

**Representing the 'Crisis' in Masculinity:
British and North American Male
Playwrights, 1990–2005**

Kathryn Ann Whittaker, BA (Hons), MA

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of a “‘crisis” in masculinity’ came to prominence in Britain and North America during the 1990s. This phenomenon developed out of several decades in which the notion of ‘the subject’ came under critical scrutiny, both from developments in postmodern and post-structuralist theory, and socio-cultural shifts informed by the politicised campaigns of second-wave feminism, gay activism and civil rights movements. In this context, the discursively central position of the white, heterosexual, middle-class male subject looked to be decentred by a host of radical projects that claimed identity positions as constructed and contingent.

In exploring the resonance of the ‘crisis’ in mainstream playwriting practice of the 1990s and early 2000s, this study centres on a range of texts by contemporary British and North American male dramatists: *Closer* (1997) by Patrick Marber; *The Shape of Things* (2001) by Neil LaBute; Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys* (2004); Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1992 and 1994); Roy Williams’s *Clubland* (2001) and *Bondage* (1992), by David Henry Hwang. Through evaluating strategies by which

privileged and 'marginalised' masculinities are portrayed, this thesis considers not only how far these works may appear to suggest a state of rupture in 'normative' masculinity, but whether they can be read as re-affirming or undermining binaristic and 'stable' notions of identity. These concerns take account of the various ways in which gender is articulated through 'race', sexuality, nationality and class.

The primary theoretical framework is drawn from the field of post-structuralist philosophy, and, specifically, selected works by Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha. Cultural studies and sociology provide a 'sub-strand' of theory, through analyses that interconnect the themes of masculinity and nostalgia. While the former trope enables psychoanalytic readings, the latter is apt for analyses of cultural texts produced at a time in which masculinity was deemed in a hazardous state of decline. It is in combining these threads with queer, feminist and performance theory, and philosophical accounts of the postmodern, that this thesis looks to reflect on how the male-authored dramas under discussion respond to or evoke the 'crisis' in masculinity, and what might thus be discerned about both this practice and the 'crisis' discourse itself.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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The 'crisis' in masculinity

In 1988, two British sociologists observed that:

the social and economic changes of the past two decades are beginning to call masculinity into question. The masculinity that once believed itself to be at the pinnacle of the natural hierarchy of things is now being slowly exposed for what it is: a subjectivity that is organised within structures of control and authority. [...] For men who were promised recognition and a secure place in the world, there lies ahead a frightening prospect: that masculinity will be shorn of its [...] power and will become simply one identity among others. (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988: 11)

According to other critics, this 'frightening prospect' was, rather, a 'frightening' present. In *Crisis in Masculinity* (1985), for instance, American Christian counsellor Leanne Payne deemed the 'crisis' a 'growing cultural malady, [...] epidemic in proportions', and one that reflected in men's 'emotional illness or instability' as a result of their being 'split off from their masculine side' (Payne, 1985: 9–11). While many pro-feminist scholars did not share Payne's view of '[m]asculinity and femininity' as 'utterly transcendent' (*ibid*: 78), a 'crisis' discourse also emerged in their work during the 1980s. Advocating 'a major reconstruction of masculinity [...] in the form of coalitions among feminists, gay men, and progressive heterosexual men', the authors of *Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity* (1985) defined '[a] crisis of a form of heterosexual masculinity', resultant from 'recent changes in the constitution of masculinity in advanced capitalist countries' (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985: 598). In another seminal text in this field, Michael Kimmel reflected, 'that masculinity is in "crisis" [...] has become a cultural commonplace' in North America (Kimmel, 1987: 121). Although Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford's prediction may then seem to come too late, I suggest that it

retains some validity — if not because masculinity was *necessarily* ever ‘shorn of its power’ in the *fin-de-siècle* West, but rather through the way in which their claims looked to be confirmed by the discursive explosion of a masculinity ‘crisis’ from the 1990s. As the innumerable texts on the topic in this decade saw it flourish as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, the earlier writings cited here may stand as seeds of a particular, contemporary trope.

This notion is supported by points of continuity between the theories of the 1980s, and what is arguably the central tenet of the ‘crisis’ discourse: the decline or disintegration of white, Western, heteronormative masculinity, and concomitant loss of phallic and patriarchal power. In these terms, it has been deemed a response to, or expression of

the anxieties of men who fit into the category of hegemonic masculinity: straight, white middle-class men who until recently enjoyed the privilege of assuming their subjectivity, their sense of a clearly defined identity [...].
(Nilsson, 2000: 56)

One function of the following chapters is to assess the resonance of this ‘crisis’ in mainstream, male-authored playwriting practice, through an analysis of British and North American dramatic texts produced at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first. Initially, I will look to provide an overview of the ‘thesis’ of the ‘crisis’ in masculinity, and a survey of relevant, existing publications produced out of the field of theatre and performance studies. An account of sociological constructions of the ‘crisis’ will follow, after which I will unpack critical reflections upon the phenomenon. Before detailing my research methodology and the structure of the forthcoming chapters at the close of this Introduction, I

will provide a brief account of some recent cultural representations of men and masculinities.

Drawn from a diverse range of sociological, cultural, philosophical and psychological analyses — and across a spectrum of political positions — the ‘crisis’ of the 1990s and 2000s has been charted through a host of scholarly, journalistic, and popular, mainstream texts. Within both Britain and North America, television, cinema, advertising and literature have been deemed to reflect or construct the discourse, underpinning its presence in the socio-cultural mainstream. The multifaceted and often contradictory ways in which it has emerged renders it resistant to a singular definition and it is not my intention, here, to attempt to provide one. In looking, rather, to chart a course through this matrix and lend it greater clarity, an outline of several key areas will be introduced. These will encompass the historical, socio-cultural and philosophical conditions of the ‘crisis’, and some of the different positions and perspectives from which it has been theorised.

Sally Robinson provides an apt summary of the ‘crisis’ thesis in stating that

[the] narrative goes something like this: in the late 1960s, in the wake of the civil rights movement, and with the rise of women’s liberation, gay liberation, and the increasing visibility of ethnic and racial diversity [...] white men begin to be decentered.
(Robinson, 2000: 2)

Echoing Chapman and Rutherford’s image of straight white masculinity ‘[becoming] one identity among others’, the pivotal significance of historically ‘othered’ positions is highlighted here. As radical political campaigns enabled the possibility of legitimate subjecthood for those

formerly denied it, the normative link between the masculine and an exclusive position of privilege began to be denaturalised, ostensibly rupturing the 'ideal' identity available to straight, white, middle-class men. R. W. Connell noted that 'one [...] long-term [consequence]' of 'second-wave feminism' was 'to unsettle traditional ideas about men and masculinity' (Connell, 2000: 149). Indeed, from the 1970s, feminist questioning of normative 'sex roles', and the exposure of class and 'race' in gender construction provided scholars a means to critically interrogate masculinity, and imagine alternative identity paradigms (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1987; Connell, 2000 and 2005; Horrocks, 1994; Segal, 1990). As a theorised topic in these terms, then, 'masculinity [...] did not really exist until feminists began to attack the presuppositions of traditional political and social theory' (Morgan, 1992: 6).

What emerges as key to this narrative is the role of political activism in undercutting masculinity's 'privilege of invisibility'; that which 'reproduces the inequalities [...] circumscribed by gender' (Kimmel, 1993: 30). For, given that there is 'real power in remaining unmarked' (Phelan, 1993: 6) it has been the case historically that such dominant positions as '[m]asculinity and whiteness retain their power as signifiers and social practices because they are opaque to analysis' (Robinson, 2000: 1). As such movements as 'feminism and gay liberation [...] brought gender into public discourse' (Kimmel, 1993: 30), rendering masculinity a *visible* script, and one open to critique, so too did they '[challenge] not only the power of heterosexual men but also the worth of their masculinity' (Hunt, 2008: 464).

These progressive projects were informed by and reflected upon central strains of postmodern thought; namely

critiques of the humanist conceptions of the subject [...] as a unified, unitary, rational, and rationalist 'point of origin'; as centred in consciousness; and, in terms of the idea of a universal 'Man' as the embodiment of an ahistorical essence. [...] In the post-World War II period the projects of post-structuralism, feminism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-racism have all [...] taken serious issue with universalising truth claims of grand narrative of history which place the European 'Man' at its centre.
(Brah, 1996: 119)

That post-structuralism rose in tandem 'with the ascendancy of the white male as victim' (Savran, 1996: 143) from the 1960s underscores its importance to this philosophical trope, as does its recurrent focus on gender and sexuality. Naturalised notions of, and connections between, men and masculinity were unpicked by such philosophers as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, who situated gender as textual or discursive phenomena, the latter branding sexuality historically and culturally contingent (Foucault 1990 [1976]; 1992 [1984]). Lent increasing credibility by these seminal theories, various radical and interventionist projects may not have 'remove[d] men's powers and privileges', yet did manage, in part, to 'strip them of their legitimating stories' (Rutherford, 1992: 3). That these interconnected tropes are pertinent to the 'crisis' is reflected in a claim of David Gutterman's:

postmodernism's focus on instability, multiplicity, and contingency, as well as its subsequent celebration of difference, provides an extraordinary basis for interrogating the cultural scripts of normative masculinity.
(Gutterman, 1994: 224)

Although such 'interrogation' thus preceded the 1990s, psychotherapist Roger Horrocks asserted in his 1994 book, *Masculinity in Crisis*, that

'masculinity as a "theorized" and deconstructed topic is new' (Horrocks, 1994: 6). Aside from highlighting the connection between a gender script open to scrutiny and a state of 'crisis', this claim can be taken to reflect upon contemporaneous philosophical advances: in particular, developments of earlier post-structuralist ventures that identified sex and gender 'norms' as constructed and contingent. In this context, feminist scholar Elaine Aston highlights the work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick as key to '[t]he 1990s challenge to identity politics', noting that, '[i]n the wake of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1991) especially, ideas of gender and performativity came into wide critical and theoretical circulation' (Aston, 2003: 7). After two decades in which masculinity appeared to have been toppled from its pedestal, the final years of the century saw the rise of theories that would enable it to be further deconstructed.

This narrative, while not exhaustive, has looked to take account of the principle strands within the 'crisis' thesis. However, as formerly indicated, these histories and concepts have been theorised from an eclectic range of positions, comprising a discourse of debate and contradiction. I will thus outline three main perspectives in a bid to orientate the reader within this field, and, in so doing, introduce certain key figures and theorists to whom later references will be made.

Broadly speaking, the first of these three perspectives espouses the view that, as a result of feminist activism and subsequent shifts in gendered roles, a once certain masculinity is in a hazardous state of decline. This 'crisis' is cast as unique and seminal; a worrying threat to normative

societal and familial relations, rendering men victims within the public and private sphere. Crucially, feminism recurs as an undesirable force of disruption. Arguably the most famous exponent of this position is American poet Robert Bly, whose 1990 book, *Iron John*, saw him become widely regarded as ‘[t]he most popular and influential writer on the “crisis in masculinity”’ (Nilsson, 2000: 56). ‘[T]he first [book] about men [as gendered subjects] to gain prominence as a [...] best-seller’ (Messner, 1997: 8), *Iron John* proved an enormous international success and reached the top of *The New York Times* best-seller list in which it featured for over a year. Recalling the grievances expressed in Payne’s *Crisis in Masculinity*, Bly adopted a comparably essentialist approach in arguing for every man’s innate masculinity: an inner ‘warrior’ or ‘deep male’ suppressed by ‘contemporary culture’ (Bly, 1990: 6). Alarmist cries of ‘crisis’, and a hostile or suspicious regard for feminism, also informed the work of writer Warren Farrell in the US, and that of British journalists Neil Lyndon and David Thomas, during the 1990s.

The second position from which the ‘crisis’ discourse has been constructed shares in the belief that masculinity is in a problematically fractured state. However, while concern for men’s social, sexual and psychological well-being also features at the centre of this thread, two factors distinguish it from the one outlined above. The masculine script under analysis is defined, explicitly, as heterosexual, and feminism is not cast as the enemy, but rather something that might productively enable men to negotiate shifts in identity. Horrocks frames his discussion in *Masculinity in Crisis* with the assertion that ‘men [...continue to be] economically and

politically powerful' (Horrocks, 1994: 26), while another key figure in the field, psychiatrist Anthony Clare, notes that 'the gains that have accrued to women remain pretty miserly' (Clare, 2000: 4) since the advent of second-wave feminism. With such sympathies, this perspective looks to sound the call of 'crisis' and the need to imagine resolutions, without advocating a 'return' to traditionalist gender roles and relations.

Unlike both of these viewpoints, the final one I wish to introduce does not make the claim, straightforwardly, of a masculinity crisis. For the most part, this position comprises theorisations of the discourse rather than constructions of it (insofar as it is possible to extricate the former from the latter). Often drawn from a queer or (pro-)feminist stance by masculinities scholars, scepticism surrounding the 'fact' of a crisis, reasons for claiming its existence and its historical 'uniqueness' are pivotal concerns. Moreover, in reading normative identity paradigms as performative or constructed, in line with post-structuralist thought, the significance of sexuality, class and 'race' are emphasised as constituent features of an *always already* fractured (gendered) subject. Various scholars who can be read as occupying this position echo Connell's disbelief in 'a full-blown crisis of the gender order' (Connell, 1987: 158), Tim Edwards and John MacInnes among them. Edwards makes the claim that 'masculinity is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis' (Edwards, 2006: 17), whilst MacInnes similarly conjectures: '[s]ince this invention of masculinity [...] is has been in crisis [...] a "coherent" masculine identity has never been sustainable' (MacInnes, 1998: 45-46). A further notion aligned with this position posits the 'crisis' as a 'backlash' against the sociological and cultural shifts enabled by

progressive political activism, and feminism in particular. From this viewpoint, the discourse has been deemed a strategic bid to 'recuperate a regressive heterosexual masculinity' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 126). In considering critical reflections on the 'crisis' in greater depth, this latter notion is one of several aligned with this position to which I will return.

Hegemonic masculinity

The theorists who are associated with the last of these perspectives have sought to emphasise that it is 'the *traditional* subject' that has been constructed 'in the throes of an identity crisis' (Byers, 1995: 7, my emphasis). Commensurately, in being male, white, middle-class and heterosexual, it is this figure that stands as the legitimate embodiment of what Connell has defined as 'hegemonic masculinity': a contingent, Western system of patriarchal privilege over 'various subordinated masculinities as well as [...] women' (Connell, 1987: 183). This, then, is the gender script at the centre of this enquiry, and one that requires some additional unpacking. Kimmel notes that '[t]he constituent elements of "hegemonic" masculinity, the stuff of the construction, are sexism, racism, and homophobia' (Kimmel, 1993: 30). Hence, '[t]o be "masculine" is not to be feminine, not to be "gay", not to be tainted with any marks of inferiority — ethnic or otherwise' (Segal, 1990: x). It is not 'direct affirmation', but 'renunciation' through which it signifies (Kimmel, 1994: 127), reflecting the notion that 'to position oneself as a transcendent subject necessitates investment in difference' (Gutterman, 1994: 222).

These 'investments' or repudiations have been deemed to inform behavioural demands made of men who ostensibly fit the hegemonic mould: proof of 'success, power and dominance' (Segal, 1990: 82) in society, at home, at work and in the marketplace; (hetero)sexual virility and competence, and a repression of 'feminine' emotionality (Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 1994); homosocial policing of the 'gay/straight' binary (Butler, 1997; Gough, 2002; Kimmel, 1994; Weeks, 1985) and aggressiveness, competitiveness and physical competence (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Nilsson, 2000). The importance of attaining economic success within a free-market economy is of particular interest to a Western 'crisis' that has been deemed to express 'fears of late capitalism' (Byers, 1995: 7). In light of this argument, it is worth citing Kimmel's account of 'Marketplace Man', claimed to have emerged in the nineteenth century, and who stands to be read as largely synonymous with the hegemonic masculine subject:

Marketplace Man derived his identity [...] from his success in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulated wealth, power, status [...] devoting himself to his work in an increasingly homosocial environment. [...] It reconstituted itself by the exclusion of 'others' — women, nonwhite men, nonnative-born men, homosexual men [...]. (Kimmel, 1994: 124)

This is defined as a position of 'striving to live up to *impossible* ideals of success, leading to chronic terrors of emasculation, emotional emptiness, and [...] gendered rage' (*ibid*, my emphasis). In shedding light on one aspect of the identity under discussion here, this analysis underscores a source of its implicit vulnerability. Aside from resonating with Connell's view that "'[h]egemonic masculinity" is [...] a position always contestable' (Connell, 2005: 76), these notions recall the arguments outlined above: that this particular masculinity is, or is prone to, a perpetual state of rupture. That the legitimate subject of this script has lately seemed to struggle in

fulfilling this set of demands, pertaining to economic success, along with those others, listed above, is one that emerges across the various threads of the 'crisis' discourse; something I will come to discuss in surveying instances of its construction.

Theorising masculinities on stage

The rise of the 'crisis' discourse from the 1990s emerged as part of a wider body of research concerned with masculinities. Within the academy in Britain and the US, a focus upon theatrical representations of male identities comprised a branch of this study that focused, overwhelmingly, on playwriting practice. The following survey of several of this area's key texts looks to contextualise the present thesis, and highlight its points of divergence from comparable, existing work.

Despite constituting a somewhat eclectic terrain, in which a variety of masculinities have been selected for analysis, much of this writing has looked to (re-)configure the hegemonic male subject as an explicitly gendered position. For instance, at the opening of *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997), Carla J. McDonough concedes that the focus of her study 'might seem [...] unnecessary in the midst of a dramatic tradition already heavily weighted toward the actions and experiences of male characters', but proceeds to argue that 'the male protagonist or male playwright has been critically treated as if he were non-gendered', resulting in 'critical blind spots' that her work looks to illuminate (McDonough, 1997: 1). Comparably, Robert Vorlicky's 1995 book, *Act Like A Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama*,

interrogates the male identities imagined in plays, by men, for all-male casts. This study opens with the claim that 'most variations of male-cast drama resist the diversity of American male experience and its challenge to traditional masculinities', and 'aggressively limit themselves to perpetuating a rigid, antihistorical account of male identity' (Vorlicky, 1995: 1). On the other side of the Atlantic, the decision 'to explore masculinity in theatre in a specifically gendered way' (Mangan, 2003: 7) is expressed by Michael Mangan in *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (2003). Echoing the approaches of McDonough and Vorlicky, this study conceives of masculinity in a performative register. However, despite this general convergence, it is worth noting that this latter text lacks the feminist politics that govern McDonough's reading, or the queer theory apparent in Vorlicky's.

