] fantasy!" (MB 90). For him, and for Hwang in East-West relations in general, it is this "perfect lie" (MB 89) that allows him his only defense, one that directly echoes Blanche's in Streetcar: "I am pure imagination. And in imagination I will remain" (MB 91).

II

Drag, of course, requires imagination, especially from an audience who is aware of the sex/gender discrepancies in the clothing of the performer standing before them. But when the performance becomes private, and the incongruity between sex and gender is not known or even suspected, drag ceases to be, and what is left is simply gender—what we can see of someone's sex externally. In one of the most often-cited passages of Gender Trouble, we discover an essential statement about this problematic layering of sex and gender in the way clothing is used and mannerisms affected to mirror the message they are traditionally said to be carrying for the Westerner:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performance,
then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals a distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.* (GT 175)

All gender becomes drag for Butler, in that we are all performing a particular role which we wish to be read as consistent (or not) with compulsive heterosexuality’s “regulatory fiction.”

As such, though Blanche is a woman performing various feminine gender roles, she simultaneously calls each of those roles into question, just as Song, in performing the role of a woman, retains the social and political privileges of a (Communist) Chinese man. Ostensibly heterosexuality in both plays, evidenced in the numerous affairs Blanche is said to have had and in her passive interest now in Mitch and active one in Stanley, and in Song’s repeated denunciations of his needing to be “homosexual” to allow the drag masquerade to continue, the gender that both “women” perform is not the result of their sexual proclivity but rather its determiner. Thus, their sexual natures result from their engendered performances, which in turn secures their sexual identities for themselves and for others. In other words, each character performs drag to some extent in the play, where the signifiers attached to the articles they wear are as much the product of performance as the real actors’ costumes are in the play. But not only is the donning of certain clothing considered to be performative of sex and gender, so too is its taking off. This strip-teasing in both plays, intentional or not, works not only to establish the sexually-charged atmosphere of the two plays but also to reflect upon the meaning of sex and gender that clothes are said to project or mask in the characters.

Strip-teases in *Streetcar* function, then, not only to arouse certain
characters (and audience) sexually but also to call into question the location of one’s sex/gender: true gender, and perhaps true sex, is no more visible in or on the naked body than in the clothes worn, changed, or stripped-off teasingly. After Stanley’s interrogation of Stella concerning the loss of Belle Reve, for example, Blanche tries to win Stanley over by flirting with him. In telling him that she is closing the curtains so as to “slip on my pretty new dress” and then “throws off her robe” (1:276), Blanche hopes to entice Stanley with her suggestive nakedness; but when she asks him moments later to do up “[s]ome buttons in back” (1:277), Stanley only fumes and refuses to buy into the seduction scheme and thereby denies her this sex-defining act, just as he will do throughout the play; in denying Blanche her sexuality, Stanley equally negates her gender. With Mitch, however, Blanche’s seduction is much more successful, for contrary to the dressing-tease with Stanley, Blanche’s strip-tease for Mitch does arouse him:

*She is unbuttoning her blouse. [. . .] She takes off the blouse and stands in her pink brassiere and white skirt in the light through the portieres. [. . .] She moves out of the yellow streak of light.* (1:293)

Fully aware that she is standing in the light, Blanche resorts to the use of the feminine body as Phallus to wrest desire from the male (here Mitch), whose gaze alone cannot release the pent-up sexual energy resulting from the enticing act, as is the case with over-excited Mitch. Here, the strip-tease is successful in equating gender with sex, but that is not always the case, especially when the sex is not expected from the gendered act, as is the case with Song in *M. Butterfly*.

