



“OUT, OUT BRIEF CANDLE” Shakespearean Echoes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*¹

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In the introduction to Scene Six of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams’s first important stage success, the narrator Tom describes his friendship with the “high school hero” Jim, whom he has invited to dinner. Jim, he says,

was the only one at the warehouse with whom I was on friendly terms. I was valuable to him as someone who could remember his former glory, who had seen him win basketball games and the silver cup in debating. He knew of my secret practice of retiring to a cabinet of the washroom to work on poems when business was slack in the warehouse. He called me Shakespeare.

Tom, as a writer, is important to Jim because he remembers the hero’s glory, the task of the poet since Homer. Jim is important to Tom because he transforms the washroom poet into a great artist by calling him “Shakespeare.” The juxtaposition of the art of the “cabinet” and that of the greatest dramatist of the English language is perhaps a fitting description of Williams’s own art, especially that of his next great work, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The film by Elia Kazan has become a modern American legend; the play is the dramatic equivalent of the great American novel. At the same time, *Streetcar* is consistently described as a “mystery,” uncannily possessing an inexhaustible wealth of interpretive possibilities.²

The mystery of this American play may indeed lie in Williams’s powerful transformation of crucial elements of Shakespearean tragedy. Like the art of William Faulkner, Williams’s contemporary, *A Streetcar Named Desire* may fruitfully be seen as transforming those elements of tragedy, as defined by Shakespeare, into the American idiom. Critics have been hesitant to pursue the traces of Shakespeare in Williams, mostly because Williams

¹ *Macbeth* V-5, l.22, *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen GREENBLATT (ed.), New York: Norton, 1997. The metaphor of the candle for the brevity and ephemerality of life is transformed in *Streetcar* into Blanche’s symbol of the barrenness of her existence deprived of the light of love after the suicide of her young husband: “And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this—kitchen—candle...” [Scene Four, 184]. All references to Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* will be from the Penguin edition, edited by Martin BROWNE, *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, London: Penguin, 1959. The play is divided into eleven “Scenes,” like chapters in a novella. There are no line numbers. I have included in each reference the scene number and the page number where the quotation appears in the Penguin edition.

² See Felicia Hardison LONDRÉ, “A Streetcar Running Fifty Years” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, Matthew C. ROUDANÉ (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 48.

himself down-played the impact of Shakespeare on his work, citing instead Chekhov or Hart Crane.³

Despite this, *Streetcar* is haunted by the ghosts of some of Shakespeare's tragic heroes and heroines. Blanche DuBois is clearly associated directly or indirectly with a number of Shakespearean heroines like Cleopatra, Desdemona, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Williams engages a number of *topoi* found in the great tragedies: the representation of life as mere illusion through theatrical metaphors and theatrical reflexivity; the meditation on the nature of death within a Christian moral and ethical framework; an exploration of the psychic forces leading to madness and, finally, the appropriation of the Other as an intrinsic element of the tragic vision.⁴ Williams's appropriation and reworking of these Shakespearean elements may help us to reach an understanding of the nature of modern American tragic theatre. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams transforms a dramatic Shakespearean legacy so as to make it practically unrecognizable. Yet, the signs of this legacy are everywhere and may go far to explain the "mystery" of this American tragedy.

"The long parade to the grave..." [Scene One, 126]

Blanche DuBois may be seen to resemble, more or less superficially, a number of Shakespeare's heroines. She has been seen as a Desdemona to Eunice's Emilia in *Othello* and there are many parallels between Blanche's being "washed up" on the shores of the "Elysian Fields" and Viola's arrival in Illyria in *Twelfth Night*.⁵ Williams's theatrical representation of Blanche's gradual descent into madness over the course of the play owes many of its

³ There are very few references to Shakespeare in the critical work on Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar*. An exception is Philip C. Kolin's references to Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello* and other Shakespearean heroines in his essay, "Eunice Hubbell and the Feminist Thematic of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" in *Confronting Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire": Essays in Critical Pluralism*, Philip C. KOLIN (ed.), Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993, 105-120. Harold Bloom, in seeing Hart Crane as the poet who represented the anxiety of influence for Williams, consequently dismisses the influence of an earlier tradition, such as that of the Romantics, on Williams. For the influence of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley and Byron, see Gilbert DEBUSSCHER, "Creative Rewriting: European and American Influences on the Dramas of Tennessee Williams" in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ROUDANÉ (ed.), 167-188.