Staging Masculinities, like McDonough's book, is a diachronic study; *Act Like A Man* is organised thematically. The two American texts imbricate in their focus on certain male playwrights often read to be synonymous with the US theatre canon: Eugene O'Neill, Amiri Baraka, David Rabe and David Mamet among them. Mangan's study is similarly focused, almost exclusively, on the UK. However, rather than a concern with a set of particular playwrights, the staging of certain dramatic texts is considered alongside, and in the context of, social and theatrical performances of masculinity in discrete historical periods. The present thesis thus differs from all three of these books in considering cultural representations drawn from both Britain and North America. Moreover, whilst the vast majority of the American plays that appear in *Staging Masculinity* and *Act Like A*

Man precede those of the 1990s and 2000s with which I am concerned, the final chapter of Mangan's book — 'Contemporary Masculinities' (*ibid*: 207–48) — centres around dramatic literature that is only referred to secondarily in this study.

It is in this closing chapter that Mangan discusses the 'crisis' phenomenon, specifically in reference to its configuration as a 'backlash' against feminist progression. David Mamet's play, *Oleanna* (1992) and *Defending the Caveman* (1999), a one-man, stand-up comedy show co-written and performed by white Australian actor, Mark Little, are read to 'directly address the sense of crisis in contemporary masculinity' (*ibid*: 246). The analysis conducted thus exceeds the parameters of playwriting practice, and Mangan takes account of the formal and aesthetic discrepancies between the two pieces. While the sexual and national identities of Mamet and Little inform the discussion, the racial positions under representation are overlooked; as, too, for the most part, is the factor of class. Finally, this relatively brief study does not expand upon defining *Oleanna* and *Defending the Caveman* as responses to the 'crisis' phenomenon, or, in mind of the 'backlash', cultural ventures that 'articulate the sense of men on the defensive' (*ibid*: 226). The political implications of their so doing, and, by extension, how far the masculinities staged might be deemed productive or problematic, remains unexplored. Similarly, whilst the 'crisis' discourse itself is surveyed from various angles, it is not subject to the analytical critique that underpins this study.

A further point to make about this body of literature relates to the specific masculinities with which it is concerned. It is the hegemonic script McDonough engages with principally, although her chapter on African American August Wilson is followed by one entitled 'Other Voices, Other Men: Reinventing Masculinity' (McDonough, 1997: 161–69). This closing analysis looks to the impact of recent, representative queer and racially 'othered' masculinities upon constructions of the privileged male subject (particularly in respect of a hegemonic 'ideal' of North American identity). However, despite its apparent relevance to the 'crisis' phenomenon, this discussion is not framed in terms of the discourse. *Staging Masculinities* holds true to Mangan's early claim of its having 'comparatively little to say about homosexual masculinities, and nothing at all about black masculinities' (Mangan, 2003: 15) — or, indeed, about any minoritised racial identity. Although many of the male characters of Vorlicky's account represent white, heterosexual subjects, also discussed are the African American men that appear in Baraka's plays, and those of Asian American identity featured in Philip Kan Gotanda's. Moreover, the pivotal interest in 'challenging' the hegemonic construct sees recurrent references to 'other' male identities, in terms of class, sexuality and 'race'. The topic of my own analysis necessitates that the privileged subject remain at the foreground throughout. However, this analysis proceeds by examining theatrical representations of that position through those of various other identities, historically subjugated on the grounds of gender, sexuality or 'race'.¹

¹ This claim will be unpacked within the forthcoming introduction to the subsequent chapters.

The staging of marginalised masculinities has also formed the material for a range of scholarly publications in the 1990s and 2000s, and, specifically, in respect of queer identities. However, before I provide a brief account of several such texts, it is worth noting that studies produced outside either Britain or North America have contributed to the dialogue surrounding masculinities in Western playwriting practice. Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr's *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (2008) is an interrogation of mainstream, (male and female-authored) Australian plays produced in the decades after the Second World War. Another diachronic study, *Men at Play* examines various privileged and subordinated masculinities. As with Vorlicky and McDonough's research especially, present here is an awareness of the hegemonic subject's vulnerability, and the role of 'other' positions in masking or exposing its fissures. If the conditions for the 'crisis' thus inform this work, the discourse is, again, not explicated for discussion.

The potential for subversion in theatrical representations of the gay male subject was explored in a various texts written after 1990. American scholar John M. Clum produced *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* in 1992, and, in 1996, *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater*. The same year in which the first of these books was published saw the appearance of David Savran's *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, and, in the UK, *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*, by theatre critic Nicholas de Jongh. Having produced *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*

in 1994, another British writer, Alan Sinfield, wrote *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* in 1999. While by no means an exhaustive list, this group of texts is indicative of the increased cultural visibility of historically 'othered' subjects, earlier highlighted as a catalyst for the 'crisis'.

All of the studies cited here, with the exception of Savran's, are diachronic in the main. As with McDonough's, both of Clum's books combine analyses of mainstream, male-authored plays and performances, with attention to the socio-political and cultural backdrops of their production histories. Hence, the work of Tennessee Williams, Noel Coward, Joe Orton, Oscar Wilde and Tony Kushner is considered alongside contemporaneous landmark moments in gay activism and experience, including the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Along with several of the playwrights mentioned here, these analytical strands are also interwoven in Sinfield's later book, comprising a strategy that is employed, too, in later chapters of this thesis. Although there are a number of disparities between all of these studies, de Jongh's is, arguably, the greatest anomaly. This analysis focuses upon the ways in which censorship laws, systems of theatre management and the work of particular actors and directors have determined the extent to which — and the guises in which — male 'homosexuality' has appeared on the stages of London and New York, since 1925. *Not in Front of the Audience* thus shares with all of the texts in this grouping a focus on cultural representations of the US and the UK. With the exception of Sinfield, what is of notable lack amongst this particular body of research resonates with that suggested above of

McDonough and Mangan: the significance of 'race' in the construction of masculinities. While this particular concern is one that governs various aspects of all the forthcoming analyses, I will later introduce it as a central tenet of Chapter Three.

On the basis of this survey, it is doubtless that this thesis exists within a thriving body of relevant research. However, as I have looked to explain, explorations of the resonance of the 'crisis' in recent playwriting are, at present, extremely limited, despite the fact that much of this work appears to have implicit connections with the conditions of the phenomenon. While the opportunity for theorising masculinities thus underpins these analyses, the field of theatre and performance studies has scarcely challenged or considered the 'crisis' discourse through a focus on hegemonic masculinity.

Constructions of the 'crisis'

Overwhelmingly, the masculinity 'crisis' has been constructed from sociological observations. Among the primary categories that emerge in this context are health, education, work and interpersonal/familial relations. In referencing a selection of key texts in these interrelated fields, I aim to demonstrate how the 'crisis' has been deemed to exist through a theorisation of ontological experiences. Mental health is a pivotal factor here; Horrocks noted in 1994 that

many men are haunted by feelings of emptiness, impotence and rage. They feel abused, unrecognized by modern society. While manhood offers compensation and prizes, it can also bring with it emotional autism, emptiness and despair.
(Horrocks, 1994: 1)

Validating an earlier observation — that ‘the psychology of men has increasingly come to be seen as one fraught with strain and crisis’ (Segal, 1990: x) — Horrocks’s sentiments also pre-figured Clare’s assertion that ‘phallic man, authoritative, dominant, assertive [...] is starting to die’ (Clare, 2000: 9). Clare also perceived ‘phallic man’ as a ‘depressed, dependent’ figure suffering from ‘[emotional] constipation’ (*ibid*: 3). That male suicide rates in the United States and Europe are termed ‘an epidemic’ (*ibid*) within this discussion creates a bridge between this text, and others written from different perspectives. A 1996 article Lyndon wrote for *The Guardian*, in which he argued that ‘men-bashing’ had become commonplace, contains, at its end, a list of statistics, among which: ‘there has been a 71 per cent increase in suicide among young men in the past 10 years; they are now three times as likely to kill themselves as women’ (Lyndon, 1996: 14). Citing comparable statistics in relation to American men, Farrell asserted in *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* (1994): ‘suicide is one of the best indicators of powerlessness’ (Farrell, 1994: 31).² In this text, as with those of Horrocks and Clare, the seeming demise in male mental health is explicitly related to a sense of identity crisis. The latter writes that ‘any suggestion or threat of being out of control challenges the very essence of what being a male is all about’ (Clare, 2000: 5), while Horrocks’s conjectures look to substantiate the claim that ‘masculinity in Western society is in deep crisis’ (Horrocks, 1994: 1). Physical health was similarly deployed in texts of this discourse, alcoholism and heart disease being two recurring examples (Farrell, 1994; Lyndon, 1996). General comments also abound in this

² Farrell’s text originally appeared in 1993. I refer, here, to the revised edition which was published a year later.

context, such as the suggestion that '[British men] receive less than half as much medical attention as women' (Lyndon, 1996: 12). On a related theme of pertinence to masculine 'norms', Horrocks argued that '[s]exual impotence is a very common problem with men' (Horrocks, 1994: 31).

In 1990s Britain in particular, 'the failure of boys [in education] often seems to be explained as centred on [...] problems with their "masculinity"' (Edwards, 2006: 10). Reflecting on the way in which the media responded to girls outperforming boys, John Head compiled a list of '[t]ypical headlines', many of which appear sympathetic to the situation:

'Girls trounce the boys in examination league tables' (The Times, 3 Sept. 1994) [...], 'Perils of ignoring our lost boys' (Times Educational Supplement, 28 June 1996), 'Time we had jobs for the boys' (Daily Telegraph, 5 Jan, 1998 and 'Grim reading for males' (Guardian, 6 Jan. 1988).
(Head, 1999: 4)

Several scholars have highlighted how the impact of feminism, and a perceived 'feminisation' of educational establishments, have been viewed as detrimental to the normative masculine script — as evinced in low male self-esteem and academic failings (Archer, 2003; Epstein, Elwood, Hey *et al.*, 1998). In a press article not featured in Head's list, the success of female students has furthermore been posited as the result of a misandristic agenda.

If we admit [...] that men have been wronged, we [...] might believe that a boy's right to a good education is equal to a girl's; and we might forbid teachers to act as we know they have acted in the past 25 years, as if it was their social duty to give preferential treatment to girls.
(Lyndon, 1996: 12)

A fear of feminisation can likewise be traced in Farrell's account of American boys' early experiences: '[i]t is women teaching [...the male

student] how to be a boy by conforming to what women tell him to do after he's been trained to conform to what his mother tells him to do' (Farrell, 1994: 4).

The effects of an apparent rupture between the realms of private/domestic and public/professional have provided a further source of configuring the 'crisis' in masculinity. This is perhaps of little surprise, given that 'the gendered separation of domestic life from the [...] economy and the political world' has historically featured as a 'major structural [feature]' of 'the gender order of [...] rich capitalist countries' (Connell, 1987: 159). Edwards has stated that paid employment 'has often stood as the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity, particularly in relation to [...] advanced Western industrial capitalism' (Edwards, 2006: 8). The fact that, from the late 1960s, feminism and civil rights enabled the increased presence of those historically excluded or marginalised in professional and economic spheres has been read to have threatened the certainty of white men's prowess in, and ownership of, the marketplace. Neil Spencer aligns the outcome of these shifts with those he perceives within the field of education: both are disadvantageous to men and compound a state of 'distress' in masculine identity (Spencer, 1999: 14). Moreover, that post-Fordism saw a marked decline in manual work historically reserved for men in the main, is something which has been taken as detrimental to masculine identity; a subject Susan Faludi surveyed in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of The Modern Man* (1999). Clare discussed how this factor could affect men 'who have defined [...] the very essence of their masculinity in terms of professional [...] achievement', the absence

of which may undermine the centrality of machismo, physical strength in the 'ideal' masculine mould:

[w]e have become accustomed to thinking of 'real' men as those who labour in the iron, steel and coal industries, in shipbuilding, lumberjacking, pre-mechanised farming. [...] What price all that brute strength, might and energy now, [...] when computerised robots and not sweating men assemble cars [...]? [...] There is hardly anything to be done in today's society that cannot be done by women. (Clare, 2000: 6-7)

And women, it would seem, were in the ascendant. Since the latter years of the 1940s, 'women's employment has continually expanded in all western [...] capitalist countries', and, in the UK, 'the proportion of all employment held by men declined from 62 per cent in 1971 to just over half by 1996' (MacInnes, 1998: 51). In concert with 'the switch from "male" heavy industries to "female" service industries' (Simpson, 1994: 1) and a 'shift towards part time working' the increased presence of women in the workforce prompted the theorisation of a 'feminization of employment' in the developed West (MacInnes, 1998: 51). Thus, while a means of validating normative masculinity looks to have been jeopardised by the decline of 'masculine' industry, several 'crisis' theories make the claim that '[male] privilege has been undermined by the development of modern industrial capitalist society generally' (*ibid*: 51 and 48).

In line with the notional decline of male employment in Britain, MacInnes has noted that 'the proportion of unpaid domestic labour undertaken by men has risen from around a quarter in the 1960s to around two-fifths a quarter century later' (*ibid*: 53). These statistics follow the observation that

strong material and ideological pressures in modern western societies [...are] forcing or encouraging men to become more involved in childcare and domestic labour and to accept a steadily greater role for women in the public sphere. [...These pressures] are continually

undermining traditional ideas about what is 'natural' or appropriate for men and women to do.
(*ibid*: 49)

Reports of the existence and implication of such 'pressures' were evidently not restricted to Britain alone. American sociologist Michael Messner wrote that 'a [...] configuration of changes in work and family relations [...] has brought about a renewed crisis of masculinity' (Messner, 1997: 10), a notion underlined by the words of one white American male in an interview with Faludi:

[t]he role of the husband and wife in America has changed so dramatically. Before, everybody's role was defined. Now, women are out in the workforce [...] and] [w]e've lost a sense of our old identity.
(quoted in Faludi, 1999: 254)

A view of normative male identity as undesirably insecure was likewise conjectured in other texts on this topic. Horrocks noted that while women were making strides to figure in the 'public world' from which they had been formerly 'excluded', men had not presented an 'equivalent converse gesture', but had 'hung back, afraid, guilty, feeling condemned, and [...] powerless' (Horrocks, 1994: 30). In a more polemic tone, Farrell argued that the increase of women on the payroll saw them granted access to 'the traditional male role', while '[n]othing tells men they have rights to what was the traditional female role — rights to stay home [...] with the children while his wife supports him' (Farrell, 1994: 4). He went on to suggest that it is women who retain control of the domestic realm (*ibid*: 19), reinforcing the link between masculinity disrupted and a loss of patriarchal power.

As concerns with public/private positions loom large in these analyses of men, masculinity and work, the familial order emerges as an imbricated

concept. Claims that the 'male breadwinner ideology has all but collapsed' (MacInnes, 1998: 53) mirrored and supported texts that identified a state of 'crisis' in the interconnected fields of fatherhood and paternity.

Underlining the link between work and family, Clare wrote:

[n]ot merely is the role of provider under siege, the role of father is threatened. The second millennium has ended with man's claim to a significant role in procreation and child-rearing seriously diminished. (Clare, 2000: 7)

This condition is aligned to advances in reproductive technology and the growing legitimacy of single-parent (fatherless) families, the latter of which has been deemed resultant of women increasingly instigating divorce in the second half of the twentieth century (see Edwards, 2006). Pre-figuring the motives of the British movement, 'Fathers For Justice', established in 2000 by divorcee Matt O'Connor, Lyndon lamented a lack of 'rights of paternity' for men separated from their child/children's mother (Lyndon, 1992: 248). That such shifts have been theorised as a threat to a masculine role of 'potency' and 'virility' (Clare, 2000: 9) owes both to the seeming redundancy of the biological father, and implications for the fatherless family unit. In *Iron John*, Bly theorised the need for

the "Wild Man Weekend", where men can escape women and society and go into the forest to bond with their fathers and other men. Through various rituals [...], men are encouraged to rediscover the warrior within and to being to feel pride in their masculinity.³ (Nilsson, 2000: 58)

Father/son bonds are deemed crucial to the recovery of what is constructed as an innate masculinity: Bly conjectures that '[w]hen a boy grow up in a "dysfunctional" family [...] his interior warrior will be killed off' (Bly, 1990: 146). Notwithstanding the suggestion that 'perhaps there is

³ Such weekends as these flourished in the early 1990s off the back of *Iron John*, as part of the US's 'Mythopoetic Men's Movement'. The term 'mythopoetic', coined by Shepherd Bliss (1986), sees explorations of masculinity '[look] to ancient mythology and fairy tales, to Jungian and archetypal psychology' (Bliss, 1986: 38), and has come to be synonymous with both Bly and Bliss as 'leaders' of the movement (see Kimmel, 1995).

no other kind of family', the absence of the father or 'dangers of no male model' emerge as the primary problem in this context (*ibid*: 146 and 17). Further to this is Bly's belief that fathers and grandfathers have an obligation to 'welcome the younger man into the ancient, mythologized, instinctive male world', so as to satisfy 'a continuing need for initiation into the male spirit' (*ibid*: 15 and 14). Horrocks's analysis of fathering lacks this sentimental evocation of a 'mythic [pre-industrial] past' (Nilsson, 2000: 57), and he himself states that 'Bly's nostalgia for an ancient state of intimacy between father and son may be overly romantic or just plain wrong' (Horrocks, 1994: 78). However, Horrocks also posits a 'lack of fathering' as 'crucial' to 'the crisis of maleness' and suggests that 'the unfathered male' is less likely to have functional relations with women as an adult (*ibid*: 77 and 80). Albeit dissimilarly, here as in *Iron John*, the superfluous or absent father emerges as a catalyst for 'crisis' in (hetero)normative masculinity. Similarly, numerous texts have observed how the patriarchal father figure has been subject to displacement through ridicule in cultural representation, a point to be later discussed.

That a demise of socio-economic, cultural and interpersonal power recurs in the 'crisis' discourse can be taken as further evidence of its centring around the subject historically privileged in these areas by virtue of its classed, raced, gendered and sexual axes. For '[t]he hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power' (Kimmel, 1994: 12). Moreover,

the continuity concerning the importance of *power* here highlights not only its significance for masculinity *per se*, but rather the sense that this is a key factor that informs the entire masculinity in crisis thesis. (Edwards, 2006: 8)

While social shifts have been thought to trouble masculinity in its hegemonic form, what Michael Kaufman has termed 'contradictory experiences of power' (Kaufman, 1994: 142) also feature at the centre of this discourse. This 'contradiction' emerges as the tension between the various material indicators of patriarchal control, and that of the powerlessness felt by straight white men which 'speak[s] of a different reality' (*ibid*). Echoing the notion that 'industrialized nations have acknowledged only the *female* experiences [of powerlessness]' (Farrell, 1994: 13, my emphasis), Horrocks noted that '[m]ost men have very little economic power, but are subject to the dictates of other men. [...] These men often experience themselves as powerless, which economically they are' (Horrocks, 1994: 31).⁴

The perception of powerlessness has also been emphasised by Horrocks and Farrell through constructions of women's advantage over men in an interpersonal register. The former has stated that 'women are emotionally powerful' while men experience 'emotional poverty' and are 'impotent and inarticulate' in matters of self-expression, viewing emotions as 'dangerous things' to be 'fear[ed]' and 'shun[ned]' (*ibid*: 26–30). In the contemporary West, according to this view, '*intimacy is power*' (*ibid*: 30). For Farrell, Western men are denied the 'sexual', 'cleavage' and 'flirtation' powers of their female counterparts, interpreted here as unproblematically beneficial (Farrell, 1994: 9). Particularly pertinent to Horrocks's thesis on this topic is the following account of changed perceptions of male identity.