Like Williams’s, Hwang’s experiment in the gender politics of drag also makes abundant use of the strip-tease to confirm his point that clothes do not make the “man.” For example, earlier in *M. Butterfly* while looking over the girlie magazines he purchased in prison—a sign perhaps of his need to continue projecting his heterosexuality—Gallimard imagines the day when he was young and first discovered magazines like them in his uncle’s closet: “One day, a boy of twelve. The first time I saw them in his closet . . . all lined up—my body
shook. Not with lust—no, with power. Here were women—a shelfful—who would do as I wanted" (MB 10). His epiphany here creates a pinup girl who comes to life, dressed “in a sexy negligé” (MB 10). The girl is attempting, in Gallimard’s imagination, to seduce him by stripping off her clothing: “Then, slowly, I lift off my night dress. [. . .] I toss it to the ground. [. . .] I stand there, in the light, displaying myself” (MB 11). Gallimard is fascinated with the strip-tease, as Mitch is of Blanche’s, but he is not aroused sexually by it: “My skin is hot, but my penis is soft. Why?” (MB 11). The answer lies in the fact that Gallimard is projecting in the scene with the girl what the (still unknown) male Song has already done for him. Given that this epiphany is a flashback, in that it occurs some twenty years after Gallimard first met Song, it suggests that he is trying to recover the Phallus that he lost when she actually did strip for him in the light.

Song’s strip-tease occurs, in fact, while Gallimard is standing outside her window with his spectral school chum Marc. Gallimard sees a light go on inside Song’s window:

Marc: Late at night—it burns. The light—it burns for you.
Gallimard: I won’t look. It’s not respectful.
Marc: We don’t have to be respectful. We’re foreign devils.

_Enter Song, in a sheer robe. [. . .] Her robe comes loose, revealing her white shoulders._ (MB 25)

Though Marc prods Gallimard, telling him that this is what he has been waiting for—that is, “a beautiful girl who would lay down for you” (MB 25)—we realize the comment, coming from Gallimard’s own disillusioned memories voiced through the heteromasculinist Marc, is more his attempt to be seduced by Song than by women in general. He resorts to the tactic of feeling “shame” in spying on Song, in the same way she does to keep him from seeing her naked, to hide his confrontation with the (apparent) heterosexual Other, again not knowing she is a man or fearing perhaps that he does know—either way, heterosexuality fails him despite his heteromasculinist clothing.
As in this scene and in the scene with the pinup girl, Gallimard has two other failed heterosexual encounters that no doubt contribute to his forging a gay identity, and both involve strip-teases. The two occur early in the play, with Hwang setting the groundwork not for a gay Gallimard but certainly a sexually-troubled one, which will cast his desire for Song in doubt later when they meet in China. For example, when Marc apparently invites Gallimard when they are at university in Aix-en-Provence to an orgy, Gallimard refuses to take part:

Marc: We are going to Dad's condo in Marseille! You know what happened last time?
Gallimard: Of course I do.
Marc: Of course you don't! You never know. . . . They stripped, Rene! [. . .] Before you know it, every last one of them—they're stripped and splashing around my pool. (MB 7-8)

Gallimard chose not to go, and his choice, indeed his fear in general, was influenced by an earlier failed heterosexual experience (though recounted later in the play), and he now fears how he might respond, sexually speaking, to this more public spectacle. During that first sexual encounter with a woman, Gallimard is sexually dominated by the girl Isabelle (just as he will later be by the co-ed Renee) and assumes the more feminine role during the encounter, which is even described as a rape:

You told me to wait in the bushes by the cafeteria that night. The next thing I knew, she was on me. Dress up in the air. [. . .] My arms were pinned to the dirt. [. . .] I looked up, and there was this woman . . . bouncing up and down on my loins [. . .] and pounding my butt up and down into the dirt. [. . .] And in the middle of all this, the leaves were getting into my mouth, my legs were losing circulation, I thought, "God. So this is it?" (MB 33)
Though Gallimard tries to convince Marc that he “had a great time” (MB 33), we are to understand that the opposite is true. As the male, he is the Phallus, but he loses the Phallus to women in both experiences, with Hwang taking delight again in playing with the notion of stripping and with freely exposing what a woman has under her dress, which will become the central issue later when Gallimard finally confronts Song’s continued sexual reticence toward him seeing her naked.