⁴ If we see Euripides' *Helen*, as the ancient model for a western, Christian tragic form, we might say that tragedy is based on the knowledge that "life" is an illusion, and that any form of salvation lies in the act and process of "recognition" by another or by oneself. The founding tragedy of the West is the Trojan war, a war which was fought, according to Euripides, borrowing from Stesichorus, for an illusion of Helen. The "real" Helen is "found" finally by her husband Menelas in Egypt, the eastern stage of the renewal of possibilities lost in the occident.

⁵ For the parallels between Desdemona and Blanche see Philip C. Kolin's essay mentioned above and for the parallels between *Twelfth Night* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* see Valérie SYSTERMANS' dissertation, "A Study of Desire in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*;" Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1998.

elements to Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia after the death of her father.⁶ Blanche's guilty conscience over the suicide of her lover and her constant bathing may owe something to Lady Macbeth's attempts to wash away the "damn spot" that remains in her soul after the murder of Duncan. Yet, Blanche DuBois and *A Streetcar Named Desire* possess an even larger "Shakespearean dimension" than these parallels are able to show. Blanche DuBois embodies Williams's vision of drama and of life in general. Blanche is Williams's Lear, running for protection "from one leaky roof to another leaky roof—because it was storm—all storm, and I was—caught in the centre" [Scene Five, 169]. She needs the "kindness of strangers" [Scene Eleven, 225]. She is also his Cleopatra, an image of tragic greatness created through art. Yet, in many ways, Blanche DuBois may be seen first and foremost as Williams's Hamlet, representative of the writer's obsession with this "mortal coil" and, in Blanche's words "the long parade to the grave" [Scene One, 126].⁷ Blanche and Hamlet are both hyper-sensitive souls suffering from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," who must resort to putting on an "antic disposition." In other words, they must both resort to the theatre, in order to keep their mental equilibrium. Much like Hamlet, Blanche interrogates the ironic discrepancy between the appearance of things and their true, inward nature. In language almost parodying Shakespearean diction, Blanche waxes eloquent on the favorite theme of the Elizabethan sonneteers, the ephemerality of beauty:

Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart... I have all of those things... I have all of these treasures locked in my heart [Scene Ten, 211].

Similarly, when Gertrude wonders why the death of the King, Hamlet's father, should "seem" to affect him so much, Hamlet retorts:

Seems madam? nay it is, I know not seems.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black
...
That can denote me truly ...
... I have that within which passes show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. [I-2, l.65]

Like Hamlet, Blanche's monologues often turn toward the way the eye is caught by appearance instead of the riches, as well as grief, hidden within. In her longest speech, Blanche focuses on the distinction between the way death *seems* and the way it truly *is* when she recounts the tale of the "long parade to the grave": the deaths of the remaining members of the DuBois

⁶ Ophelia's madness is represented on stage through songs with fragmented, often sexual, lyrics and a close association with flowers. The repetition of the *Varsouviana* and especially the song of the Spanish woman selling "flowers for the dead" are ways in which a very strong case for parallels between Blanche and Ophelia can be made. Furthermore, the casting of Vivien Leigh in the first performance of *Streetcar*, as Blanche DuBois itself contains Shakespearean echoes and resonances. A critical moment in modern stage history was the first use of theatre-in-the-round during the 1939 performance of *Hamlet* in which Leigh played Ophelia, exactly ten years before she became Blanche DuBois under the direction of her husband, Shakespearean actor and director, Lawrence Olivier. The stage (and later film) history of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one could suggest, is filled with references to Shakespeare.