What were once claimed to be manly virtues ([...] independence, [...] strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine

⁴ See also Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994: 262.

vices ([...] coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to [...] communicate, to empathize, to be soft [...]).
(MacInnes, 1998: 47)

After a decade that gave rise to the soft and caring 'New Man' — a concept to which I will return — the male subject was conceived in an uncertain guise at an interpersonal level: traditional phallic 'virtues' were now seemingly discredited, bereft of their power over archetypically feminine traits. Echoing the identity crisis prompted by public/private shifts, and the paradox of power/lessness in economic terms, 'men now occupy no-man's-land' (Horrocks, 1994: 31) in analyses of this sphere, only able to wield interpersonal power over women through an emotional/feminine realm 'dangerous' to the rehearsal of a normative masculine script. Here too, one can trace a link between claims of crisis and the 'threat' of feminisation.

The 'backlash'

Towards the close of the 1990s, in considering the ways in which (British) '[m]en's [...] privileges' were drawn to be 'under [...] scrutiny and attack' MacInnes termed the 'crisis' discourse as a 'possible [...] backlash by men against the impact of feminism [...] in order to preserve male superiority' (MacInnes, 1998: 47). Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991) maintained a comparable stance in regards to the US. In it, she argued that

the last decade has seen a powerful counter-assault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. [...] The backlash convinced the public that women's 'liberation' was [...] the source of an endless laundry list of personal, social and economic problems.
(Faludi, 1991: 12)

Crucially, the 'backlash' is deemed prompted 'not simply by a bedrock of misogyny', but by the perception that women's attempt to 'improve their status' equated with 'masculine doom', especially for 'men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being' (*ibid*: 13). While this analysis comprised a reflection on the 1980s, significantly, it was in the early 1990s that a spate of polemical texts emerged that bespoke a 'masculine doom' in line with this account.

Iron John arguably epitomised this trend. While the 'manly nurturing' (Kimmel, 1992: 168) it called for seemed to celebrate a masculinity marked by sensitivity, over one of coldness and aggression, many critics noted the scarcely-concealed persistence of 'many features of hegemonic masculinity' (Ferber, 2000: 38). In a passage that looked to reflect upon the effects of 1960s activism, for instance, Bly observed:

[i]n the seventies I began to see [...] a phenomenon that we might call the 'soft male.' [...] [M]any of these men are not happy. [...] They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. [...] The strong or life-giving women who graduated from the sixties [...] played an important part in producing this [...] man.
(Bly, 1990: 2-3)

The apparent risk of 'feminisation', or inversion of gendered 'norms' (men are 'soft' and women are 'strong') clearly recalls other areas of the 'crisis' discourse discussed above. It was such comments that lead pro-feminist scholars to determine that Bly had configured 'the feminist movement' as a key contributor in 'destroying the very masculine traits which in the past, [...] helped establish an effective masculine identity and a harmonious and productive society' (Nilsson, 2000: 56). Commensurately, in *Iron John*, women are held responsible for the demonisation of men, who, consequentially, 'are suffering right now': '[m]ore and more women

in recent decades [...] maintain that everything bad is male, and everything good is female' (Bly, 1990: 27 and 175). This binaristic and essentialist mode of thought — apparent here as in the 'deep male' idea — is drawn as something to be celebrated. In respect of 'opposites' like 'male and female', Bly outlines the opportunity to 'rejoice that they exist' (*ibid*: 174–75). Citing scientific research on genetic differences between the sexes, he asserts that 'it is important to emphasize the three per cent difference [in DNA] that makes a [male] person masculine' (*ibid*: 234). Hence, the text not only held feminism responsible for the sorry position of men and masculinity, but sought to counter progressive concepts of gender that grew out of post-1960s identity politics.

Anticipating the loss of male privilege alleged in Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power*, *Iron John* also pre-figured two British books, by Lyndon and Thomas respectively: *No More Sex War: The Failures of Feminism* (1992) and *Not Guilty: In Defence of the Modern Man* (1993). Horrocks defined the latter of these books as providing 'some evidence of a backlash against feminism' (Horrocks, 1994: 2), while Aston cites this and Lyndon's text as 'key examples of men claiming victim status and blaming feminism for the oh-so-much-harder-lives men have compared to women' (Aston, 2003: 3). *No More Sex War* was subject to another critique that further situates it as part of the 'backlash'. '[R]ailing against an evil "incubus" of feminism', Lyndon is thought to have 'imagined an alliance between the "gay movement" (meaning gay men) and "the sisterhood"' in a paranoid defence of the masculine (Simpson, 1994: 4). Although Farrell stated that his thesis did not represent 'the flip side of feminism' (Farrell, 1994: 7), the

androcentric nostalgia of *The Myth of Male Power* echoed that of Bly's work. Prior to claiming that '[f]eminism justified female "victim power" by convincing the world that we lived in a sexist, male-dominated, and patriarchal [society]', and that 'the world is *bi*-sexist, [...] both patriarchal and matriarchal', he introduced the book as a means to examine 'why male-female roles that were functional for the species for millions of years have become dysfunctional in an evolutionary instant' (*ibid*: 5 and 1). In light of the certainty with which these texts conceived masculinity in a state of disarray, and their widespread influence and appeal (*No More Sex War* and *The Myth of Male Power* were also best-sellers), the 'backlash' became a defining strand of the 'crisis' discourse. Mark Simpson's suggestion that 'incontrovertible evidence of [...] a "crisis" [in masculinity]' (Simpson, 1994: 1) could be seen in reactionary responses to socio-political change, lends weight to this notion. Such events of 1993 as President's Clinton's promise to admit lesbians and gays to the Pentagon and the influx of British and American women to the armed forces are cited here as catalysts for a 'counter-revolution for patriarchy' on the part of 'new wave masculinists' such as the US Right, who, perhaps like the authors under discussion, 'feared that the phallus has lost its power' (*ibid*: 1-5).⁵ This account reverberates with those of other (pro-)feminist and masculinities scholars whom I earlier introduced as regarding the 'crisis' with scepticism, and who perceived the sentiments of *Iron John et al.* to constitute a 'backlash politics' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 126).

⁵ Writing two years later, Savran noted of North America: 'white, heterosexual [...] men [...] believe themselves to be the victims', and that '[a]ffirmative action is under fire both locally and nationally on many fronts' (Savran, 1996: 128).

Reflections on the discourse

The proclaimed oppression of men and masculinity has thus been seen from some quarters as a means of 'strategic self-othering' (Mercer, 1992: 432), to borrow a phrase from Kobena Mercer. In Tania Modleski's words: 'however much male subjectivity may currently be 'in crisis,' [...] we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution' (Modleski, 1991: 7). A later analysis similarly noted how '[i]t is tempting to read the white male victim as just another ruse of white patriarchy, a last-ditch strategy to hang onto a privilege that is perceived to be slipping away' (Robinson, 2000: 7).

Comparable critiques of the discourse point to a lack of attention given to identity axes other than that of gender. In a chapter entitled 'Crisis, What Crisis?', Edwards notes the obscuring of 'race', class, sexuality and geography in analyses of education, work and crime, highlighting, for example, how commentaries on altered patterns of employment overlook the fact that 'many working-class women have always historically worked' (Edwards, 2006: 9). Such studies underpin the privileged demographic of the men deemed to be suffering, and, by extension, the *particular* masculinity conjectured to be 'in crisis'. A reading of *Iron John* can be seen to function similarly:

[in creating] the illusion of a transcultural, transhistorical masculinity [...] Bly conveniently avoids the fact that traditional masculine subjectivity has relied on the denial of identity to others based on race, class, gender, and sexuality.
(Nilsson, 2000: 59)

As Bly's nostalgia for 'traditional' masculinity occurs through this 'avoidance', so his text is seen to reproduce a default function of the historically unmarked subject: standing in for and concealing a host of

'other' positions, which are thus reified. That this strategy further deflects focus from the tenets of hegemonic masculinity shores up arguments for *Iron John's* recuperative agenda, underlining the importance to this project of ostensibly cohesive and natural gender moulds. The specificity of Bly's appeal has been used to verify arguments along these lines: his 'weekend warriors' were, overwhelming, white, heterosexual and middle-class (Ferber, 2000; Hunt, 2008; Kimmel, 1995).

While a marked absence of class and 'race' provided a way to unmask the subject of the 'crisis', and motives for its construction, studies which compared the phenomenon with ones of preceding periods questioned its uniqueness to the late twentieth century. Stephen J. Hunt encapsulates the findings of such analyses in noting how

the crisis of masculinity [...] has been found in earlier historical periods where such crises were frequently followed by a backlash of reaction and attempts to rediscover a traditional and idealized conception of masculinity [...].
(Hunt, 2008: 465)

This account references a text by Kimmel, in which the 'contemporary "crisis" of masculinity' is considered in relation to analogous trends in England and the US, on the cusp of the seventeenth and eighteenth, and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively (Kimmel, 1987). Details of the latter, American 'crisis' bear obvious resemblance to the discourse of the 1990s. It was 'women's fault' and prompted '[a] strongly misogynist current' in discourses of medicine, religion and politics, all of which 'resorted to a revived emphasis on the "natural" differences between men and women' (*ibid*: 143). Moreover, 'a significant group of American men openly embraced [contemporaneous] feminist principles as a potential solution to the crisis in masculinity' (*ibid*: 149). Although

Kimmel's later article 'Invisible Masculinity' (1993) was not centred on the 'crisis' *per se*, an account of the effects of social shifts in the States at the start of the twentieth century reverberated with those charted at the millennium's close. The earlier period is drawn here as 'a time [...] in which the traditional foundations of gender identity [...] were eroding':

[r]apid industrialization, which brought changes in the scale and process of production; [...] challenges by women to the separation of spheres; new waves of swarthy immigrants and black migrants to the cities, and the emergence of a visible gay male subculture in the northern cities — all threatened hegemonic masculinity's sense of empowerment. Everywhere, cultural critics observed masculinity to be in crisis.
(Kimmel, 1993: 32)

A perceived 'feminisation' of culture and education is likewise charted in this context, forging further links between the two disparate eras (*ibid*). By questioning the singularity of the 1990s 'crisis', this type of analysis has proved troublesome to nostalgic constructions of a past in which masculinity figures as certain and secure.

In mind of such responses as these to the discourse in hand, the subsequent chapters' reflections on the 'crisis', through theatrical representation, do not necessarily look to accept it as unique. While its status as a discursive trope sees that its existence, *per se*, is not disputed here, arguments for its being a recuperative bid or 'backlash' also shape these analyses. Simultaneously, however, the specificity of the period in question requires an ongoing awareness of the relevant theoretical and cultural shifts that I have outlined. The following chapters are thus further informed by the socio-cultural and philosophical particulars of the 1990s and after.

Men and masculinities in cultural representation

In 2001, Alex Sierz observed: '[t]he nineties was the decade of the boys. Wherever you looked, blokes were thrusting their way into the limelight' (Sierz, 2001: 153). Emphasising the significance of mainstream, British drama to this trend, he added that '[w]hile in the eighties it was plays by women that headed new writing, [...] by the nineties the fad was for boys' plays' (*ibid*). This view reverberated in the later observation that:

[f]rom the vantage point of a new century it might be reasonable [...] to expect to be looking back on a decade when women dramatists, capitalizing on their advancements in the 1980s, moved centre stage. This is not, however, what happened. Although the British stage claimed its renaissance in the mid-1990s, it was not represented as feminist, but was, in a majority view, associated with a wave of writers, that [...] were (mostly) angry young men. (Aston, 2003: 2)

Prior to providing a broader survey of those masculinities that emerged in the cultural mainstream of Britain and North America during this period, the relevance of these claims to the present study invites consideration. Insofar as the work of British women playwrights sought to probe constructions of female identity, while that of male writers looked to the masculine, the pattern identified in both these analyses may be aligned with a shift of focus from femininity to masculinity, over the two decades in question (Saunders, 2008). Aside from the way that this development concurs with the cultural centrality of masculinity at the twentieth century's end, a further point is of note here. The perceived displacement of female playwrights, and marginalisation of women in representation of the 1990s, has been aligned to the 'sometimes virulently anti-feminist feel to the decade' (Aston, 2003: 3). The male monopoly claimed of British theatre can thus be deemed a component of the 'backlash', earlier discussed: not only in terms of privileging the staging of plays about men

and masculinity, but through a seeming preference for male dramatists over female. Despite the fact that such shifts, in the US, were less pronounced, comparisons can be made that underpin the 'backlash' as transatlantic phenomena. Here too, the 1980s was a period in which female playwrights were prolific in the mainstream. Established dramatists Beth Henley, Marsha Norman and Wendy Wasserstein all received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, alongside a notable rise in 'avant-garde, alternative women's theatre companies, both in New York and around the country' (Porter, 1999: 195). As fewer women playwrights received critical acclaim during the 1990s, it was also '[a]fter the [...] 1980s when the number of feminist theatre groups began to decline' (Canning, 1995: 178–79).

Despite the feasibility of reading these shifts in mind of the 'backlash', the profusion of male-authored plays about men, along with television programmes, films and books that featured white men at their centre, can scarcely be claimed as new to the 1990s. This notwithstanding, two further points are of interest to the 'crisis' phenomenon. First, given the argument that 'representations of masculinity fuel the sense that masculinity is itself in crisis' (Edwards, 2006: 15), it is of note that what came centre stage in this period were men drawn as *explicitly* gendered, struggling to fulfil or decipher 'ideals' of manhood. Second, 'masculinities multiplied like suspect rashes' (Sierz, 2001: 153), offering diverse images that strained against the hegemonic script's look of coherence. Various aspects of popular culture in Britain and the US may thus be read to validate the claims of a ruptured male identity.

Depictions of violence were one way in which masculinity (and, I shall suggest, masculinity 'in crisis') came to the cultural forefront. In asserting that 'plays and especially films from the period actively appeared to [...] celebrate a world dominated by violent and reckless forms of masculinity', Graham Saunders made reference to British dramas featuring groups of men 'on wild sprees of violent behaviour': Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator* (1994) and *Gangster No. 1*, by Louis Mellis and David Scinto (1995), a list to which one might add Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995), a play that depicted a motley crew of would-be gangsters (Saunders, 2008: 11). Aston cited an influence upon this latter text as Quentin Tarantino (Aston, 2003: 5), the American film director whose *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) saw virtually all-male casts sweat and bleed with trigger-happy machismo. While *The Godfather: Part III* (1990) was a third such 'gangster' film to have been produced in the US, *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) comprised two British examples of this trend. These films — like those of their American counterparts — enjoyed transatlantic critical and popular success.⁶ Women, according to Saunders, rarely made an appearance in texts of this type, or, as in the film *In the Company of Men* (1997) by Neil LaBute, '[were] simply used as a vehicle for abuse' (Saunders, 2008: 11): here, as a deaf secretary whom two male colleagues torment to avenge themselves on other women who have

⁶ Two years after *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* was released, it won the Best Motion Picture Screenplay Edgar Award in the United States, and UK magazine *Total Film* placed it at number thirty-eight in its 2004 list of the fifty 'Greatest British Films of All Time'. *Trainspotting* ranks tenth in the British Film Institute's 'Top 100 British Films' (1999). Although *Reservoir Dogs* was not an immediate commercial success, at least in North America, *Empire* magazine named it 'The Greatest Independent Film of All Time' (2005), while *Pulp Fiction* won numerous accolades (including the 1994 Academy Award for Best Screenplay). As with *The Godfather* trilogy, all of these films are widely considered to have achieved cult status.

rejected them.⁷ Aston drew from Claire Monk's analysis of 1990s British film in discussing *Naked* (1993) and *Nil By Mouth* (1997), the former of which 'portrays a serial abuser and rapist', and the latter, 'domestic violence' (Aston, 2003: 88). Both are noted for their 'concentration on the masculine', and 'relatively unexplored position of women as victims' (*ibid*). During his discussion of the British plays cited above, Saunders notes that, instead of conveying the sense of a masculinity 'crisis', such works 'often seemed to advocate a violent masculinity' (Saunders, 2008: 11). While the popularity of Tarantino *et al.* might, undeniably, imbue these visions of violence with problematic credibility, I would question that such portrayals do not reflect (or construct) a state of 'crisis'. Indeed, various sociological analyses directly link male violence with ruptures in the masculine. For instance, in speaking of his interactions with violent patients, Horrocks observes:

these are not men who are comfortable with their masculinity [...]. Frequently we find that [...they] have deep feelings of inadequacy, impotence and unwantedness. The violent male often secretly fears he is not a man, and sees no other way of proving he is [...].
(Horrocks, 1994: 31)

Comparatively, for Connell, [t]he scale of contemporary violence points to crisis tendencies in the modern gender order' (Connell, 2005: 84).

Other US texts lend weight to this concept, two prime examples being Joel Schumacher's film *Falling Down* (1993), and *Fight Club*, a 1996 novel by Chuck Palahniuk that was adapted for the screen three years later. The earlier film starred Michael Douglas as William 'D-FENS' Foster, a middle-aged, middle-class white American man. Newly laid off from his job in the defence industry, and estranged from his ex-wife and daughter,

⁷ LaBute first wrote and produced *In the Company of Men* as a play in 1992.