While these strip-tease in Streetcar and M. Butterfly have frequently been discussed in the both plays’ criticism, various other ones involving the men, however, have escaped recognition and yet bear much upon Blanche’s and Song’s sex/gender act. If, for instance, Blanche attempts to use the donning or the removal of clothing to gain the sexual upper-hand, she is not the first nor the last in the play to do so, as Mitch responds to Blanche’s strip-tease with one of his own later in scene six. Though he needs Blanche to prod him first—“take off your coat and loosen your collar” (1:344)—which Mitch finally cannot do, embarrassed about his perspiration stains, he alludes to a strip-tease in describing his nakedness through “what I weigh stripped” (1:347). His strip-tease is as dull and as unerotic as he is, however, and does little more than to feminize him. Remove his cheap and artificial alpaca jacket and what we find is an even cheaper and artificial heteromasculinity underneath; here, the clothes serve to construct the ambiguous gender that they are said to be performing.

Yet, if Mitch’s “strip-tease” fails in scene six to perform his masculinity, Stanley’s in scenes one, three, and ten do succeed in establishing his Phallus. For instance, if Mitch’s attempt to recover the Phallus was merely a reaction to Blanche’s in scene three, Blanche’s strip-tease in scene three was itself a reaction to Stanley’s in scene one, where he strips for Blanche in a manner which could be interpretted as seductive. In other words, what sister-in-law like Blanche would not have found it unusual for her brother-in-law to undress in front of her after having only just met. Not more than a minute has passed, for example, and Stanley already “starts to remove his shirt”: “My clothes’re stickin’ to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?” (1:266). If ever there were a more familiar come-on line in Western mythology, then this is certainly it, one used by nearly all the vixens in the early
Hollywood films of which Williams was certainly well aware. Moreover, in removing his shirt, Stanley is potentially bearing his naked chest before Blanche, suggesting that he does not even need clothing to perform his gender. While decorum in the Broadway theatre of the Forties required Stanley to wear an undershirt beneath his silk green bowling shirt (which by Kazan's film was discarded briefly in this scene), Williams himself does not specify that he is wearing one, which would leave Stanley half-naked for the rest of the scene.

Stanley's half-nakedness is reproduced again in scene three at the tumultuous end of the poker night. Drunk and bellicose, Stanley appears only "half-dressed" (1:306) out on the porch at the end of the scene, bellowing out his cry for "STELL-LAHHHHH!" (1:307). Having struck his wife in a maligned act of masculine bravado, Stanley is forced by the poker players into taking a cold shower to sober him up. The men have stripped Stanley, who emerges from the bathroom only in his "clinging wet polka dot drawers" (1:305)—the boxer's motif cleverly linking Stanley to the gay poet Allen and his Polish polka, to which he was dancing moments before committing suicide. Never modest, as one need not be in the Quarter anyway (as Mitch assures an "[in]properly dressed" Blanche moments later [1:308]), Stanley probably does not dress from this shower before leaving the flat to recover his runaway wife. Given Blanche's comment to Mitch later on how Stanley "stalks through the rooms in his underwear at night" (1:351), it is safe to assume that is only in his underwear now, and not in the pants and tee-shirt Brando wore both onstage and in the Kazan film, when he shouts up the stairs for Stella.6