family and the loss of Belle Reve, the ancestral home. Blanche accuses Stella of being fooled by the ritual trappings of death, while Blanche has witnessed “that which passeth show:”

You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths—not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles [...]. But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! [Scene One, 127]

The appearance of death, the “gorgeous boxes” and the “pretty flowers,” gives little indication of the terrifying decay and corruption that lies underneath. It is this horror that Blanche says she “saw,” the sight of which affected her like corporal blows:

I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! [127]

The language here is close to the passage where Blanche comments on the vicissitudes of physical beauty. Blanche's description of Margaret alludes to some specific, yet not quite fully unrevealed horror: “that dreadful way” and “big with it” needing to be burned like rubbish. It is not clear what “it” is. This ambiguity reinforces the horror of what Blanche saw at Belle Reve, the spectacle of death personified as the “Grim Reaper,” who has encamped at Belle Reve, a reference to the slaughter of the Southern gentry at the hands of the Northern army in the American Civil War. It is a horror beyond normal comprehension, something sickening to imagine. The leap from burial to garbage, “burned like rubbish” seems to ring like a distant echo of Hamlet's dark musings concerning the fate of kings:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust,
the dust is of the earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam
whereto his was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away. [V-1, ll.193-197]

Both Hamlet and Blanche indulge in what Stella refers to as “morbidity:” “I don't listen to you when you are being morbid!” [Scene Five, 169]. But, like Hamlet accusing his mother of having betrayed his father for her own sexual pleasure, Blanche sees Stella's sexual fulfillment as a direct betrayal of the ancestral home and name. Hamlet accuses his mother of making love with a beast, the “satyr” Claudius:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty” [III-4, ll.82-84]

He accuses her of having exchanged a “Hyperion” for a “satyr” and betrayed the memory of his father. Blanche similarly accuses Stella of having put her own pleasure before her duty to her family:

You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw! And now you sit there telling me with your eyes that I let the place go! How in the hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss

Stella!... Honey—that's how it slipped through my fingers! Which of them left us a fortune? Which of them left a cent of insurance even? Only poor Jessie—one hundred to pay for her coffin. That was all Stella! Sit here and stare at me, thinking I let the place go! I let the place go? Where were *you*. In bed with your—Polack! [Scene One, 127]

Blanche's racist term "Polack" signals a vision of an underlying miscegenation between Stanley and Stella, between immigrant and Southern aristocracy, between sub-human and human. When Blanche learns that Stanley is Polish she asks "They're something like Irish, aren't they?" blending various types of immigrants in a larger category of the Other. In *Hamlet*, as in *Othello*, there are varying degrees of otherness, acting as foils for the main characters; in *Hamlet*, the "sledded Polacks" [I-1, l.63] are at the furthest remove, like the Turk in *Othello*. Shakespeare simultaneously uses both Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, as a foil for Hamlet, as well as an almost mindlessly obdurate "Polack," to highlight Hamlet's inability to act. Fortinbras and the enemy Pole are both representatives of the real world of action. In the case of the Poles particularly, it is action against every odd, in order to protect a tiny piece of land they call their own:

Hamlet: Good sir, whose powers are these?
Captain: They are of Norway sir.
Hamlet: How purposed sir I pray you?
Captain: Against some part of Poland.
Hamlet: Who commands them sir?
Captain: The nephew of old Norway, Fortinbras.
Hamlet: Goes it against the main of Poland sir,
 Or for some frontier?
Captain: Truly to speak, and with no addition,
 We go to gain a little patch of ground
 That hath in it no profit but the name.
 to pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it,
 Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
 A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
Hamlet: Why then the Polack never will defend it.
Captain: Yes, it is already garrisoned. [IV-4, ll.9-24]

Alone, Hamlet contemplates his own weakness faced with the strength and courage of the "Polack" willing to defend his unprofitable territory to the last:

How all occasions do inform against me,
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. [IV-4, ll.25-28]