D-FENS embarks on a spree of violence 'directed against the multi-ethnic patchwork of contemporary Los Angeles' (Baker, 2006: 85), smashing up a convenience shop run by an Asian American man, and shooting a member of a Hispanic gang. A failure as a husband, father and professional, this protagonist has been read as '[a] figure of white masculine resentment and marginalization' (*ibid*) in his resort to violence. His multiple 'enemies' appear to embody various tropes of otherness repeatedly drawn as catalysts for the 'crisis' in masculinity. Concomitant with this is D-FENS' ultimate fate; he is seen shot and killed at the film's close. As Brian Baker noted in drawing from a 1997 analysis of Richard Dyer's, this ending 'sees the affinity of whiteness and death as a terminal anxiety [...]: [...] white subjectivity is approaching a kind of 'dead end' (*ibid*). Finally, it is worth mentioning the film's tagline — 'the adventures of an ordinary man at war with the everyday world' — which has been read by Jude Davies and Carol Smith as a bid to 'maintain the culturally central focus of white masculinity' (quoted in Baker, 2006: 83). Along with the suggestion that Douglas's role is one of '[a] persecuted, molested and belligerent [victim]' (Savran, 1996: 145), such comments hint at the film's capacity to propound the 'crisis' zeitgeist, adopting strategies redolent of the 'backlash' discourse.⁸

As both a novel and film, *Fight Club* bears similarities to *Falling Down*. The critically acclaimed book has been praised for the way in which it 'capture[d] the psychological tension of contemporary white, heterosexual

⁸ Although there is not the space here to further unpack this notion, studies of the film have shown how, despite the violence against racially 'other' characters, the figure of D-FENS was realised to '[differ] from a recognizably fascist version of white masculinity': recoiling in disgust at a neo-Nazi showing him a can of Zyklon B gas, and positioned in solidarity with an out-of-work African American male character (Davies and Smith quoted in Baker, 2006: 85).

men in light of the transformative effects of liberatory movements on American culture' (Boon, 2003: 275), while analyses of the film defined a central theme as '[middle-class] men's marginalization, alienation and identity crisis in society' (Craine and Aitken, 2004: 289). Tenets of the 'crisis' discourse do, indeed, recur through the narrative in both versions of this text. The white, middle-class, straight male protagonist functions as an unnamed narrator, and thus, an 'everyman' by Kevin Boon's account (Boon, 2003: 272). Initially, he is depicted in a physically undemanding office job, and in a flat furnished with mass-produced items. The discovery of alter-ego Tyler Durden is shown to radically change the character, prompting him to establish an underground fight club exclusively for men. Boon argues that, at the outset, the protagonist is "'feminized" by taking pleasure and comfort in the trappings of late capitalist consumerism' (*ibid*: 271). Durden works to 'guide the narrator back toward his masculine legacy', just as the fight club 'enable[s] men to distinguish themselves, to exhibit valor, to prove their manhood' (*ibid*: 272). If the language used here recalls the nostalgia of Bly's conjectures, so too might the homosocial validations imagined in *Fight Club* evoke those attached to the mythopoetic weekends: not least as the narrator/Tyler Durden is constructed as fatherless. Finally, the clubs being a secret and the desire to fight have been viewed to represent the paradoxical demands of violence in *fin-de-siècle* masculinity: both that which is to be repressed or avoided, and inherently necessary to the ongoing demands made of men as 'protectors' of family and nation (*ibid*: 270). As with *Falling Down*, then, violence is drawn to explicate troubled white male identity; here, perhaps,

as a nostalgic flight to an 'authentic' masculinity of physical strength and aggression.

At first glance, the notional discrediting of a violent masculinity may seem to owe, in part, to the 'New Man' phenomenon that first appeared in the late 1980s. This trend was epitomised by the best-selling 'Man and Baby' (1986) — a black-and-white poster of a topless, muscular, young white man, cradling a newborn — as one journalist noted: 'its juxtaposition of a rugged male and helpless infant [...] was held as presaging the arrival of the sensitive but sexy "New Man"' (Milmo, 2007: 8). Similar representations also emerged in the US mainstream. For instance, in an advertising campaign that stretched into, and beyond, the 1990s, Calvin Klein's 'Eternity for Men' fragrance (1989) was marketed through monochrome images of men in tender, protective embraces with women and young children.⁹ For Edwards, 'the New Man [...] is an oddly dualistic or two-sided phenomenon, being about nurturance and caring on the one hand, [...] or narcissism and grooming on the other' (Edwards, 2006: 39). Although I would concur that this construction is 'oddly dualistic', it is arguable that both 'sides' referred to here may be grouped together as signs of feminisation. A further paradox then occurs through these being combined with visual signifiers of the masculine: muscular male bodies with the potential strength or aggression to protect women or children, the representations of which, moreover, invites the viewer to read the male subject as heterosexual and reproductive. This, in itself, might then posit the 'New Man' as another source of the 'crisis' in masculinity, calling for

⁹ All of the models used in this campaign were white.

proof of traditional manliness *and* a foray into the feminine. More significantly, however, its manifestation through posters and advertisements meant that men's bodies became widely available for visual consumption. The white male subject was thus at risk of being 'feminised' through objectification.

In advertising especially, what emerged in tandem with images of the 'New Man' were portrayals of men in differently realised configurations with women, and men without women at all. In a study of 1980s television commercials for Levi jeans — one of which featured a man stripping in a busy laundrette, before a pair of giggling women; another, a man having a bath in his 501s — George Melly observed a rise in the representation of men as 'passive sex objects' (quoted in Nixon, 1997: 293).¹⁰ Frank Mort similarly noted of the same advertisements that 'the sexual meanings in play are less to do with macho images of strength and virility [...] than with the fetishised and visual display — a visual erotica' (*ibid*). Such comments might aptly be applied to later campaigns, such as the image of a solo, smiling male in a pair of tight-fitting briefs, which occupied the huge Calvin Klein billboard in New York's Times Square throughout 1992. The subject was rapper Mark Wahlberg, who, like the Levi models, was young, white, muscular and good-looking. Two years later, Diet Coca-Cola launched a hugely successful, transatlantic television campaign, 'in which a hunky construction worker takes off his shirt and guzzles a can of soda, all the while being ogled [...] by an officeful of salivating women' (Bordo, 1999: 22). In this latter example, as with the laundrette commercial,

¹⁰ These advertisements, 'Laundrette' and 'Bath', were part of a 1985–6 campaign.

the silent male was positioned as the object of the female gaze within the fictional frame. These examples support the notion that, '[i]n [...] advertising imagery, the hegemony of the "male gaze" has been broken' (MacInnes, 1998: 47), insofar as these texts can be seen to have mobilised the (hetero)normative female subject as bearer of the look.

However, through a shift away from the inclusion of women, who functioned to '[make] it clear just whom the boy is looking pretty for' (Bordo, 1999: 22), this body of representation, at large, stood to have transgressed a binary switch. In Simpson's words:

the grounds of men's anxiety is not just that they are being exposed and commodified but that their bodies are placed in such a way as to passively invite a gaze that is undifferentiated; it might be female *or* male, hetero *or* homo.

(Simpson, 1994: 4)

By virtue of such successful publications as *Men's Health* magazine — first produced in the States in 1987, and reaching Britain in 1995 — 'men's bodies [...were] increasingly represented as objects for other men's gazes' (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks, 2001: 4). Back in the world of advertising, other images of men further 'exploit[ed] rather than resolve[d] [...] sexual ambiguity' (Bordo, 1999: 22), resisting strategies for masculine assurance granted the 'New Man'. Androgynous-looking male models with long, sleek hair and slim bodies were used to market Calvin Klein's unisex perfumes, 'CK1' (1994) and 'CK-Be' (1996). The print campaign for Jean-Paul Gaultier's 'Le Male' (1995) featured smooth-faced, beautiful men with huge, glistening muscles, pouting seductively at the camera, or positioning as if to arm-wrestle as they gazed into each other's eyes. Thus, the 'threat' of feminisation from this cultural trope stemmed not only from white male bodies being 'on display everywhere' (Simpson, 1994: 4) and

for everyone, nor from constructions of the female gaze. The use of less 'macho', prettier models, and homoerotic parodies of 'ideal' male physiques and behaviours, saw mainstream portraits of white men blur the divide between hetero-masculinity and 'the [...] territory of gay sexuality' (Edwards, 2006: 13). The 'anxiety' to which Simpson refers underpins how such strategies may have induced a sense of 'crisis' for a gender script wholly reliant on this divide.

The theme of feminisation can further be traced in various films from Hollywood and Britain. Action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger, 'America's highest paid actor of the early 1990s' (Boose and Burt, 1997: 9), retained his guns and muscles in the sequels to *Terminator* (1992 and 2003), but also played a teacher to a class of four-year-olds in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), and fell pregnant in his lead role in *Junior* (1994). In *Basic Instinct* (1992), Michael Douglas took the part of a police detective falling for a seductive murder suspect (played by Sharon Stone), and became the victim of a female executive's sexual advances in *Disclosure* (1994). In both of these films, the male protagonist became the prey of a predatory femme fatale, recalling the narratives of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Misery* (1990). Later, in the UK, box office hit *The Full Monty* (1997) depicted a group of working-class men in Sheffield. 'Displaced from marriages, families, homes and jobs, [...they] take up stripping: their only means of survival is the objectified, ornamental role, traditionally reserved for women' (Aston, 2003: 4). This film shares much in common with a later British picture set in the mid-1980s, *Billy Elliot* (2000), which also centres around a group of working-class characters in an economically deprived town in northern

England. While it is stripping that provides a means of salvation for the men of *The Full Monty*, the eponymous young protagonist of this film is drawn to ballet, in part as a means of escapism from the gritty realities of his father and brother's involvement in the miners' strike. Billy's choice of a 'feminine' hobby over the boxing his father chose for him, in tandem with the character of Billy's gay, cross-dressing best friend, has prompted the film to be read as a means of 'questioning [...] the heterosexual masculinity that underpins the working-class community' (Hill, 2004: 104). Although US films like *Disclosure* look to have been rather less progressive, highlighting but one discrepancy between the above films, all of these pictures stand to reflect how varied manifestations of feminisation were constructed in the cinema, wrought through portraits of disaffected white men.

That *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* showed working-class masculinity in a state of disarray contradicts perceptions that informed the emergence of the 'New Lad': considered a central 'model for 1990s masculinity' (Knowles, 2003: 569), and one that went *some way* to displace the sensitive 'New Man' (Aston, 2003; Sierz, 2001).¹¹ For,

[t]hrough association with a new lad culture, it was felt that [...] middle-class anxiety over the loss of masculine power could be regained [...] by attaching itself to those aspects of society in which masculinity was still perceived to be flourishing, particularly [...] working-class society.
(Bentley, 2008: 117)

Commensurately, the men who were represented by, and embraced this 'culture', were predominantly educated and middle-class (Knowles, 2003; Saunders, 2008), and looked to pursue 'a lifestyle of drinking, casual sex

¹¹ The term 'New Lad' was coined in 1991 by Sean O'Hagan, in an article for *Arena* magazine (see Saunders, 2008: 100).

and “masculine” leisure pursuits — particularly football and violence’, as well as being ‘consciously immature and anti-intellectual’ (Knowles, 2003: 569). This phenomenon thus figured as a middle-class appropriation, or construction, of male working-class ‘norms’, as a response to the perception of a masculinity ‘crisis’.

‘[A]t one time credited with [...] creating Lad culture’ (*ibid*), best-selling British men’s magazine, *Loaded* (1994–) was, indeed, central to the rise of this phenomena, combining articles on cars, beer and football with pictures of semi-naked women (or ‘hotties’ and ‘crumpet’). In an analysis of what she termed *Loaded*’s “‘New Lad” misogyny’, Aston argued that it ‘provided testimony to a masculinist culture that derided women in attempts to bolster a vulnerable male ego’ (Aston, 2003: 3–4). Along with an apparent nostalgia for an ‘authentic’ (working-class) masculinity, this sort of reading invites representations of the ‘New Lad’ to be considered part of the ‘backlash’ discourse. In the wake of *Loaded*, the 1990s beheld a significant rise in similar men’s monthly magazines. Another British publication, *FHM* (1994–), and the US’s *Esquire* (1933–), gained fame for their annual polls of the world’s ‘sexiest women’, while *Maxim*’s popularity following its 1995 UK launch prompted an American version to appear two years later. After the millennium, the release of weekly publications like *Nuts* and *Zoo* (both 2004–) created a shift in the British market, usurping sales of their monthly equivalents. However, in maintaining focus on ‘girls’, sport and video games, these magazines ensured the continued presence of the ‘New Lad’ in the 2000s.

This phenomenon also owed to various, alternative sources, including novels, television and films. Along with other scholars (Sierz, 2001; Bentley, 2008), Joanne Knowles has highlighted British novelist Nick Hornby as having 'a major role in the creation of the New Lad' (Knowles, 2003: 570) through international best-sellers like *Fever Pitch* (1992) and *High Fidelity* (1995). Both of these texts take the form of a first-person narrative, inviting identification with the (white, heterosexual, middle-class) protagonist who is placed to struggle with an 'anxious masculinity' (Gilroy, 2004: 117). In *Fever Pitch*, an obsession with football operates as a metaphor for lead character Nick's 'inability to grow up' (Bentley, 2008: 118) and commit to his girlfriend, further denoting 'the reclamation of a certain kind of male experience' central to the 'Lad culture' (Knowles, 2003: 570). Fittingly, Nick's love of football is constructed through his perception of it as 'an exotic taste of working-class culture that appears to be so much more masculine' (Bentley, 2008: 123). In *High Fidelity*, too, protagonist Rob bears the hallmarks of an adolescent, spending too much time amongst his record collection to retain the romantic interest of successful lawyer, Laura. Considered a 'defining text for the late-twentieth-century male' (Knowles, 2003: 570), Rob is delineated as somewhere between a 'New Man' and 'New Lad',

a man in 'crisis', torn between the old — patriarchal — and new — feminist — parameters of masculine propriety [...], between keeping up an appearance of manly self-composure on the one hand and succumbing to girl-friendly pressure — [...] 'expressing your feelings' — on the other.
(Lea and Schoene, 2003: 13)

Like another of Hornby's novels, *About A Boy* (1999), both these earlier texts were adapted for the cinema, *Fever Pitch* in 1997 and again in 2005, and *High Fidelity* in 2002. Paralleling developments in the magazine

industry, this fact is of some significance to the way in which 'Lad culture' — if initially a UK phenomenon — proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic. While the first film of *Fever Pitch* was a British production, set in England, the second came from Hollywood and changed the text's sport from football to baseball, often constructed as an equivalent national (male) obsession. Changes also occurred from the page to the screen in *High Fidelity*, the original London locale being replaced by Chicago, and the British characters appearing as US Americans.

On British television, comedians Frank Skinner and David Baddiel adopted the 'New Lad' mantle in presenting *Fantasy Football League* (1994–96) from a set of shabby sofas strewn with football scarves and bottles of beer. While this double-act was self-consciously juvenile, reliant for its entertainment value on the presenters' wit, it emerged shoulder-to-shoulder with 'portrayal[s] of regressively stupid white males' (Boose and Burt, 1997: 18) which both intersected with, and extended beyond, 'Lad culture'. In this context, there is certainly ample evidence for Bly's argument that

in situation comedies, 'The Cosby Show' notwithstanding, men are devious, bumbling, or easy to outwit. It is the women who outwit them, and teach them a lesson, or hold the whole town together by themselves.¹²
(Bly, 1990: 23)

Men Behaving Badly, which ran for six years from 1992 in the UK, and from 1996–97 in the US, epitomises the imbrication between the 'credible' Loaded male and white men as figures of ridicule. Although its thirty-

¹² That *The Cosby Show* (1984–92) is highlighted as an exception in this context is, of course, significant, given its focus on an African American man and his family. Bly's separation of it from a body of representation overwhelmingly concerned with white male subjects underpins the particular raced masculinity of the 'crisis', as earlier outlined.

something lead characters, Gary and Tony, were positioned to spend much of their time drinking beer and discussing women, they were, moreover, hopelessly immature and emotionally incompetent, in contrast to their sensible, long-suffering girlfriends. Comparable characterisation later surfaced in Channel 4's *Teachers* (UK, 2001–04; US, 2006), in which a portrayal of young secondary school teachers juxtaposed pint-downing, sexually frustrated, commitment-phobic men with intelligent, articulate women, contemptuous of their male colleagues' narcissistic complaints. Ludicrous white male double-acts with less suggestion of 'New Lad' cool surfaced in the US animation of obnoxious teenagers, *Beavis and Butthead* (1993–97) and in a film about inept men Lloyd and Harry entitled *Dumb and Dumber* (1994). *Mr Bean* (1990–95), a British television programme, relied for its slapstick comedy on the ridiculous antics of its bumbling title character, whilst Ricky Gervais's David Brent of *The Office* (2001–03) presented a male manager as professionally and socially incompetent, with a propensity for racist and sexist jokes. That laughable white men were in the cultural ascendant is borne out not only by the presence of these shows, but by their enormous popularity and international reach. Among the many versions of *The Office* produced across the globe was an American adaptation, aired in 2005. Both this and the original, like *Men Behaving Badly*, won innumerable awards, including BAFTAs in the UK and Golden Globes in the US. In a different vein, Michael Moore's 2001 best-seller, a critique of the Bush administration, took as its title *Stupid White Men*. The zeitgeist thus extended beyond explicitly fictitious representations in laying blame for the failings of a white-male-run nation.

Not only these symbolic 'fathers' stood to be belittled, however. Elsewhere on television and cinema screens, images of 'actual' family men were viewed as contributing to 'high profile images of a collapsing modern manhood' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 126). The hugely successful American cartoon *The Simpsons* (1989–), which came to Britain in 1990, imagined an 'average' (white) family to be comprised of a calm, caring mother, an academically gifted daughter, a wayward son and a stupid, insensitive and overweight father. This trend continued with later, popular animations, *Family Guy* (1999–) and *American Dad* (2005–), in both of which the nuclear family at the centre of the show was constantly seen to be thrown into mayhem at the whims of an irresponsible, self-obsessed, unintelligent 'head of house'. Films, for their part, portrayed biological fathers usurped in narratives inflected by the theme of feminisation. Prior to stripping at the close *The Fully Monty*, lead character Gaz's financial problems imbricate with his personal ones. Ex-wife Mandy is seen to consider him a poor role model for their young son, not least as he is unable to afford child support payments. This places the protagonist in direct contrast with Barry, Mandy's better-off boyfriend, and the man with whom Gaz's son spends much of his time. Some years earlier, in *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), Robin Williams starred as an immature and eccentric father-of-two. Following a divorce initiated by his wife, the character's only means of seeing his children regularly is by posing as a female nanny. In this cross-dressing role, he is forced to witness his family being loved and supported by his ex's new partner (played by heart-throb future Bond star Pierce Brosnan). That these ineffectual and troubled fathers mirrored the concerns of those claiming a 'crisis' in masculinity, is

underpinned by comments of both American and British writers. As early as 1990, Bly lamented that 'the father figure shows up as an object of ridicule [...] on television' (Bly, 1990: 99), while Spencer later aligned such representations as 'contributing to a growing lack of confidence among young males' and 'unlikely to be much help to our sons in shaping their identity for the future' (Spencer, 1999: 14). Contemporaneous with portrayals of violent masculinity, 'New Lad' culture and varied manifestations of 'feminised' or 'feminine' men, the inept man/father thus surfaced as another guise in which white male identity proliferated in art and culture. Apart from the way in which certain of these individual threads clearly informed the work of writers I have associated with a 'backlash', the eclectic representation of white male subjects — of diverse masculinities — feasibly fuelled the claims of 'crisis', compromising monolithic concepts of the privileged masculine.