Stanley's third strip-tease takes place just prior to the rape in scene ten. Williams has by now established the symbolism of clothing and the act of putting on or taking off several items. Here, Stanley "starts removing his shirt" (1:394), the same "vivid green silk bowling shirt" (1:391) he wore in scenes one and five (1:266; 1:327), which he put on earlier in the evening before taking Stella to the hospital in scene eight.vii This time, however, Blanche, who is herself decked out "in a somewhat soiled and crumbled white satin evening gown" (1:391) that Stanley likens to a "worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker" (1:398), is unwilling to play into Stanley's strip-tease,
frightened where it might lead: “Close the curtains before you undress any further” (1:394). Stanley, though, wants to prolong the act, and he tells her that this “is all I’m going to undress right now” (1:394). The proleptic phrase “right now” has both an erotic and a terrifying quality about it, with Stanley’s taunting of Blanche with his undressing carrying Williams’s appropriate message of how the Phallus is finally won through the stripping away of society’s clothing more so than in its donning. Moments later, when he goes to the bedroom bureau and takes out the “silk pyjamas I wore on my wedding night!” (1:395), that message is sealed: “When the telephone rings and they say, You’ve got a son! I’ll tear this off and wave it like a flag” (1:395). Though Stanley later goes into the bathroom to dress for the night, emerging in “the brilliant silk pyjama!” (1:400), we have been well-prepared for the de-robing act that will inevitably follow: “He grins at her as he knots the tasseled sash about his waist” (1:400). The rape scene had already been played out long before Stanley finally takes her limp body in his arms. Through the battling imagery of clothing, whether it be put on or taken, ripped, or stripped off ever since scene one, Williams has already made it clear that clothes do not make the “man”; though Stanley uses the phallus to assert the Phallus, he is no more the man for his actions than Blanche is the woman deserving her fate because of her drag performances throughout the play.

In M. Butterfly, while Song has been able to play her “Oriental shame” card in pretending that it is modesty that keeps her from exposing herself naked to Gallimard, she can no longer, like Blanche with Mitch, keep her admirer unsatisfied:

Gallimard: I want to see you . . . naked. [. . .]

Silence.

Song: I thought you understood my modesty. So you want me to—what—strip? Like a big cowgirl? Shiny pasties on my breasts? Shall I fling my kimono over my head and yell “ya-hoo” in the process? [. . .] Well, come. Strip me. (MB 59-60)

Gallimard, however, does not desire to see her naked and perhaps
expose the truth: “Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps” (MB 60). In the end, it matters little to Gallimard whether or not he would find Song’s phallus because, as Song soon claims, “I’m pregnant” (MB 61). The child, a complete ruse of course (like Maggie’s in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, who also relies on the strip-tease to arouse Brick), placates Gallimard’s need to see/recover the phallus since the child is post hoc proof of it. The child recalls Judith Butler’s “defining moment of performativity” where Song’s declaration “not only perform[s] an action, but confer[s] a binding power on the action performed” (BTM 224-25). While he cannot have a child with his female wife, he ironically can have one with his (f)emale lover.

In her/his final confrontation with Gallimard in M. Butterfly, Song does strip in and reveals to him and the world that she/he is a man. Though the strip-tease is intended to humiliate Gallimard, as the East would like to humiliate the West, Hwang leaves it uncertain as to whether or not Song performs the strip-tease because he also desires to be eroticized by Gallimard. As Song says to him, “C’mon. Admit it. You still want me. Even in slacks and a button-downed collar” (MB 85). Song even reclines seductively, “[e]prising his feminine character” (MB 86) and then “starts to remove his clothes” (MB 86). Gallimard asks him to stop, as Blanche had Stanley in scene ten of Streetcar—either because he feels afraid of the other’s sexual potency or because he is humiliated that his homosexuality might finally be unveiled: “No! Stop! I don’t want to see. [. . .] I order you! To stop!” (MB 87). Song continues, and is “down to his briefs” (MB 87), which he “drops” moments later and stands naked before Gallimard with the undeniable phallus before him. Gallimard’s response, however, raises several interpretive problems, as Song thinks he is crying because he has been shamed (as Song was in the affair from the start and is now exacting revenge), but instead Gallimard is actually laughing. Song is offended and even hurt and fails “to see what is so funny?” (MB 88), and even suggests that his intentions to strip were not merely to get even: “Wait! I’m not “just a man”’’ (MB 88). We are still left with the uncertainty as to whether Song has only played the role of a woman when perhaps he wished to maintain it or whether Gallimard is gay or not or only wishes to be the
ideal Oriental woman he fantasizes about. In the end, not only are their clothes not hiding gender and sexual identities, but even their skin and sexual organs fails to offer any impeachable proof as to what their sex is.