Here, the Other appears to be a "man" while Hamlet sees himself like the beast. Similarly, Stanley Kowalski, the "Polack" in *Streetcar*, appears both as a beast, but also as the man who takes pride in his home, defends it against invasion and brings home dinner. Stanley, in fact, defines himself as an insider, not an outsider:

I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack. [Scene Eight, 197]

Yet, whether he is actually Polish or American, in Blanche's view, Stanley and all the men who play poker with Stanley are "downright—*bestial*" [Scene Four, 163], attesting to her more general problem with sexuality and the frightening truths of corporeal existence and earthly appetites:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something—sub-human—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something—ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in—anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you—*you* here—*waiting* for him! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! ... *God!* Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella—my sister—there has been *some* progress since then! [Scene Four, 163-164]

Blanche's meditation on the bestial nature of the immigrant Other, echoes the mediations of Hamlet on the disparity inside man, both seen as a "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" and "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." Like Hamlet castigating his mother, Blanche tries to convince her sister to aspire to something higher, to something more than the gratification of lust. This is what she also attempted to do as a school teacher: "...instill a bunch of Bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos with reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe!" [Scene Three, 151]. For Blanche, literature is what makes man "noble in reason ... infinite in faculty" and while Hamlet wishes "that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew," Blanche DuBois obsessively bathes to wash away the impurity of the flesh in her daily, almost hourly, ablutions. Yet, the tragedy of both Hamlet and Blanche may lie in their withdrawal from the corporeal world which they see as falling far short of their "romantic" expectations. While Stanley Kowalski seems only concerned with "eating and sleeping," he, like the "Polack" in *Hamlet*, shares a kind of determined and resolute fortitude, even a form of courage. Like Hamlet who leaves behind a "dying voice" in place of the deeds of a Fortinbras, Blanche can only offer Stella a "belle reve," an "insubstantial dream" in place of a world of violence and lust.

"Queen of the Nile"[Scene Ten, 213]

One of the hallmarks of Shakespearean drama is the way it reflects upon itself and calls attention to itself *as* theatre. In *Henry V*, a Chorus "pointedly emphasizes the play's self-conscious lack of realism."⁸

Can this cock-pit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? [Prologue, ll.11-14]

Macbeth famously muses that "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (and Hamlet takes on the role

⁸ See the introduction by Katharine Eisaman Maus to *Henry V* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen GREENBLATT (ed.).

of the director of the play-within, *The Mousetrap*, thus enabling the playwright to comment upon the craft of the dramatist. One of the traditions of the early-modern English stage was to have boys play the women's parts. Shakespeare consistently turned this powerful convention inside out, by 'redressing' boys (who were playing girls) into boys, effectively revealing the seam side of his art through transvestied characters such as Viola of *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind of *As You Like It* and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois literally stages her own final descent into madness for the gaze of Stella, her sister, and Stanley Kowalski, her brother-in-law. Williams employs the theatrical metaphor in order to emphasize the illusory nature of Blanche's hopes for a better life. Yet, it is Stanley who finally reveals Blanche's theatre as tawdry illusion in the climactic Scene Ten of the play:

Stanley: There isn't a goddamn thing but imagination!

Blanche: Oh!

Stanley: And lies and conceit and tricks!

Blanche: Oh!

Stanley: And look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are!

Blanche: Oh-God...

Stanley: I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say-Ha-Ha! Do you hear me? Ha-ha-ha! [He walks into the bedroom.]

Blanche: Don't come in here! [Scene Ten, 212-213]

Stanley reveals Blanche as a character in her own imaginary play. In this passage, imagination and fancy, conceit, cheap tricks and costumes, all the elements of the theater itself, rise to a crescendo to climax in Stanley's image of Blanche as an Egyptian queen. It is clear from the stage direction that Stanley is speaking to Blanche in the bathroom. For it is in the bathroom, her sanctuary, that Blanche, the Oriental Kabuki actress powders herself, sprays perfume and covers the light-bulb of reality with her Bourbon street lampshade of fantasy. It is in this intimate, private space that she sits on the toilet, her "throne," drinking in order to blur the edges between herself and the world.