Methodology

The research methodology of this study combines qualitative analysis with a 'materialist' approach. This allows for consideration of the theatrical, historical and socio-cultural contexts within which the playwriting practice appears, and out of which it can be read to have developed. Overwhelmingly, the theoretical framework(s) deployed here comprise recent work produced out of three fields: post-structuralist, psychoanalytic philosophy; cultural studies and sociology (including, inevitably, texts focused on masculinities); and feminist and queer theory, largely drawn from theatre and performance studies. In addition, cultural and philosophical accounts of postmodernity and postmodernism inform

the subsequent readings, as will be outlined in each of the forthcoming chapters.

The first of these three, key tropes encompasses the primary material through which the plays are analysed. The specific theories employed here, and their relevance to the subject of each chapter, are points to which I will return. At this juncture, however, it is worth highlighting how this particular branch of theory functions, both in terms of the approach to, and style of, this study as a whole. Given its pivotal role, historically, in Western theorisations of gender and sexuality, the terrain of psychoanalysis is clearly commensurate with a focus on masculinity. Likewise, as I have already suggested, post-structuralist thought is of particular importance to the concept of the 'decentred' male subject. Certain theories in which these two schools of thought are interconnected are thus apt to this project; a notion that stands to be reflected in the forthcoming introductions to the specific texts deployed.

Notwithstanding the fact that this strain of philosophy is used as a framework through which dramatic literature is read, I have also taken the opportunity, within my doctoral thesis, to develop the skills associated with 'crafting' theory: approaching it critically and — through the filter of the plays and additional, theoretical threads — unpacking or questioning several of its claims. It is in this sense that this strand of theory is privileged over those others, employed herein. The decision to 'work' psychoanalytic material in this manner also informs my treatment of the plays discussed. For instead of reading them, primarily, in mind of live

performance, their status as written texts is privileged for the most part. This is not to suggest that formal and aesthetic devices, and their significance to the possibilities imaginable in terms of the live event, are entirely obfuscated, or that I do not draw upon past productions. Rather, in light of a realm of theory in which language or 'the word' is key, the affective impact of performance (arguably better suited to a phenomenological approach) does not take precedence over textual analysis. A second concern also governs the decision. Although plays are the primary material under consideration here, this thesis is not, in fact, about theatre or performance *per se*. The key interest, rather, is in assessing how far a particular branch of cultural representation can be read to reflect upon the 'crisis' phenomenon, in mind of its apparent resonance with other areas of the mainstream such as television and cinema. It is also in this capacity, then, that the dramas of my analyses are approached as (cultural) texts.

Overview of chapters

While the subsequent chapters all consider a range of dramas within certain thematic tropes, each pivots around one British and one American play. These look to function as case studies for areas of focus central to theatrical representations of masculinity from the 1990s. In addressing echoes of the 'crisis', another critical aspect of this study looks to evaluate how far each of the six main dramas can be deemed to consolidate, or subvert, hegemonic masculinity, and its attendant structures of patriarchal power. In this sense, their imbrication with the 'backlash' discourse may be ascertained. The choice of my points of focus is informed by certain,

pivotal tenets of white, heterosexual masculinity, and, by extension, fields of otherness deemed catalysts for its 'crisis'. In Chapter One, Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997) and Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* (2001) enable attention on the masculine through portrayals of heteronormative relations and the female subject, as constructed by two straight white male playwrights. Both of these dramas depict two men and two women involved in shifting, problematic heterosexual encounters. Sharing a focus on the interpersonal, each play's picture of the troubled male subject intersects with questions of artistry and authorship in terms of gendered power. *The History Boys* (2004) by Alan Bennett, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1992 and 1994) serve as the case studies in Chapter Two. Here, the gay/queer male subject and homosexuality provide the filter for analysis. While the contrasting approaches to these themes by two gay writers may appear to divide the plays, their applicability is underscored by several factors. Both incorporate largely male ensemble casts, and are set in the 1980s, amongst national and institutional structures governed by masculinist homophobia. Both take history as a crucial theme, which lend themselves to be considered in relation to postmodern notions of the 'end of history'. Through its interconnection with the 'death of the subject', or perceived loss of fixed identities, this topic proves pertinent to constructions of masculinity, and the 'crisis' therein. So as to examine these phenomena in respect of racial otherness, Chapter Three includes readings of black British playwright Roy Williams's *Clubland* (2001), and *Bondage* (1992), by Asian American David Henry Hwang. The former of these plays portrays a group of black and white working-class Londoners; the latter is a two-

hander between an Asian American man and a white woman who roleplay various racialised roles. Aside from other factors I will shortly address, the choice of these plays is determined by an awareness that, just as black British playwrights have received limited critical attention (see McMillan, 2006), theatrical representations of Asian Americans and studies thereof have been somewhat marginalised by those concerned with African Americans (Kondo, 1996; McDonough, 1997). In reading these dramatic texts together, then, this chapter aims to avoid reifying 'unidimensional [sic] black identity [that] can only reinforce white supremacy by the logics of duality' (Mirza, 1997: 16). Further to this, *Clubland* and *Bondage* each depict a white male subject adversely affected by multiculturalism. Just as this element invites them to be read in tandem, so too does the way in which racial identity is drawn to impact upon the (hetero)sexual careers of each play's male characters.

The structure of each of these chapters follows a similar pattern. An introduction to the two key plays, and their initial reception, is followed by a historical survey of various male playwriting tropes relevant to each drama. This is followed by separate, in-depth readings of both. Each of these latter analyses deploys a theoretical framework primarily comprised of one philosophical, and one sociological text. As outlined above, the former type of theory draws from post-structuralist psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan's 'The Meaning of the Phallus' (1982 [1966]); for the first chapter, 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification' (1997) by Judith Butler, for the second; and, Homi Bhabha's 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' (1984) for the third. As I will return to

unpack, all of these texts can be read to posit identity as performative, prising open the collapse between binaristic subject positions and those legitimate bodies by which these positions are rehearsed. In these terms, they centre, respectively, on gender, sexuality and 'race'. Thus, while the texts' variations in focus are relevant to the concerns of each chapter, taken together, their respective identity (de)constructions offer a theoretical through-line.

Lacan's 'The Meaning of the Phallus' (1982 [1966]) is a response to and reconceptualisation of the Freudian notion of the phallus. For Freud, the phallus was signified by the male sex organ and comprised '[a] biologicistic account of male superiority' (Grosz, 1990: 123) based upon the notion that the masculine is the only libidinal identity. Lacan's work also sees the gendered subject situated as such through its relation to the phallus as an organising principle of meaning. However, the key distinction here resides in the fact that the later theory is based in the 'linguistic and symbolic' (*ibid*), rather than the biological, realm. '[The] phallus is a signifier' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 79) which is granted transcendental status in the signifying chain by virtue of the fact that it has no referent: it 'can only play its role as veiled' (*ibid*: 82) in signalling that which is only ever an absence or lack. The relevance of the phallus to the incarnation of the gendered subject comes by the fact of it being designated '[the] privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire' (*ibid*). Thus the phallus marks the point at which the subject signifies as such. If desire is conceived as fundamentally insatiable, a lack which cannot be overcome, it is the phallus that comes to stand as its symbol.

Lacan observes that '[if the subject] speaks in the Other [...] it is because it is there that the subject, according to a logic prior to any awakening of the signified, finds his signifying place' (*ibid*: 79). The male child is thereby alienated or split from himself in the process of entering the symbolic, and must give up the imaginary wholeness of his relationship with the mother. Having learnt that he cannot reverse this split by being the object of her desire, the phallus is then imagined to be 'attached' to the father. It is in aligning himself with this figure that the male child may figure as a gendered subject who too can 'have' the phallus. It is important to note at this juncture a further disparity between this theory and that of Freud. The child comes to perceive the mother as incomplete as he himself is no longer 'whole'. That the mother does not appear to 'have' the phallus, however, is not prompted by the same realisation as that of the Freudian model: that is, that she does not have a penis. Although the child, for Lacan, perceives the mother to be lacking something,

she is denigrated [...] not because of the child's perception of an anatomical lack. Instead, the child perceives her powerlessness in terms of the mother's relation (of desire for, and subordination to) the father.
(Grosz, 1990: 70)

Possession of the phallus is thereby shifted from being synonymous with possession of the penis. The fact that the male organ *is not necessarily or consistently* a metonym for the phallus can then be seen to unsettle the associative link between the male body and (hetero)normative masculinity.

Prompted by and contextualised within a culture of homophobia, Butler's work makes two key claims: that the heterosexual subject signifies

through a melancholic incorporation of homosexual object-cathexis, and that the 'unlivability' of same-sex desire propounds a culture in which the loss of such attachments cannot be mourned with the legitimacy of their heterosexual equivalents. Like Lacan, Butler draws on Freud, defining melancholia as the response to an imaginary or indefinable loss that 'continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications' (Butler, 1997: 134). In discussing the heterosexual subject, she asserts that whilst the loss of an object-cathexis of the opposite sex is allowed to be grieved, that of a homosexual attachment is not granted the same legitimacy and is thus managed by 'the transferring [...] of the (lost) object from external to internal: giving up the object becomes possible only upon the condition of a melancholic [...] *incorporation*' (*ibid*). Thus, this 'incorporation', far from casting 'otherness' outside the subject, is a *recurring* process that provides the conscience 'its [...] most treasured source of sustenance' (*ibid*: 143). The homosexual subject comes to signify similarly, through a melancholic incorporation of heterosexual object-cathexis. However, as signifying as gay means taking up a position always already defined by abjection, the two are not equivalents. This theory then looks to expose those structures that determine who it is that the subject may legitimately desire or lose, in a patriarchal economy of heterosexualist binaries. In so doing, a pertinent question is raised: 'what would masculinity "be" were it not for this aggressive circuit of renunciation from which it is wrought?' (*ibid*).

Bhabha's theory is put forward in a seminal text within the field of post-colonial studies. Arguing that the project of the 'post-Enlightenment

English colonialism [...] alienates its own language and produces another knowledge of its norms' (Bhabha, 1984: 126), Bhabha explores the concept of mimicry 'as one of the most elusive and effective strategies' for disrupting the legitimacy of the discourses upon which this project was founded (*ibid*). Mimicry here is a parodic function of colonialism's unauthorised subtext; 'an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideals' (Huddart, 2006: 57) that may mark the colonisers' formal constructs of identity as both fictitious and vulnerable. The potential effectiveness of mimicry lies in its resistance to signification. It sees the partial taking-on of ways of being that, in their incompleteness, problematise the claims of identities to wholeness and authenticity. A "'partial" presence' (Bhabha, 1984: 127), mimicry does not hide an authentic whole: on the contrary, it 'conceals no presence or identity behind its mask' (*ibid*: 129).

In an analysis of Bhabha's theory, David Huddart notes that:

it is the colonizer who is haunted by his discourse. His own fixing strategies require an un-fixed, monstrous supplementarity [...] he fantasizes endless monstrous stereotypes that can only lead to anxiety rather than the desired certainty.
(Huddart, 2006: 61)

A necessary condition of colonialism as Bhabha defines it, the realm of this 'supplementarity' is the space in which mimicry emerges: hence, the formal discourse of the colonising power creates the potentiality for its existence. That this is so reflects upon the ambiguity implicit in such hegemonic narratives. In rupturing the stereotypes called upon to justify and perpetuate this process, mimicry appears as a 'menace' (Bhabha, 1984: 127) within colonial discourse, refuting the occupation of a secure subject position as it calls the very concept into question.

The key strand of 'sub-theory', used in tandem with this psychoanalytic thread, draws from sociological literature on masculinity and nostalgia. Aside from offering an alternative mode of reading to that enabled by philosophical psychoanalysis, this theme is of obvious relevance to the construction of the 'crisis', most especially in relation to writings on the topic motivated by the desire to recoup a 'lost' masculinity. The nostalgia theories deployed cater to the individual themes of the chapters. Used first, then, is Janice Doane and Devon Hodges's *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (1987), a study of (predominantly white and male) cultural theorists and novelists whose 'nostalgic' work is argued to evince the drive to '[fix] sexual difference' and 'construct [...a] vision of a golden past to authenticate woman's traditional place' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 13 and 3). In Chapter Two, a study of the impact on masculinity of the gay male subject, and rise of queer culture, constitutes the secondary theoretical text. Taken from Lynne Segal's *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1990), 'Competing Masculinities: Traitors to the Cause' charts prejudicial and nostalgic reactions to the 'threat' of homosexuality, not least in the advent of AIDS. Finally, analogies between far right-wing and mythopoetic men's groups form the subject of the text used in Chapter Three: Abby L. Ferber's article, 'Racial Warriors and Weekend Warriors: The Construction of Masculinity in Mythopoetic and White Supremacist Discourse' (2000). In a comparative analysis of the guiding tenets of these North American movements, Ferber identifies the nostalgia for 'traditional notions of authentic masculinity and [...] white male authority and privilege'

(Ferber, 2000: 53) apparent in both. Apt to the demands of Chapter Three, nostalgia for racial hierarchies privileging masculinity and whiteness are surveyed in this analysis.

These two primary sets of theory are supported by various texts relevant to the focus of each chapter, and introduced therein. It is in tandem with the other strains of theory outlined above that I look to establish how the dramas under discussion respond to or evoke the 'crisis' in masculinity and, finally, what can be discerned in this context about both this playwriting practice, and — mindful of the conditions for its emergence — the 'crisis' discourse itself.

Fighting for the Phallus

Straight White Masculinity and Fear of the Feminine in

Patrick Marber's *Closer* and Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*

Introduction to the plays and critical responses

Patrick Marber's *Closer* premiered at the Royal National Theatre in May 1997; Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* (*Shape*) at London's Almeida Theatre in 2001. Geared towards portrayals of an interpersonal nature, the social and heterosexual interactions of four white, middle-class characters, two men and two women, form the dramatic material of each play, the former set in London and the latter in a 'liberal arts college in a conservative Midwestern town' (LaBute, 2001: ii) of the United States. One critic described *Closer* as a 'square dance of desire' (McElvoy, 1998: 5), while an essay on *Shape* deemed it, similarly, 'a sexual dance' (Biggsby, 2007: 92).

In addressing representations of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male subject, and the resonance of both the 'crisis' in masculinity, and post-structuralist models of gender, this chapter will evaluate the possibility for reading either play as nostalgic for 'authentic' or 'fixed' subjectivities. This will be enabled, in part, by situating *Closer* and *Shape* within a post-Marxist, postmodern context that will be framed by the theories of Jean-François Lyotard, Charles Jencks, Fredric Jameson and

Jean Baudrillard. Prior to applying Lacan to an analysis of each drama, the first half of this chapter will see this philosophical aspect interwoven with an account of playwriting trends relevant to the two plays. Aside from allowing for a contextual sketch that will aim to legitimise *Closer* and *Shape* as case studies, this combination of the theoretical and the cultural invites an assessment of how far both dramas can be read as 'postmodern': and, indeed, whether the elements that may constitute this signal a optimistic thread of postmodernism, marked by such elements as a 'rebuttal of nostalgia' (Jencks, 1996: 15), or something rather more evocative of a nihilistic 'melancholy' (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]: 23). Inherently tied to the question of how far these plays may appear to repeat or subvert traditional gender tropes, this is a notion that will be returned to throughout the analysis. As a point of departure, this discussion will begin by detailing the responses to the premieres of *Closer* and *Shape*, and subsequent film adaptations of each. The overwhelmingly positive tone of these reactions, and the mainstream venues of each premiere, can be argued to have invested the plays with the supposedly 'universal' quality that, historically, allows for canonical status. As Jill Dolan notes:

mainstream criticism both shapes and reflects the ideological workings of a dominant culture [...]. [...] [T]he traditional canon [...] is a project of a class of privileged, powerful, mostly white male subjects whose ideology it represents.
(Dolan, 1991: 19–20)

In these terms, the success of the plays is one factor that might legitimate reading them as reifications of an androcentric culture that privileges masculinity. If there is (apparently) nothing here to invoke a critical backlash, it is feasible that the dramatic worlds presented largely accord with the normative hierarchies of patriarchal hegemony.

Closer opened to critical acclaim, winning the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Comedy, as well as the Laurence Olivier, the Critics' Circle and the *Time Out* awards for Best New Play. *The Sunday Times* claimed it to be 'one of the best plays of sexual politics in the language' (Peter, 1997) and in *The Independent on Sunday* review, Marber was described as 'the leading playwright of his generation' (R. Butler, 1997: 12). Likewise a commercial success, the play was transferred to the (larger) Lyttelton Theatre after a sell-out opening season at the Cottesloe. Although it did not enjoy quite such high praise, *Shape* proved to be '[a] critical and popular hit in London' (Brantley, 2001: 1); a fact borne out by its move to the off-Broadway Promenade Theatre in Autumn of 2001, where it was nominated for three Lucille Lortel and two Drama Desk Awards. British critics described the premiere as 'tantalising' (Billington, 2001a: 27), 'brilliant' (Coveney, 2001a: 4) and 'thought-provoking' (Spencer, 2001a: 24). In some such reviews, assessments of the play and its author can be seen to recall those made of *Closer* and Marber in conferring canonical standing. Whilst Michael Coveney described LaBute as a 'gifted, intelligent and wittily moral' playwright, who had reached his 'theatrical maturity' with *Shape* (Coveney, 2001a: 4), Paul Taylor was one of several who drew parallels between the play and the work of David Mamet (Taylor, 2001: 9): a 'significant American playwright' (MacPherson, 2005: 303) who is perceived, in the mainstream, to have 'enduring international appeal' (Banfield, 2004: 294).

The success of *Shape* was reflected in its being made into a film in 2003, directed by LaBute; a year later, after numerous offers from Hollywood,

Marber co-wrote the screenplay for *Closer* under director Mike Nichols, and the film was realised with an impressive Anglo-American cast including Julia Roberts and Jude Law. With all the trappings of a slick, big budget production, the film of *Closer* won eight awards from various film institutes and was nominated for a further nineteen, including two Academy Awards. *Shape*, by contrast, was completed in less than a month on a minimal budget, retaining both the original London cast and a barely-altered script. Shot so as to 'underscore' its 'theatrical origins', rather than to '[conceal] them', the film was made up of long scenes during which the camera seldom moved, so that the actors would occasionally 'leave the frame' (Bigsby, 2007: 101–02). Given this mode and style of production, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Shape* premiered at Utah's Sundance Film Festival, famous for the promotion of independent cinema. Both plays were made into films that not only confirmed the popularity of the originals, but gained significance in their own right as contrasting pieces of cinema.