Each of these strip-teases in *Streetcar* and *M. Butterfly*, then, culminates in rape—physical, mental, and even cultural. Song even describes at the end of the play during the trial scene that there is a rape mentality present in all imperialist agendas, which is one that has been attributed repeatedly to Stanley's raping of Blanche: "Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes" (*MB* 83). Hwang has said of this chauvinistic sexual fallacy:

> Whether we talk about it in terms of race or whether we talk about it in terms of gender or imperialism or whatever, there is a desire to degrade the person who is not like yourself and to feel somehow superior, to feel that you have power over them. (Bryer 138)

All sexual and political issues aside, that rape in *M. Butterfly* (and to a certain extent in *Streetcar*) frees as it demeans the violated: Song, having been sodomized by Gallimard for twenty years, is now free to accept his homosexuality outside of China; Gallimard, visually raped by Song during his revelatory strip-tease, can turn, as Blanche had done after her rape, toward the world of illusion in which both find peace through death (literal and figurative, respectively). To some extent, each undergoes a metamorphosis—Blanche into the moth; Song, and then Gallimard, into the butterfly—but the phallos, and its heterosexual cultural imperative, remains intact at the close of both plays.

**CONCLUSION**

Early in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes that the "univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of mas-
culine and heterosexist oppression” (GT 44). Though she was not describing Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* or Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, she might just as well have been since both plays provide convincing evidence of the kind of gender trouble about which Butler would later theorize. In fact, she concludes her study with a comment that could be equally rewarding in describing how both playwrights resort to drag to problematize gender, sex, and race in their plays: gender is, in all final assessments, merely “a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (GT 177). For Blanche, her performances are in no way determiners of her sex or gender. As she passes from the moth in scene one, to the dominatrix at the end of scene five, to the Madonna in scene eleven, she is beyond sex and gender, and in no way do her clothes or her “corporeal style[s]” or “act[s]” serve to define her sexual identity. Her clothing throughout *Streetcar*, in fact, does not signify her; she signifies her clothing. In this sense, Blanche represents a reversal of the Latin phrase *Vestis virum reddit*: clothes do not make the “man” but, rather, “the ‘man’ makes the clothes.”

In many ways, this is precisely Hwang’s message in *M. Butterfly*. Song’s Oriental kimono does not signify “her” femininity any more or any less than his Georgio Armani suit makes “him” a man at the end, just as Gallimard’s exchanging his masculine Western clothing for Song’s/Butterfly’s discarded kimono makes him a woman. Sex and gender, and race specifically, are not inscribed anywhere on the body, so clothes cannot hide what is not essentially there anyway. True sex/gender/race construction starts in the mind. If society were only willing to “see” this, then perhaps we would allow Gallimard the freedom to become Butterfly, or Blanche her beau Shep Huntleigh. Drag in Williams’s *Streetcar* and Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* thus demonstrate that the phallus is a myth, perhaps the ultimate myth, of Western nations, found no where on the body nor in the traditional signification of clothing used to hide it but rather in the cultural space that lies between.

While the similarities between *Streetcar* and *M. Butterfly* are undeniable, Tennessee Williams and David Henry Hwang, to be sure, share
more much in common than their social critique of Western masculinity and sexual politics. Raised in fundamentalist Christian families from which they attempted with varying degrees of success to break, both were advocates for and practitioners of the plastic theatre, incorporating dance and music, particularly opera, into their plays as extra-literary devices. Hwang even once likened his play *Family Devotions* to *The Glass Menagerie* in that both are autobiographical memory plays told through a narrator. But where Williams and Hwang are most similar is in their commitment to the political left's questioning and destabilizing of paradigmatic thinking about race, sex, and gender. And even if Hwang has frequently acknowledged the work of several contemporary dramatists as having influenced his work, Williams's name does appear from time to time as one of the earlier generation dramatists who had helped shape Hwang's perception of a political involvement in the theatre. In his 1994 address as William L. Abramowitz Guest Lecturer at M.I.T., Hwang said:

I think ethnic isolationism also runs the risk of reinforcing a larger prejudice in society: that ethnic minorities are defined primarily by their race. This can lead to the ghettoization of writers. Certainly those who choose to write about a particular ethnic group are really falling into a great literary tradition of writers like Tennessee Williams or Fitzgerald or August Wilson, whose work stems from a particular.  