Despite his own heavy drinking, Stanley asserts that he has never been "wooly:" "Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes." He sees straight and clear. Yet, it is Stanley who "beholds" the bathroom as Egypt and Blanche as Queen of the Nile. It is Stanley who, a little before in this scene, plays along with Blanche, pretending to mistake her tawdry rhinestones for "Tiffany diamonds" and the fake furs for "fox-pieces." It is Stanley who "mistakes" Blanche for Cleopatra, even though he knows full well that Cleopatra, like Blanche, is a simple theatre costume, a wrapping of imagination and tricks.

Like Williams's Blanche, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is presented as a fabrication when seen through the eye of Enobarbus.⁹ Enobarbus describes Cleopatra as a piece of art in which "the fancy outworks nature" and Cleopatra, equally able to play the part of the fabricator (she is the painter as well as the painting) sees Antony as "bestriding the globe," a giant and god in her imagination. The play constantly questions the idea of a *real* Cleopatra and of a *real* Antony and the version created of them in the "orientalist" imagination of others.¹⁰ In other words, Blanche and Cleopatra, the two 'queens of the Nile' truly exist "in the eye of the beholder." Like Enobarbus, Stanley is a fascinated and wholly engaged observer of the magic of Blanche's self-representation as a work of art. However, like Octavius, who wants to show Cleopatra in the "posture of a whore" in his Roman triumph, Stanley wants to tear away the theatrical illusion and destroy it. Stanley's harsh rejection of the imagination and the fragile beauty of Blanche's Cleopatra in the bathroom may be precisely what Cleopatra refers to when she imagines the future Shakespearean stage upon which the lovers' story will be travestied:

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th' posture of a whore. [5]

The "quick" comedians are both "artful" (as in a "quick" study) as well as "living" (the "quick" and the "dead"). To stage them "extemporally" implies not only that they can be played without a script, but also literally "out of time", out of real time, in play or stage time. The ultimate "travesty" is the triple travesty of dressing up a boy to play the part of a woman, having Cleopatra's name slandered by history as a "whore," and finally, having her "greatness" "boyed." In other words, having her greatness reduced to the stature of a boy and showing her conquering sexuality turned into an object of lust for grown male spectators watching the performance of boys. In this passage, Cleopatra would be reduced to a small stature being staged out of existence by Caesar's triumph. Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley's representation of Blanche as merely a common liar leads to her effacement. Just after Stanley rips away the veil of imagination, Blanche reaches for the telephone, trying to reconnect herself to her main fantasy and prop, the millionaire Shep Huntleigh, who by loving her will constitute her as someone:

Operator, operator! give me long-distance, please...I want to get in touch with Mr. Shep Huntleigh of Dallas...Please understand, I—No! No, wait!...One moment! Someone is—Nothing! [Scene Ten, 213]

The "Nothing" that Blanche has become is her own self, deprived of scenery and props. A self that, in the last scene, will have to "depend on the kindness of strangers." Those more generous spectators in the audience who

⁹ The Greek word for the poet was, of course, *poien*, "one who makes" the "fabricator," which later acquired the meaning in English of the "liar."

¹⁰ See Edward W. SAID, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin Books, 1978, 63.

will see in Blanche her Cleopatran greatness even in the moment of her greatest weakness.

“The inhuman jungle voices rise up” [Scene Ten, 215]

According to Edward Said:

The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.... In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet, and dozens more; settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. [Said, 63]

Said sees orientalist representations of the East as a kind of theatre, a stage upon which a few stereotyped images play, symbols of occidental “terrors, pleasures, desires.” In *Antony and Cleopatra*, even while Cleopatra is to some extent used by Shakespeare as such a stock figure of the western imagination and imaginary, the play seriously interrogates its own occidental representation of her through its characterization of the Roman view of “Egypt,” both the country and its queen. Said’s perceptions do help us, nevertheless, examine the larger, more nebulous role of the Other in Williams’s *Streetcar*, which does, in fact, represent “white” terrors and desires, specifically those of Blanche DuBois. There is, even, a strong element of the cartoon in the way Williams draws and depicts these pleasures and terrors in a manner that verges on the parodic. Williams seems ready to parody facile appropriations of the East to denote sexual pleasure in Blanche’s attempt to seduce the young delivery boy at the end of Scene Five:

Young man! Young, young, young, young—man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights?
[174]

Yet, in other ways, it seems as if Williams uses images of a purely American “orient,” namely the black or the “Negro” and the carnival indelibly associated with New Orleans, in a manner that is not parodic. Williams, in fact, creates an equivalent American orientalist stage, peopling it with the Negro piano player, the Red Hot Tamale Vendor, the Mexican flower woman, the prostitute with the sequined bag, and the Negro Woman who haunts the play from beginning to end, the emblem of a carnivalesque indulgence in sexual pleasure. These new characters are simply another way to describe the “heart of darkness” and the otherness of the world which the white Blanche DuBois has entered. We see this from the opening description of Scene One where “a tinny piano” is “played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers” [115]. In this respect, Williams’s use of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, I would argue, is less transformative than his use of either *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Hamlet*. I would argue that this is because Williams, as an American, sees blackness as representative of the radical Other in the

American soul. Williams's use of *Othello*, therefore, tends to construct a racist image of the "real" world his heroine must face. While for Hamlet, this world is that of the king's court, and for Lear, the cruelty of a personified Nature, for the white Southerner, Blanche DuBois, the cruelty of the real world lies in its racial miscegenation.

Philip C. Kolin has noted the manner in which Eunice's diatribe against Stanley resembles Emilia's castigation of men in *Othello*. "Eunice is the outspoken Emilia to Stella's (and perhaps Blanche's) quieter, more resigned Desdemona." However, Kolin notes: "I am not arguing that Williams had *Othello* in mind..."¹¹ While Kolin hesitates to draw conclusions about the possible of influence of *Othello* upon *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I would suggest that a close reading of the "bedroom" scenes in both *Othello* and *Streetcar* yields a concurrence of elements which may lead us to believe that Williams indeed, at least for this scene, have had "*Othello* in mind."

In Scene Ten, with Stella in the hospital, Blanche and Stanley are alone in a scene in which the sexual tension mounts with the threat of violence. Stanley emerges from the bathroom wearing "the silk pajamas I wore on my wedding night." For the night of Othello and Desdemona's final, tragic encounter, Desdemona asks Emilia to make the bed with her wedding sheets: "Prithee tonight / Lay on my bed my wedding sheets, remember." [IV-2, 1.107]. Williams then gives very carefully choreographed stage directions to set the scene as precisely as possible:

The night is filled with inhuman voices like the cries in a jungle...the Negro Woman appears around the corner with a sequined bag, which the prostitute had dropped on the walk. She is rooting excitedly through it. [Scene Ten, 213]

The "sequined bag" may be seen as the cheap sex of the prostitute, showing itself on the sidewalk carelessly for anyone. Like the "spotted handkerchief" passed between all the women in *Othello*: the prostitute, Bianca, Emilia, Desdemona, and originating with the strange Egyptian mother of Othello himself, the sequined bag of the prostitute becomes a suddenly over-determined, female, emblem of sexuality. The Negro Woman, rooting excitedly through the bag like a grunting pig, has been associated the underside, hidden carnival side of sex. It is she who in fact opens the play with the unintelligible fragment which alludes generally to taboo desires:

She says St Barnabas would send out his dog to lick her and when he did she'd feel an icy cold wave all up an' down her. Well, that night when— [Scene One, 115]

The images of the jungle and the red-light district of New Orleans, from the "heart of darkness," pave the way for the later description of "the inhuman jungle voices" and set the scene for Stanley's rape of Blanche. While preparing for her meeting with Othello, Desdemona refers to her mother's maid "Barbary," who taught her the song she sings about false love. Iago compares Othello to a "Barbary" horse [I-1, 1.113], lending, according to the

¹¹ See Philip C. KOLIN, "Eunice Hubbell and the Feminist Thematic of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" in *Confronting Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire,"* 116-117.

note in the Norton edition, “an exotic, non-European aura to Desdemona in her victimization” or simply to the scene itself, as in Williams’s *Streetcar*.