Closer sees four characters come together and break apart in a series of heterosexual configurations. The action is played out within a 'formalized and intricate' structure (Saunders, 2008: 29) of twelve discrete scenes that — in being separated by inconsistent time lapses that vary from one day to one year — lend the play an episodic quality. This is heightened by the fact that no two scenes are set in the same location, and that one encounter occurs as a flashback. Obituaries writer Dan meets Alice, who introduces herself as 'a waif' (Marber, 1997: 9) and alludes to her work as a stripper. Having left his current girlfriend to begin a relationship with her, Dan falls

in love with divorcee Anna, a photographer, and inadvertently sets her up to meet Larry, a doctor whom she marries. Following Larry's confession of a one-night stand, Anna admits to having had a year-long affair with Dan; she leaves Larry, who has a brief relationship with Alice. Anna then returns to Larry, and Dan to Alice, but neither couple lasts: by the end of the play, Larry makes reference to a new partner and Alice has died. Dan is single and Anna, a double divorcee. The audience witness both the first and final meeting of each pair through a 'sequence of moments' (Rosenthal, 2007: xxxi), predominantly comprised of duologues. It is not enduring love with which the audience are presented, but rather 'the sparks that ignite [...] each relationship' (*ibid*: 25), and the ultimate failure of each.

The specific urban backdrop is evoked through such settings as the London Zoo Aquarium and Saint Bartholomew's hospital, and spoken references to Blackfriars Bridge and Smithfield's Market, amongst other places. For the premiere, an image of Postman Park was projected onto the back wall throughout the performance, while the sound of 'London traffic noise' played between each scene (*ibid*: lxvii). Graham Saunders observes that 'the relationship of the individual to their urban environment [...] [is] a crucial theme in [...] [Marber's] work', noting the use of the photograph 'Lonely Metropolitan' that appears on the cover of *Patrick Marber Plays: One* (Saunders, 2008: 63 –64). That 'family, work colleagues and ex-partners are mentioned, [...] [but never] actually appear' perpetuates the notion that each onstage figure, as they are seen to strive and fail in relationships, 'very much exist[s] in isolation' (*ibid*: 79). The function of

Closer's setting thereby echoes a particular conceptualisation of postmodernity. In discussing Kevin Lynch's book, *The Image of the City* (1960), Jameson notes that 'the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map [...] their own positions', claiming the contemporary metropolis as a metaphorical space of disorientation induced by the 'spatial [...] and] social confusion' of the postmodern West (Jameson, 1991: 51 and 54). The characters' thwarted bids for 'closeness' are drawn to be inextricably tied to their experiences of a city as elusive and changeable as their relationships. Larry is heard to comment that the strip joint in which he meets Alice by chance used to be a 'punk club', prompting him to add that 'Everything is a Version of Something Else' (Marber, 1997: 58). Referencing this example, and the fact that Anna's studio is revealed to have once been a refuge, Daniel Rosenthal underlines the way in which 'the city has no true identity' (Rosenthal, 2007: lvi–vii). This representation of London as an unknowable, 'alienated' locale might therefore function to situate *Closer* within a distinctly contemporary context, furthermore aligning it with a theory that can be read to contain a degree of nostalgia. For Jameson perceives this disorientating aspect of postmodernity negatively: something that requires strategies to 'endow the individual subject with some [...] sense of its place in the global system' (Jameson, 1991: 54).

Although the events of *Shape* are played out within a less rigid dramatic structure, it shares formal qualities with *Closer*. '[S]ix of the ten scenes involve two characters in conversation' (Biggsby, 2007: 100); none of the locations represented are seen more than once; time elapses between each

of the chronologically-ordered scenes (although, while the action of the other play spans over four years, here, it covers less than five months). Adam, a shy, awkward student, meets Evelyn, a confident and attractive art postgraduate. They begin to date, and to double-date, with Adam's friends Philip, a 'would-be Jock' (Taylor, 2001: 9), and his fiancée, Jenny: a sweet and unassuming 'girl-next-door'. With Evelyn's encouragement, Adam changes: losing weight, altering his wardrobe and undergoing a nose-job. Jenny, who admits early on in the play that she once had a crush on Adam, turns to him for advice when she believes Philip may be being unfaithful to her, and the conversation ends with the pair kissing. Philip likewise notices the changes in Adam in ways that *hint* at the possibility of homosexual desire, and the audience also learn of an illicit encounter involving Evelyn and Philip. The penultimate scene is Evelyn's degree show, at which it is revealed that Adam has proposed to her and that Philip and Jenny have separated. The most significant revelation here, however, is that Evelyn's degree work has, in fact, been her 'sculpting' of Adam. In introducing her project, she explains that their relationship was no more than a means to create a human exhibit, 'although the illusion of dating was imperative' (LaBute, 2001: 120). In a dialogue with Adam that is the play's denouement, she tells him, 'all that stuff we did was real for you, therefore it was real. [...] It's all subjective, Adam' (*ibid*: 129). The final scene sees Adam alone in a gallery, surrounded by displayed documentation of his time with Evelyn.

As the setting of *Closer* evokes Jamesonian theory, *Shape's* subject matter bears relevance to Baudrillard's assessment of postmodern culture. For

Jameson, the loss of what he defines as the 'once-existing centered subject', is a result of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991: 15). While Baudrillard likewise critiques the impact of capital and consumerism, he furthermore cites the advent of 'sex's liberation' as an influence upon 'the loss of every referential' deeming 'the ascent of the feminine [...] *catastrophic* [...] to sex's reality principle' (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979]: 5–6, my emphasis). In this capacity, a correlation is made between the socio-cultural, political and ideological shifts enabled by second-wave feminism and the 'loss of strong values, the devaluation of meaning' (Gane, 2000: 67) key to this theorist's critique. In collapsing feminism into feminisation, the claim is made that the 'potentially limitless force' of '[s]exual liberation' is 'why in this society everything — [...] relations of all types — will be feminized' (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979]: 26). Feminisation, in these terms, would see an aestheticised state defined by a commercial 'new beauty system' (Gane, 2000: 65). That this is potentially detrimental to the male subject provides a link to the 'crisis' in masculinity, insofar as, as Rita Felski has argued, 'symbols of gender crisis automatically imply a loss of [...] agency [...] [and] this seems much more true of the feminized male than of the masculinized woman' (Felski, 2000: 148). If, as Mike Gane conjectures, '[Baudrillard's] theory suggests the primacy of a fatal feminine principle [...] which prevails over [...] virtue, truth [...] [and] reality' (Gane, 2000: 72), it is possible to conclude that these principles are reified as masculine, and the 'real' displaced, in postmodern hyperreality, by the victory of the object over the subject (Baudrillard, 1990 [1983]). As the 'success' of feminism is positioned as a contributor to this condition, this theory repeats the association between 'Woman' and 'object', lending validity to the

argument that 'Baudrillard's attitude to [...] the liberation of women was always hostile' (Gane, 2000: 65). During the monologue in which Evelyn is positioned to present Adam as her artwork, she justifies the changes wrought in him in these terms:

open any magazine, turn on any television programme and the world will tell you... he's only gotten more interesting, more desirable, more normal. In a word, better. He is a living, breathing example of our obsession with the surface of things, the shape of them.
(LaBute, 2001: 121)

Shape thus depicts a woman with the agency to construct a man, changing and 'improving' him according to a cultural onus on aesthetics and the 'surface'. In this sense, it might be viewed as a microcosmic representation of a 'feminised' America. Hence, there are parallels between the play and a particular trope of postmodern thinking that may be claimed as sexist and (as with that of Jameson) nostalgic. Like *Closer*, the theory mentioned here allows the dramatic literature to be situated within a contemporary context.

British context and playwriting tropes

In a broader sense, the cultural zeitgeist of Britain at the end of the twentieth century corresponds with the tangible evidence of Lyotard's seminal statement: 'I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]: xxiv). This 'incredulity' was prompted by the socio-political failure of certain hegemonic ideologies; the bankruptcy of historical projects geared to 'absolute freedom and absolute knowledge' (*ibid*: 31) — Marxism primarily. This teleological project for the 'emancipation of humanity' was rendered illegitimate by the events of the Cold War and subsequent perception of the 'failure' of socialism (*ibid*: 30). It is against this backdrop that an evaluation of British

playwriting culture might usefully be explored in contextualising *Closer*, as well as *Shape*. For, as I will argue, the latter of these plays looks to have been influenced by prevailing trends of mainstream British playwriting, perhaps reflecting upon LaBute's association with the UK. As a postgraduate in 1991, he received a scholarship to work with director Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court, 'an experience which he later claimed to be influential to his development as a writer' (Biggsby, 2007: 4–5), and has since rehearsed and premiered many plays, like *Shape*, in London. It is in mind of these reasons that more attention will be paid to the relevant strands of playwriting practice in Britain.

Commenting on the 1990s, journalist Anne McElvoy claimed that '[a] shift towards the personal, the primacy of sex over politics [...] [defined] a generation of new playwrights' (McElvoy, 1998: 5). Responding to the same issue a year earlier, Mark Ravenhill suggested that this move was down to the fact that '[i]n the '80s [...] every given about British society was thrown up in the air. I don't think playwrights of any generation knew how to respond to that' (quoted in Kramer, 1997: 70). The output of established left-wing, white British male playwrights in the 1980s — David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Brenton and Trevor Griffiths among them — anticipated the 'shift' to which McElvoy refers. Although the themes of their plays were still largely political, depictions of individual experience began to take precedence over the large-scale socialist critiques apparent in earlier works like Hare and Brenton's *Brassneck* (1974) and *Destiny* (1976), by Edgar.

In a study charting the response of such playwrights to the political landscape of the 1980s, D. Keith Peacock observes that '[t]he discrediting of the Left and the ascendance of the new Thatcherite discourse had made obsolete the earlier theatrical discourse of political theatre' (Peacock, 1999: 66). In his 1987 play *That Summer*, a response to the miners' strike of 1984, Edgar was seen to be 'concerned [...] not with the pros and cons of the miners' struggle [...] but with the development of personal relationships between the miners and their supporters' (*ibid*: 93). Commensurate with this agenda was the form of the play, which did not employ

the epic structure of his earlier 'faction' [...] [but] turned [...] uncharacteristically and without irony, to the naturalistic comedy of manners written by such mainstream writers as Stoppard and Gray. Its theatrical discourse consisted of naturalistic acting within a realistic domestic setting.
(*ibid*: 92)

In the penultimate point made here, Edgar is aligned with two playwrights that John Bull includes in a 1994 list of those he defines as 'supporting the status quo' rather than 'advocating revolution' (Bull, 1994: 121).¹ Peacock notes a shift in Howard Brenton's work comparable to that in Edgar's, asserting that, in contrast to *The Churchill Play* (1974) and *The Romans in Britain* (1980), 'the dramatic focus is tighter in *The Genius* [1983] and, as in *The Sleeping Policeman* [1983], is on a small number of individuals' (Peacock, 1999: 73). Although the latter work is concerned with local legislation in the London borough of Peckham, Peacock makes the assertion that 'it could not be described as politically radical' (*ibid*: 72). A change in David Hare's focus is also apparent in at least several of his plays from the 1990s, including *Amy's View* (1997) and *The Blue Room*

¹ That this list is made up of writers whose work is generally politically conservative and often set in a domestic space is reflected in the inclusion of such as Alan Bennett, Peter Shaffer and Christopher Hampton; writers who have, historically, been considered in contrast to the left-wing playwrights under discussion here.

(1998), which deviated from political themes more markedly, and dealt, instead, with familial and interpersonal relationships. In its depiction of flawed, (hetero)sexual encounters, this latter play has been compared to *Closer* by scholars and critics (Saunders, 2008; Shewey, 1999; Steyn, 1999; Wolf, 1999). Like many of the others I have mentioned here, these plays, too, were set within the domestic sphere and featured small casts. Thus, although these mainstream, left-wing playwrights continued to pass comment on British socio-politics, the change of focus from society to the individual can be traced throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, underlining the difficulty writers faced in 'engaging an audience that was [...] increasingly unsympathetic to socialist politics' (Peacock, 1999: 65).

Despite these shifts, however, it is undeniable that this school of male playwrights continued to produce work demonstrative of an explicitly political agenda. This issue is one which highlights how form does not necessarily determine political stance. Hare's *Skylight* (1995) may have been set in a flat, comprised, for the most part, of a duologue between two ex-lovers, yet was claimed by Michael Billington to be 'one of Hare's most polemical pieces of writing' in '[uniting] sexuality and the state of the nation' (Billington, 1995: 2). Furthermore, the forms of other 1980s and 1990s plays recalled techniques that had formerly been widely used. For example, David Edgar's contemporaneous 'State of Europe' plays (Smith, 2003), *The Shape of The Table* (1990) and *Pentecost* (1995), boasted Marxist sentiments and large casts redolent of Brechtian theatrical tradition. For the most part, however, the shifts that occurred in the 1980s pre-figured a largely apolitical (or, perhaps, *unprogressively* political) mood on the

mainstream stages of Britain during the following decade. The ultimate fate of the socialist playwright might, then, aptly fit the mould of Jameson's 'cultural [...] moralist' as one who found himself 'so deeply immersed in post-modernist space [...] that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique [...] becomes unavailable' (Jameson, 1991: 46).

Aside from the absence or de-politicisation of work by an older generation of socialist male playwrights, other trends within 1990s theatre are relevant to this discussion. In an analysis of plays being staged at the start of the decade, John Bull notes that the vast majority of the works performed in mainstream venues '[did] not impinge on post-79 political issues', highlighting the continued presence and popularity of Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Bennett and Noel Coward (Bull, 1994: 212–14).² His assertion that 'British theatre today is living on a combination of escapism and nostalgia' (*ibid*: 209) resonates in David Ian Rabey's discussion of the same issue. He notes that

radical theatre artists [of the 1990s] were often [...] demoralised [...] institutional theatres such as the RSC moved towards supposedly apolitical 'director's theatre' and away from new writing [...].
(Rabey, 2003: 168)

The popularity of revivals might appear to bear testament to a desire for dramas in which hegemonic masculinity is left untroubled. For many plays that were staged or revived in the 1990s are set in middle-class

² *Private Lives*, for example, Noel Coward's 1930 play, was revived on numerous occasions during the 1990s in such mainstream venues as the Royal Exchange in Manchester (1995), London's Lyric Hammersmith (1996) and the Lyttelton Theatre at the National (1999). The continuing public appeal of Coward, on both sides of the Atlantic, was reflected in the fact that it was staged again in London at the Albery Theatre in 2001, and, in 2003, on Broadway, featuring Hollywood film actors Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones in the lead roles.

domestic interiors and centre around heteronormative, familial/personal concerns, Coward's *Private Lives* (1930) and Ayckbourn's *Family Circles* (a 1996 reworking of *Me Times Me Times Me* [1970]) being two examples. While neither *Closer* nor *Shape* are exclusively set in comparable spaces, both depict small, insular worlds. In the former play, the public locations function as settings for a series of coincidental meetings, pivotal to the characters' interpersonal transactions. Anna is in the London Zoo Aquarium, by chance, when Larry appears there to meet her, having been set up by Dan; Alice's relationship with Larry begins after he visits the strip club in which she is shown to work (a later scene sees him explain to Anna, 'I went to a club, she happened to be there' [Marber, 1997: 79]) (Saunders, 2008). The play may thus evoke a claustrophobic context, in which the onstage figures appear ineluctably linked. Along with its similarly small and interconnected group of characters, an analogous argument may be made of *Shape* through the construction of the 'actual' size of the town in which the action is set. During the monologue at her degree show, Evelyn does not name Adam as the subject of her work, but is heard to state: 'it's a small college in a smaller town [...] so you've got a pretty decent chance at guessing who it is' (LaBute, 2001: 118). Comparatively, when Adam confronts Evelyn in the subsequent scene, he says, 'I can't really show my face in the streets' (*ibid*: 123).

Within these individualised, white, heteronormative, middle-class worlds, the sense of a British or North American political landscape is arguably absent. In comparing *Closer* to Hare's *Skylight*, Billington noted that

[w]hat Marber lacks [...] is Hare's ability to see sex in a broader context: there's no equivalent here to [...] [the] great speech in *Skylight*

about the 'right-wing fuckers'. There are just occasional hints of wider issues [...] Marber only fleetingly relates sex to society. (Billington, 1997: 7)

Marber, it seems, intended there to be more of a political slant to *Closer*; ultimately, this only came to fruition in the off-stage character of a nurse, Polly, who refuses to have sex with Larry while he is working for a private practice. Speaking to Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* a year after the play had premiered, Marber claimed that 'it was much more political... I consider it a failure of the play that the politics dropped out of it' (quoted in Gardner, 1998: 6). The very fact that the play was structured in such a way that these politics were able to 'drop out of it' is noteworthy. Sexual politics are the only kind under interrogation within this dramatic world as the characters are drawn within a hermeneutic bubble, separated from the broader issues of 'London (in) the 1990s' (Marber, 1997: ix). Thus, whilst the play draws upon the geography and history of the city, it simultaneously depicts it as something of a political vacuum. Comparatively, the fact that LaBute's play is set in a fictitious college, 'in some nameless mid-America' (Istel, 2001: 38) may work to divorce the events of the play from the wider, national context. It is in these terms, too, that *Closer* and *Shape* may be deemed to echo with the revivals of classics (for example, by Coward and Ayckbourn).

It is clear, then, that this trajectory at large can be read as overwhelmingly nostalgic and conservative: a notion furthered by the fact that many of the plays referenced here are either, broadly speaking, realist or (as with Ayckbourn's work) apolitical farce. The popularity of old *and* new dramas which reified the cultural centrality and normalcy of heterosexual, Caucasian subjects, and which did little to address the socio-political

climate, might thereby be deemed a strand of the 'backlash' against progressive shifts — not least in the field of sexual and gendered identity. Aside from reflecting on the drive to shore up the position of the 'white, European [...] male' (Jencks, 1996: 60), this trope may be seen to cater to Jameson's notion of nostalgia, as that which seeks to 'lay siege [...] to our own present and immediate past' (Jameson, 1991: 19).