For Hwang, Tennessee Williams was first, and perhaps foremost, a political writer of the American stage, and in whose footsteps he surely follows.

**Notes**

1 For work on Williams and the race/sexuality matrix, see Bak, Crandell, Kolin (two essays), Saddik, and van Duyvenbode. For those on Hwang and the race/sexuality matrix, see the excellent work of
Cody, Davis, Eng, Garber, Irmscher, Kehde, Koh, Kondo, Lin, Moy, Saal, Shimakawa, Shin, Skloot, and Street.

In a revealing interview with Gay Sunshine, Williams even once "proselytize[d]" to transvestites:

I picked up a copy of Gay Sunshine (GS 29/30) saying that plays such as Streetcar, and virtually all of my plays, were lies because they were about homosexuals disguised as women, which is a preposterous allegation and a very dangerous one. [. . .] I don't understand transvestites or transsexuals. They are really outside my understanding. [. . .] I think the great preponderance of them damages the gay liberation movement by travesty, by making a travesty of homosexuality, one that doesn't fit homosexuality at all and gives it a very bad public image. We are not trying to imitate women. We are simply trying to be conformably assimilated by our society. (Whitmore 312)

Williams treated the issue of drag queens only once in a short play entitled And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens . . . (1957/1960), and even then with jaded sympathy.

Note, for example, Blanche's retort to Mitch, "I don't think I've ever tried so hard to be gay and made such a dismal mess of it" (1:341), and later, "Who told you I wasn't 'straight'?" (1:385); or Stanley's to Blanche and Stella, "What do you two think you are? A pair of queens?" (1:371). More obscure gay encoding can also be found in Blanche's query whether or not Mitch is a wolf (1:292) (an active sodomite) and in her referring to the paperboy as a lamb (1:339) (a male youth who lets himself be sexually used by an older man).

Williams felt this too, as his interview with George Whitmore cited above demonstrates. He especially did not like Tallulah Bankhead's 1956 performance of Blanche, where she camped up the role to the pleasure of the many "queens" in the audience. Williams dramatizes his reaction to Bankhead's Blanche in his late play Something Cloudy,

To avoid unnecessary confusion, I will refer to Song with a feminine pronoun when he is woman in the play and a masculine one when he shows himself to be a man at the end.

It is perhaps interesting to note that while Stanley is being given his cold shower, Blanche, dressed only "in her robe" after her strip-tease, rushes into the bedroom, demanding, "I want my sister's clothes" (1:304), which Mitch echoes.

As Williams writes in scene eight: "He crosses into the bedroom, ripping off his shirt, and changes into a brilliant silk green bowling shirt" (1:377). Angry that Stanley still plans on going bowling after the tragic birthday meal, Stella "catches hold of his shirt' to keep him from leaving, ultimately ripping the shirt (1:377).

Interestingly, Blanche's rhinestone tiara, which she is also wearing during this scene, may be a direct allusion to Stanley's earlier recitation of Huey Long's successful 1928 campaign speech for Governor of Louisiana: "Every man is king, but no one wears a crown."

Why Stanley thinks he is going to have a son is never clear in the play, just as Song's is in M. Butterfly when she tells Chin to find her a boy whom she will give birth to (MB 62); presumably in both plays, the masculine imperative is connected with the cultural one, and male dominance is assured.

Significantly, Bouriscot's/Gallimard's French equivalent of the English expression "the clothes make the man" is, in fact, the opposite: "les habilites ne font pas la moine" ("clothes do not make the monk"), or in this case "the spy."

See http://www.fb10.unibremen.de/anglistik/kerkhoff/ContempDrama/Hwang.htm#Interviews
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