Desdemona, like Blanche, has been accused of being a “whore:” “I cannot say whore. / It does abhor me now I speak the word.” [IV-2, 1.165] Stanley’s motive for revealing Blanche’s past to Mitch is very much the same as Othello’s for deciding to murder Desdemona. Othello, at the beginning of Act IV, scene 2 names it as “the cause:” Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. / Put out the light, and then put out the light” [V-2, 11.6-7]. Othello sees it as an almost religious duty to murder the whore. Stanley, similarly sees his revelation of Blanche’s promiscuity to Mitch as saving him from disgrace and shame: he explains to the horrified Stella, much as Othello explains later to Emilia and others:

Mitch is a buddy of mine. We were in the same outfit together—Two-forty-first Engineers. We work in the same plant and now on the same bowling team. You think I could face him if—...I’d have that on my conscience the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught!” [Scene Seven, 190]

In the moments just before Stanley carries Blanche to the bed, the stage directions are again very specific: “The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step towards her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips” [Scene Ten, 215]. The stage direction here is significant at two levels, both of which emphasize Stanley’s momentary transformation into Othello, essentially murdering the white, Blanche: Stanley “biting his tongue” corresponds to Othello’s biting of his lip just before murdering Desdemona: “Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?” [V-2, 1.46]. One might well ask why Williams decided to note additionally that Stanley’s “tongue... protrudes between his lips.” It is important to understand that for Williams these stage directions were of the utmost importance. His was a theatre, as he said, of “delicate and tenuous material” justifying “atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction” [Bigsby, 33]. This strange additional piece of direction for the actor of the Actors Studio could well be an allusion to the racist game in which “white” children pretended to be “black” by protruding their tongue from between their lips while rolling back the bottom lip, effectively adding another “lip,” creating the illusion of thick “black” lips. Stanley, in the jungle, rolling back his lip, protruding his tongue and biting it commits a violence equivalent to that committed by another “black” man who, realizing what he has done turns into the Turk who represents the ultimate Other. Whatever we think of the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is clear that for Stella, at least, the Kowalskis and the DuBois are separate species. By the end of the play, Stanley has become the Polack, the Jungle Other, losing, at some level, his status as an American. He is replaced in his white, Southern wife’s affections by *her* baby boy, who might inherit the fallen, miscegenated world of this American tragedy.

While many of the Shakespearean echoes in Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* have been transformed into a “terrible beauty,” it seems clear that Williams created an American tragedy with Shakespearean drama in mind. Williams, elsewhere, attests to the difficulty of creating a new, modern tragic form, when, like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, he aspires to be a Shakespeare. The first poem in his collection, *Androgyne, Mon Amour*:

Poems by Tennessee Williams (A New Directions Book, 1944), "Old Men Go Mad at Night" makes reference to *King Lear* and the poverty of a modern "drama," both on the stage and in modern life:

Old men go mad at night
but are not Lears

There is no kingly howling of their rage
[ll.1-3]

No title of dignity, now,
no height of old estate

Gives stature to the drama... [ll.10-12]

One of the central themes of *Streetcar* seems to be the impossibility of making theatre, emblemized in the destitute figure of Blanche DuBois, in the "old" way, as Shakespeare did with Lear. It may be that the struggle of a new theatre to be born out of an old, like the new South out the old, gives life and mystery to this American tragedy. To Blanche's Hamlet-like musings on death and her Egyptian theatre, Stanley Kowalski's rebuttal signals the birth of a new American drama appropriating its native American idiom: "Now let's cut the rebop!" [Scene Two, 137]. Shakespearean drama haunts the background of this play, but Williams transforms it into something originally American like jazz. This process of transformation is a necessary consequence of the loss of that "dignity" and "stature" once enjoyed by the drama in the age of Shakespeare.