Additional similarities can be discerned between the type of characters constructed within this trajectory, and those of *Closer*, beyond the fact of their being middle-class. Amongst new plays of comparable styles and themes are Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* (1982), revived at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in 1999, and *Imagine Drowning*, by Terry Johnson, first staged at the Hampstead Theatre in 1991.³ The protagonist of *The Real Thing* is a playwright and that of the other play is a journalist. In respect of *Closer*, and, particularly, the depiction of writer Dan, it is significant that the role of the artist is attributed to these male characters, both of whom are in the throes of crisis by virtue of interpersonal relationships. In *Imagine Drowning*, for instance,

[the journalist] David is [...] struggling to find a big story with which to revive his career. It also becomes apparent that [...] [he] is struggling with several conflicting emotions — not only concern about his job, but [...] his growing hatred for his [...] wife.
(Bluhm, 2003: 24)

³ Given the fundamental stylistic differences between Stoppard and the other playwrights I have cited within this trajectory, *The Real Thing* may appear to be something of an anomaly. To account for this, it is worth referencing Canada's National Arts Centre English Theatre study guide (2005–6), which notes that this play saw Stoppard '[abandon] the Absurdist techniques of his earlier works for an exploration of Realist techniques' (McNabb, 2005: 6). *The Real Thing* can thereby be read in tandem with the other, predominantly realist plays I have mentioned that depict troubled, (hetero)sexual relationships, and provide little evocation of a wider social or political context. Indeed, one critic described *The Real Thing* as 'a narrow piece of work that speaks only to itself and a certain class of people' (Speirs, 2005: 57).

The portrayal of a male artist in crisis is likewise central to David Storey's 1992 play, *Stages*, which depicts 'a man [...] at the height of his fame as a painter and writer [...] going [...] mad' (Tinker, 1992: 3). That which emerges as the character's pivotal sexual relationships are not played out in the play's present, yet, as in the other dramas, they likewise come to bear upon the events portrayed. The shared theme discussed here is also of some significance to *Shape* and *Closer* as a point of contrast: each depicts a confident female artist who is seen to trouble, undermine and hurt her male counterparts. That this may be a potentially subversive device is an ideal I shall return to shortly.

Comparable to Stoppard, Johnson and Craig's plays is Simon Gray's *The Holy Terror* (1990), a re-working of his 1987 *Melon*. The later of these two dramas depicts an adulterous publisher who is paranoid about his wife's lack of fidelity. The male protagonist, Mark Melon, suffers a nervous breakdown, or, as suggested by some critics, the menopause. Like the others I have referenced, a 'crisis' in masculinity can be evinced here by virtue of the way in which Melon experiences interpersonal dysfunctionality, within the context of heterosexual relationships. *The Holy Terror* is also relevant because of its resonance with the plays of Ayckbourn and Coward that were popular at this time; in 1994, Bull described Gray's work as

[...] the nearest the contemporary mainstream comes to a reworking of the territory of the well-made drawing-room comedy supposedly killed off in the mid-1950s. His characters live [...] in a world of social privilege and ease.
(Bull, 1994: 123)

This description clearly resonates with the middle-class affluence represented in *The Real Thing* and *The Holy Terror*. That *Imagine Drowning*

can be considered in concert with these plays is not solely due to its thematic terrain. This play, again, can be read as privileging a portrayal of the individual over that of the socio-political, so that '[w]hat Nichols offers his audience is a series of stock-takings of marriage and the family [...] in which the personal and the domestic are always strongly foregrounded' (*ibid*: 113).

Additional elements also come into play in assessing the degree to which *Closer* and *Shape* can be aligned with 'traditional' British plays of this period. In terms of form and staging, it is Marber's play that is of the most interest here. The structure of the opening of *Private Lives*, in which a newly married couple retire from a hotel terrace as the man's ex-wife emerges with her new husband from the suite next door, echoes in the form (as well as the themes) of *Closer*. The scene in which Larry and Anna admit their infidelities to one another, and break up, is set within their marital home, designed to take place on one side of the stage. On the other side, Dan's flat provides the setting for his telling Alice about his affair with Anna, and the two separate duologues are structured to intersect. As I have already noted, *Private Lives* was revived on several occasions during the 1990s; it was also referenced in many of the reviews and analyses of *Closer* (Coveney, 1997; Gardner, 1998; Nightingale, 1998; Rabey, 2003; Sierz, 2001). Fittingly, the two dramas were staged in tandem at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 2001. Written over thirty years after *Private Lives*, Ayckbourn's *How The Other Half Loves* (1969) also deployed the technique of splitting the stage space in its portrayal of two interrelated, married couples, within their respective homes. That one of the women is having

an affair with the 'other' man imbues this mode of staging with a dramatic irony that is also evident in *Private Lives* and *Closer*. While in the former, the two couples are not aware of their proximity to one another, in the latter, the audience learn of Dan and Anna's affair through Dan's confession to Alice, which occurs before Larry is made aware of it by Anna. *How The Other Half Loves* was revived in 1988 at the Royal Theatre, Bath, and again, at the same venue, in 2007, reflecting the continued popularity of plays concerned with introspective pictures of heterosexual relationships. In a similar vein, Howard Pinter's 2000 play, *Celebration*, took for its setting a restaurant in which two couples are seated at adjacent tables. One of the female characters torments her unfaithful husband with innuendoes about her former affairs; it is later implied that she 'may have been the first love and lay' (Nightingale, 2000) of the man at the other table. Although Pinter's style is fundamentally dissimilar to that of many of the other playwrights I have been discussing, here, too, is a celebrated writer whose work at the end of the century stages middle-class, heterosexual interactions and betrayals. Theatre critics made direct links between Pinter's 1978 play, *Betrayal*, *The Real Thing*, and Peter Nichols's *Passion Play* (1981), which depicted an adulterous affair, and was staged at the Donmar Warehouse in 2000. *Betrayal* was also revived, at Baron's Court in 1992 and at the Donmar Warehouse six years later. A three-hander in which a wife has a long-standing affair with her husband's best friend, this play has been described as one in which 'Pinter allows himself to focus on love divorced from global, political considerations' (Prentice, 2000: 233).

In structural terms, *Betrayal* differs from all the other plays I have discussed in that the events shown are played out in reverse chronological order. However, its dialogue warrants consideration in relation to that of *Closer*. Penelope Prentice writes of Pinter that ‘pauses [...] and silence are as much communication as language’ in their capacity ‘to convey deep emotions’ (*ibid*: lxi). In Marber’s play, pregnant pauses and staccato dialogue often occur at crucial moments of emotional intensity; a fact that has led many who have written on the play to draw a stylistic comparison between the two (see Benedict, 1997: 5 and Saunders, 2008: 56–57). An example of this influence, the following occurs minutes after Dan has revealed to Alice that he has been having an affair with Anna.

DAN I’m sorry.
ALICE Irrelevant. What are you sorry for?
Beat.
DAN Everything.
ALICE Why didn’t you tell me?
Beat.
DAN Cowardice.
(Marber, 1997: 46)

If *Betrayal* is relevant to an analysis of *Closer* by virtue of its style, the themes of desire, infidelity and competitive male relations also align it with *Shape*. In a quote that underlines the British play’s link to Pinter, Rabey notes of *Closer* that, ‘[u]nlike Kane’s *Blasted* [1995] or Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* [1996], the shock resides in the verbal rather than the visual images’ (Rabey, 2003: 199). That physical violence is not represented in *Betrayal* or in *Shape*, and on only one occasion in *Closer*, might provide further links between the latter two and the dramas to which they have been compared, in contrast to another defining school of playwriting in

the 1990s: the new, 'in-yer-face' or 'experiential plays' (*ibid*: 195). *Closer* and *Shape* were thus staged at a moment in which the productions of mainstream British theatre can be seen, in very general terms, to have divided into two camps: one of which was characterised by a nostalgic inclination towards popular productions and revivals of chamber plays, domestic dramas and comedies, while the other was concerned with shocking their audiences through graphic depictions of violence, sex and death.

In keeping with its historic role, the Royal Court Theatre played host to much of the significant 'new writing' during this period. The themes of many of the plays staged at this venue reflected a mood of apoliticality, dislocation and individualism. As the playwrights of the 1980s did not appear to know how to respond to fundamental changes in British society, to paraphrase Ravenhill, the characters that appeared on the stages of the Royal Court were drawn as directionless and isolated in works by such new, young playwrights as Joe Penhall, Sarah Kane, Jez Butterworth and Judy Upton — as well as Ravenhill himself. In an 1997 article for *American Theatre*, Matt Wolf observed that 'the British theatre can be said to be in the throes of an abiding nihilism running so deep that it makes the "angry young men" of three or four decades ago look faintly quaint' (Wolf, 1997: 44). Quaint or otherwise, it is relevant that the dramatic tone of this work recalled John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* (1956), a drama synonymous with a post-war white male character in 'crisis', nine years after Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* premiered in New York.

In such as Simon Block's *Not A Game For Boys* (1995), David Eldridge's *Serving It Up* (1996), and Che Walker's *Been So Long* (1998), the characters portrayed are working-class. Rundown housing estates, dingy bed-sits, park benches and street corners are characteristic settings; tenuous groups of friends or gangs are far more common than representations of the normative nuclear family. It can be argued that these 'observations of social decay' (Rabey, 2003: 192) do indeed evince a political agenda in depicting contemporary Britain: professional and economic hardship appears in *Serving It Up*, in which, like *Been So Long*, interracial tensions are also presented. However, the 'arguably nihilistic' (*ibid*) tone of such male-authored plays, in which individualism often prevails, is one factor that undermines the possibility of their being read as politically progressive. Adherence to psychological and social realism likewise forecloses the possibility of imagining alternative lifestyles or environments from those depicted, and, commensurately, the characters rarely change.⁴

If nihilism is, then, a theme of the in-yer-face trend, it is credible to outline its points of convergence with a Baudrillardian view of the world, in which

people [...] have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external 'reality', to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even 'reality' no longer seem to have any meaning.
(Kellner, 1994: 9)

⁴ The close of *Serving It Up* may usefully be cited here. Throughout the play, Val, the mother of protagonist Sonny, is shown in attempts to make her family and guests welcome through offering them cake, something she eats herself as a means of comfort. Having found out that her son has attacked his best friend with a knife, she becomes monosyllabic and the stage directions indicate that she '[...] breaks off handfuls of the cake which she disturbingly stuffs in her mouth. The tears roll down her face' (Eldridge, 1997: 76). Just as Val is not imagined to break with her habit, there is nothing in the closing moments that undermines the troubling and pessimistic tone likely to be conveyed.

Felski notes that 'Baudrillard's writings offer a [...] nostalgic narrative [...]. Harking back to an imagined era when signs conveyed a [...] fullness of meaning, he recounts a doleful parable of cultural decline' (Felski, 2000: 140). In these terms, bracketing the experiential school in this theoretical frame might allow for a link between it and the more 'traditional' dramas. However, whereas the prevalence of this second trope may work to reassert the seemingly once-secure norms of a lost, 'imagined era', and thus be seen as informed by a conservative political vision, the very absence of the possibility for socio-political change proved a defining element of various male-authored Royal Court plays. It is in this capacity that their focus can be discerned to mirror Baudrillard's view that 'all that remains, is the fascination [...] for the very operation of the system that annihilates us. [...] [T]he critical stage is empty' (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]: 160–61). The degree to which *Closer* and *Shape* tally with such plays is therefore significant to further consideration of both their postmodern characteristics and political agendas.

Kane's *Blasted* (1995), the stage adaptation of Irvine Welsh's novel, *Trainspotting* (1995), and *Shopping and Fucking* were three of the most significant plays of the period, comprising images of addiction, violence and rape played out in squalid, urban settings and through 'taboo' language (Sierz, 2001: 7). Although neither *Closer* nor *Shape* obviously fall into this category, both plays bore its traces, albeit within a quieter, calmer, middle-class context. Addiction is not about illegal drugs, but the mundane inability of the characters in *Closer* ever quite to quit smoking; in *Shape*, Philip does not attack or rape Adam, but comments on his

attractiveness and implicitly threatens him; *Closer's* Alice dies, but the audience does not witness her death or see her body. Although these plays did not attract the moral outrage of, for example, Kane's work, the impact of 'in-yer-face' theatre is evident in the representations of the characters' habits and interactions, as well as in their language. A scene towards the end of *Closer* includes the only example of physical violence in the play. At this point, Dan and Alice have re-united as a couple. He asks her about the affair she has had with Larry, to which she refuses a straightforward answer. The duologue culminates thus:

ALICE Go on, hit me. That's what you want. Hit me, you fucker.

Silence.

Dan hits Alice.

(Marber, 1997: 102)

That Sierz includes an analysis of *Closer* in *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) reflects the relevance of this style of theatre to that of the play. However, as Saunders argues, the presence of traditional influences 'make *Closer* something of a theatrical oddity among the rash of [...] "in-yer-face" plays' (Saunders, 2008: 3). Similarly, it is only in regard to certain facets of *Shape* that the play bears similarities to those that were being produced at the Royal Court. For example, the staging of the premiere of *Shape* deployed various tactics with the potential to create an intense or shocking live experience: the premiere saw most scenes 'smartly divided by a high-speed slam of the curtains' (McMillan, 2001) and the contemporary music of the Indie Rock band, 'The Smashing Pumpkins', was played at such volume at the outset that Pinter famously left before the action had begun. Recalling *Closer*, the spoken dialogue is punctuated by expletives. Just as Anna's leaving of Larry prompts him to say, 'fuck off

and die. You fucked-up slag' (Marber, 1997: 56), one of Adam's later lines to Evelyn is 'up yours, you heartless cunt' (LaBute, 2001: 127). Whilst reverberating with the style of Ravenhill, the misogyny of such lines finds parallels in works by other white, British male playwrights, who — like many of the Royal Court and 'traditional' playwrights — demonstrated an interest in the individual and relationships.

Simon Block's *Not A Game For The Boys* (1996) depicts the lives of three male cab drivers taking part in a competitive table-tennis match. The trio evince a shared need to escape the pressures represented by off-stage wives, mothers and girlfriends, and a desire to beat an (also unseen) female competitor. Thus, what is shown to trouble the characters relates first and foremost to women, the domestic and the personal. The same can be said of *Serving It Up*, in which the factors drawn to affect the young, white, male protagonist include his best friend's affair with his mother and satisfying his marijuana addiction. Described by Sierz as 'a powerful picture of the self-destructive male' (Sierz, 2001: 176), this play, like Block's, bears witness to the fact that the masculinity 'crisis' can be traced as a recurrent theme of the 'in-yr-face' trend. Works such as Marber's first play, *Dealer's Choice* and Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (all 1995) were, similarly, characterised by violence and homosociality, depicting British men as constantly bidding for validation amongst unreliable peers and surrogate father figures. In *Mojo*, the simple request made by one member of 'a gang of petty villains' (*ibid*: 161) to be given some cake results in an aggressive bid at one-upmanship:

SKINNY I'm asking you — gimme a piece.
POTTS Am I your cake fetcher?

SKINNY No. No. You're not. Absolutely. You jumpy cunt. I thought we were mates.

POTTS Would you get me a piece of cake?

(Butterworth, 1995: 48)

Thematically, however, the experiential plays that resonate most obviously with *Closer* and *Shape* are not those that depict groups of men, but rather ones that can be read as staging the 'crisis' in the context of heterosexual engagements. Here, again, one can perceive a link between the two strands of playwriting that I have outlined. Ryan Craig's *Happy Savages* (1998) and Richard Zajdlic's *Dogs Barking* (1999) provide key examples. Evoking responses to *Closer*, one critic described the former as 'a painful piece of partner-swapping' (Taylor, 1998: 11), whilst Sierz deemed the latter 'a territorial skirmish in the sex war' (Sierz, 2001: 202). As they are redolent with descriptions of the 'traditional' plays, such comments highlight *Closer* and *Shape's* comparable positions as somewhere between the two theatrical tropes. In order to further consider the impact of national context upon takes on the 'crisis' in masculinity, the conclusion for this portion of my analysis will be followed by an account of the American backdrop to LaBute's play. *Closer* and *Shape* gain credibility as case studies through occupying a thematic realm prevalent in two key strands of relevant, British plays. Each finds parallels in both the nostalgic conservatism and nihilistic despair apparent in contemporaneous drama, allowing them to straddle these tropes and, by extension, the views conveyed by various discourses on the contemporary. In being, in this sense, 'hybrid[s]' (Jencks, 1996: 16) or 'heterogeneous' (Jameson, 1991: 1), they reflect distinctly postmodern qualities.

US context and playwriting tropes

North America's relationship to the 'end' of socialism inevitably differed from that of Britain, in that, at least since McCarthy, an 'ideal' of US nationalism has been defined in opposition to Communism. While the end of the Cold War signalled a defeat for the British Left, it was an ideological victory for the capitalist America that had begun to emerge in the post-war 1950s. Although the mainstream plays produced in this country during the 1980s and 1990s largely reflected those across the Atlantic in conveying an interest with personal and domestic matters, this did not comprise a seminal shift in form or setting, even for those with Leftist sympathies. For example, just as Arthur Miller's 1947 anti-war play, *All My Sons*, revolves around the action of a family in the mid-west, and features a cast of ten, his Holocaust drama *Broken Glass* (1994) is similarly restricted to domestic spaces and contains six characters. In an analysis of mainstream American drama of the 1990s, David Krasner notes that this was 'a period of introspective self-involvement' marked by such factors as 'the dot.com economy' and 'body consciousness [...] [a]ny celebration of individuality was soon inverted in commercialism [...]. Yet it was also a contemplative era enriched by a focus on history, memory and nostalgia' (Krasner, 2006: 148). Focus on consumerism, the virtual and the surface, as well as an inclination to install 'the past as "referent"' (Jameson, 1991: 19), are reflected in seminal accounts of the postmodern. For although postmodernism was widely conceived of as a trans-national phenomenon, Baudrillard and Jameson's theories developed as a response to the US specifically.

If the decentred male subject can be deemed to invest *Shape* with Baudrillardian nostalgia, the same might be claimed of Mamet's work from the 1970s. Plays like *American Buffalo* (1976) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) represent groups of insecure, competitive men, anticipating those who would later appear on the stage of the Royal Court. However, while certain British 'in-yer-face' dramas can be read as nihilistic, the same is not necessarily true of Mamet's output. It is in setting his plays in suburbs of Chicago and New York, and critiquing a capitalist culture through inept crooks and hardnosed salesmen, that Mamet appears to offer a social commentary of the US. This notwithstanding, the moral issues that arise in his work stem from personal interaction, namely homosocial and heterosexual relations. Although these plays lack the epic, metaphoric presence of US history present in those of Sam Shepard, or the moralistic tone of Miller's social realism, they are clearly influenced by both of these playwrights' lost and disaffected characters. Across stylistic differences, then, Shepard, Miller and Mamet arguably share in the national dramatic tradition of '[contesting] the [...] optimistic master narratives of American society, including [...] "the American Dream"' (Richardson, 1996: 5), if particularly in relation to the plight of the white male subject. The capacity for capitalism to induce a sense of crisis in the men represented inextricably links the plays of Mamet to *Death of A Salesman* (1949) within the mainstream American theatre genealogy. That LaBute is often regarded as the 'direct descendent' of Mamet thus underscores his position in relation to the US canon.

Links between Mamet's work and *Shape* occur in the registers of theme and style. LaBute's drama focuses on sexual power and politics, depicting characters capable of shockingly brutal words and deeds. The fact it is a woman who behaves with the most obvious malice makes the play something of an anomaly amongst the collective work of these writers. Historically, accusations of misogyny levelled at Mamet and LaBute have stemmed from their depictions of brazenly sexist treatments of women by men (perhaps most notably in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* [Mamet, 1974] and *In The Company of Men* [LaBute, 1993]). Violence is present in the work of both, most often made manifest in swearing, misogynistic comments and unveiled threats; however, as I have noted, the characters in *Shape* are not seen to engage in bodily violence, unlike many of Mamet's. Stylistically, a fast-paced dialogue and frequent duologues provide a further link between the two, which, in harking back to Pinter, provides a connection with *Closer*. In comparing this play to *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, Rosenthal notes that 'Marber [...] acknowledges that *Sexual Perversity* had influenced *Closer's* four-hand structure and language [...]. Linguistically, both plays are equally terse' (Rosenthal, 2007: xxi).

Many of the critics who reviewed *Shape* drew parallels with what is arguably Mamet's most controversial work, *Oleanna* (1992), in which the power struggle between a male university lecturer and a young female student culminates in violence. Aside from the university setting and theme of subjective interpretation, there are parallels between the duologues of the men and women in these plays. The final scenes see Mamet's Carol and LaBute's Evelyn being called a 'cunt' by their male

counterparts (LaBute, 2001: 127; Mamet, 2004: 79); both women speak with confidence before the men deliver this line. In responding to the plays in performance, the press noted a sense of satisfaction in the audience at these moments. Of *Oleanna*, Anna Karpf wrote in *The Guardian* that 'John's attack on Carol drew applause; Mamet perpetuates the very thing he should be exploring' (Karpf, 1993). If the 'feminisation' of Adam in *Shape* resounds with Baudrillardian lament for 'the defunct reality of sex' (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979]: 5), or a 'crisis' in masculinity, it is feasible to read this text as a backlash against (what is perceived to be the result of) the second-wave feminist project. The self-assured Carol that emerges towards the end of *Oleanna* is shown to be the result of an allegiance with what is suggested as an all-female, feminist group. That she encounters misogyny validated by audience response underlines a point of correlation between the plays in these terms. As it seems improbable that Evelyn could be received sympathetically, she, like Carol, is arguably positioned to 'deserve' the abuse she gets. *Oleanna* might therefore be read as nostalgic, redolent of Krasner's analysis of contemporaneous US drama, facets of Baudrillardian theory, and a cultural zeitgeist in which, from one feminist perspective, 'resistance to women's rights had acquired political and social acceptability' (Faludi, 1992: 13). The notion of a backlash can likewise be traced in *Closer*, to which I will return.

Postmodern aesthetics

Having situated *Closer* and *Shape* within postmodernity and relevant national contexts, it is now valid to further assess the extent to which each is constructed according to certain key elements of a postmodern aesthetic.

Jencks states that, '[p]ost-modernism has [...] as its essential definition, what I have called double coding [...] the continuation of modernity and its transcendence' (Jencks, 1996: 15). A 'continuation of modernity' figures in the plays through ties with the earlier dramas, while 'transcendence' may be apparent, in part, through the presence of intertextuality. If this strategy denotes a 'commitment to pluralism', a pivotal feature and 'perhaps the only thing that defines every post-modern movement' (*ibid*: 29), the degree to which it may be discerned in the dramas aids this evaluation.

On the basis of its comparability to the canonical plays I have already mentioned it is little wonder that *Closer* was deemed a '*Private Lives* for the late 1990s' (Coveney, 1997: 7). Notwithstanding the formal similarities between the plays, 'irony, parody [or] displacement' (Jencks, 1996: 30) are not readily apparent as postmodern devices that might render *Closer* a self-referential re-working of the earlier drama. In anticipating Hare's 1998 representation of a 'geometric swapping of partners' (Saunders, 2008: 76) in *The Blue Room*, Marber's play was retrospectively linked to Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* (1900), from which Hare's drama was adapted. A review entitled 'Satire lost in the free adaptation of the sexual daisy chain' (Billington, 1998: 2) underlined the way in which *The Blue Room* was perceived to have staved away from matters of the socio-political deemed apparent in *La Ronde*. Its similarities with *Closer* contribute to highlighting the conservative aspect of this play. Despite fitting into a historical line of works of similar forms and themes, specific influences are never self-consciously referenced to the effect of 'double coding'. In this sense, *Closer*

can be argued as continuing in and perpetuating a modernist trajectory. Of the drama's name,

[...] Marber admitted: 'The title is stolen. [...]'. Joy Division were the Manchester band whose most famous song [was] 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' [...]. Marber added: 'Closer was their second album and my second play'.
(Rosenthal, 2007: xxiii)

This, by contrast, may be deemed an explicit intertextual reference to both the themes of the play and its place in the author's output. Although the 'original' source of the title is not made apparent by the action of *Closer*, this aspect parallels Jenck's notion of the 'double code' as that which may speak to a specific 'minority' with particular, prior knowledge (Jencks, 1996: 29). Along with the play's depiction of an elusive, shifting London — 'a palimpsest to older versions of itself' (Saunders, 2008: 65) — this represents evidence of postmodern influence, in aesthetic terms.

As a reconfiguration of the *Pygmalion* story, Shape invites comparison with both the 1916 George Bernard Shaw play of this name, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE). Use of this narrative enables the final plot twist, and such texts are referenced as 'literary clues scattered throughout' the play (Billington, 2001a: 27). For example, when Evelyn figures to tell Adam, early on, that she is 'very proud' of the ways in which he has changed, he cites *Pygmalion* in responding, 'thank you... (cockney)... 'enry 'iggins' (LaBute, 2001: 20). When she asks, 'What's that? Who's...?', Adam states, 'Nothing. From a book. A play, actually' (*ibid*). On various such occasions, the female character does not 'get' the reference, just as an audience may or may not understand either it or the meta-theatricality discernable in Adam's last line here. This indeterminacy persists through the fact that Adam never gives the name of the canonical texts from which he quotes.

Intertextuality is thus abundant in underscoring the narrative from which that of *Shape* is wrought. In a play that reverses the sexes of the ‘sculptor’ and the ‘sculpted’, the playful use of these clues see the texts from which they are taken subject to ‘displacement’ and ‘eclecticism’ (Jencks, 1996: 30) as recognisably postmodern strategies. ‘Double coding’ is at play again, in this case through the ‘transcendence’ of classic and modernist literature.

What is likely *Shape*’s most explicit intertextual reference appears through character names: Adam and Evelyn. This allusion to the book of Genesis compounds the play’s postmodern quality, its presence underlined by the revelation that Evelyn’s initials spell ‘eat’ (LaBute, 2001: 53–54). The binary switch of the ‘male creator’ and ‘female artwork’ is a subversive move, and one I will discuss in more detail later. However, in accordance with the biblical narrative, it is worth noting here that it is the woman represented who is shown to be responsible for unleashing ‘knowledge, guilt [and] deception’ (Biggsby, 2007: 84) in a man who develops through a (hetero)sexual relationship. In a scene depicting Adam and Evelyn in a post-coital conversation, the former’s prior lack of experience is revealed when he states, ‘you’re sort of in unchartered waters here’ (LaBute, 2001: 39). Becoming sexually active is integral to his transformation.

Furthermore, to cite Jameson:

the designation of [...] historical names [...] operates powerfully and systematically to reify [...] characters and to *make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of an already acquired knowledge [...]*.

(Jameson, 1991: 24, my emphasis)

In these terms, the naming of Evelyn (opposite Adam) may work to imbue her with the trait of deception historically associated with the ‘first’ woman as an enduring feminine archetype — and well before her

mendaciousness is revealed. This sees *Shape* reify a stereotype which might work in concert with the process of feminisation represented, contributing to a nostalgic agenda that privileges masculinity.

Shape, Genesis and Lacan

One final point will constitute a link to the remaining portion of this chapter, and focus upon the way in which Evelyn's position as a female artist represents a bridge between the Genesis narrative in *Shape* and Lacan's 1966 theory of the phallus.

It is strongly suggested that Evelyn's construction of the male form is not limited to Adam. The two first meet in front of a nude male statue, the penis of which has been covered by a leaf made of plaster. Evelyn is heard to explain that this is the result of 'local townspeople' having 'objected to his "thing"' (LaBute, 2001: 9). Earlier, when Adam asks why she has a can of spray paint, Evelyn says that 'I was going to do something to the nude'; at the end of the scene, the stage directions indicate that 'Evelyn is left alone. She [...] starts shaking her paint can' (*ibid*: 6 and 15). It is later established that a penis was sprayed onto the plaster leaf. This early event therefore constructs Evelyn as one who appears willing to transgress normative social conduct, perhaps mirroring the character's subversive function as a break with traditional gendered roles. She figures with the capacity to construct, or deconstruct, the male subject, inverting the biblical narrative in which, made in God's likeness, Adam provides the 'original' historical archetype of 'Man', out of which 'Woman' (as opposite) is created. It is especially pertinent that Evelyn appears to 'reinstate' the

statue's sex organ, prior to a project of symbolic castration. The act of spray-painting therefore functions to pre-figure the later 'sculpture' of Adam.

As the earlier venture is specifically concerned with the sex organ, and the second sees white, male identity as unfixed, it is feasible to argue that the statue's penis becomes a symbol not for anatomical maleness, but rather for a masculinity that may be shifted or undermined. For notwithstanding the physical changes that Adam is shown to make, it is the certainty of the subjecthood he represents that is perceivably damaged by Evelyn's 'work'; a concept I will later discuss in reference to the character of Philip. The title of the play may thus suggest 'the shape of things to come', as a nostalgic reaction against the 'threat' of feminisation. The 'thing' may, too, be a symbolic penis (as in Evelyn's line), an emblem of the masculine, the position or 'shape' of which is made malleable by the destabilising of gendered subjectivities, through shifts such as those created by feminism. If the 'thing' is something that can be deemed to exist in a discursive register, it is redolent of Lacan's notion of the phallus as distinct from the anatomical male organ. This disparity is that which enables a rupture in access to the masculinist Symbolic, which is commensurate with *Shape's* depiction of Evelyn as a female creator. As Christopher Bigsby notes, her 'work' represents 'a claim on significance and meaning' (Bigsby, 2007: 93), historically a masculine preserve. The evocation of Adam and Eve, and simultaneous repetition and subversion of their roles, underlines the means by which the play provides a point of intersection between the

gender roles and relations perpetuated by a founding biblical narrative, and those apparent in certain readings of Lacan's post-structuralist theory.

In view of the way that Evelyn's feigned desire for Adam temporarily constructs him as 'more confident' (LaBute, 2001: 121), this aspect of the play sheds light upon the importance of female characters and female characters as artists, to the representation of men and masculinity in a period of 'crisis'. With this in mind, the following discussion will open with an analysis of the women represented in *Closer*.

Analysis of *Closer*

Like Evelyn, *Closer's* Anna and Alice are both duplicitous and changeable, albeit contrastingly. The former is unfaithful to both of the men, her year-long affair with Dan only coming to Larry's attention when she opts to tell him about it. Alice, if discernibly flirtatious with men who have partners, never actually commits infidelity.⁵ Larry ultimately realises that she 'made herself up' (Marber, 1997: 106) on discovering, after her death, that she was really called Jane, and had temporarily adopted the name of Alice Ayres from a memorial plaque in London's Postman Park. Larry's line carries significance beyond that of this context; indeed, it can be seen to epitomise a character in whom contingency is a defining feature. '[T]he [...] series of female archetypes she adopts — Victorian waif, loyal lover, temptress and victim' (Saunders, 2008: 22), is an apt summary of the diverse roles by which Alice comes to appear. Her life is taken as the

⁵ In the opening scene of *Closer*, during which Alice learns that Dan has a girlfriend, she nonetheless partakes in 'a flirtatious and witty battle of repartee' (Saunders, 2008: 17), asking him, for example, if he noticed her legs when he first saw her (Marber, 1997: 3). Similarly, at a later point in the play, '[o]n learning that Larry is Anna's boyfriend, Alice flirts with him' (Saunders, 2008: 19).

subject of the novel Dan writes, and she is furthermore constructed in a photograph that Anna takes of her, in which she is neither Alice, nor Jane, but 'Young Woman, London' (Marber, 1997: 33). The same photograph is later the subject of a postcard Larry buys a copy of in New York.

If the roles by which she is portrayed mean that Alice figures through associations with objects and images, it is noteworthy that when she and Dan stand before her photograph in a gallery, his comment, 'You look beautiful', is evidently aimed at the 'huge' picture rather than the person: Alice responds by saying, 'I'm here' (*ibid*: 31). Perhaps the most explicitly constructed role she is shown to take on is that of a stripper, as which she appears in a single scene dressed in 'a short dress [...] high heels [...] [and] a garter' (*ibid*: 57). Some of the lines she is heard to deliver to Larry in this context are evocative of an earlier cybersex scene in which the two male characters communicate online 'via the clichéd language of men's pornographic writing' (Saunders, 2008: 37): 'The thought of me creaming myself when I strip for strangers doesn't turn you on?' (Marber, 1997: 59). Commensurate with Marber's assertion that 'Anna, Dan and Larry are 'lookers', while Alice is "looked at"' (Sierz, 2000: 188), and Christopher Innes's assessment of the character as a 'waif-like ideal of male fantasy' (Innes, 2002: 432), the costume and language attributed to Alice as stripper underline a reading of the character as an object of heterosexual male fetish. Saunders claims that the stripper role functions to '[subsume] her identity as part of the [strip] club's brand and ideology' (Saunders, 2008: 41). Whether there is, indeed, an identity presented that is available to be subsumed is a question to which I will return. Certainly the way in which

a particular 'brand' or 'ideology' is at play in shaping this incarnation of Alice is comparable to that created by the exhibiting and circulation of Anna's photograph, within the gallery space and as a commodified simulacrum of an artwork. In at least these two roles, Alice can be read to figure as an aestheticised object within discourses defined by their capacity for repetition and reproduction, evoking Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal. Comparable to the other personae by which she is realised, Alice may therefore be seen as an embodiment of particular stock, female figures, aligning her with the traditionally 'feminine' qualities of 'image' and 'fiction' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 9).

Through the conversations shown between Larry, Anna and Dan in the final scene of *Closer*, the audience learn that the fourth character has died. This fact can thus be seen as a narrative convention that further reifies the traditionally feminine role(s) in which Alice is wrought, as well as perpetuating the association between femininity and silence. As much of the play is constituted by duologues, the presence of the other three characters here underscores Alice's absence (despite the fact that all of them are only on stage together briefly). Despite being significant to the scene, it is through words ascribed to others that the key revelation about Alice comes to the spectator's attention.

As part of his analysis of Alice, Saunders makes reference to the possibility of 'her need to invent a myriad series of identities in order to disguise a lack of core identity' (Saunders, 2007: 23). This would seem to point to the possibility of there being additional postmodern and subversive elements

in *Closer*, if character construction through a 'series of identities' figures here as a means to foreground performativity. However, Alice does have a real name and the scar on her leg is a corporeal actuality that contrasts with the fictions she is shown to create about both herself and this injury.⁶

Saunders observes that

Larry's training as a dermatologist seems to get closer to the origin of the scar as well as troubling hints about Alice's background through his suspicion that she might have created the scar herself [...].
(*ibid*: 22)

Whether or not an audience would consider this a credible assertion, the notion that there is an 'origin' of the scar available to be discovered is of some significance. Although a spectator's experience of the character may be as one who is ultimately undefinable, such elements might induce her or him into thinking that there is, indeed, a 'core' to be detected. This, then, may work to underscore a claim for perceiving Alice as cast in a traditional mould, according to the tenets of psychologically realist drama.

It is also within a psychoanalytic register that the construction of Alice can be seen to perpetuate normative links between the female subject and 'feminine' identity. Saunders notes Rabey's assertion that 'it is the very "indefinability" that lies at the heart of Alice's ability to attract and fascinate men' (*ibid*), an observation that rings true when one considers, in the case of the strip club scene, the extent to which Alice's insistence that Jane is her real name furthers Larry's desire for her to admit that it is, in fact, Alice.⁷ This exchange can be seen to function as an example of the

⁶ Alice responds differently every time she is asked how she came by her scar (see Saunders, 2003: 22 and Sierz, 2000: 193-4).

⁷ Larry's first question about Alice's name is 'Why are you calling yourself Jane?' (Marber, 1997: 62). When she insists, repeatedly, 'Because it's my name', it is clear that Larry becomes increasingly frustrated and aggressive (*ibid*). When Alice has reiterated that her name is Jane three times, Larry says, 'Why don't I give you — All — This — Money —

way in which a metaphorical refusal of intimacy on the part of the female character propounds the male counterpart's desire for it. In 'The Meaning of the Phallus', Lacan observes that:

[i]f it is the case that the man manages to satisfy his demand for love in his relationship to the woman to the extent that the signifier of the phallus constitutes her precisely as giving in love what she does not have — conversely, his own desire for the phallus will throw up its signifier in the form of a persistent divergence towards 'another woman' who can signify the phallus under various guises, whether as a virgin or a prostitute.
(Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 85)

If the woman who 'satisf[ies]' the male's 'desire for love' does so at the expense of revealing that, in fact, desire is fundamentally insatiable, thereby motivating the man to seek phallic fulfilment from another woman, it is arguable that the woman who (perpetually) refuses to satisfy, in this sense, remains (perpetually) desirable. It is interesting, in addition, that Lacan makes reference to two female archetypes as the 'guises' under which a woman may signify as a phallic symbol of desire. That Alice is figured through such personae underscores her function as the desirable 'other woman': it is not her, but the other female character of Anna with whom both Larry and Dan repeatedly claim they are in love.⁸ That it is not one, but a series of guises through which Alice is constructed, underlines this point. She does not appear as either lascivious temptress or vulnerable waif, but rather moves between these and other roles, underlining her elusiveness. The very construction of Alice thus also fits with the Lacanian notion that '[i]t is for what she is not that [...the woman] expects to be desired as well as loved' (*ibid*). The opening scene of *Closer* positions the

and you tell me what your Real Name is, [...] Alice' (*ibid*: 63). Aside from the capital letters, underlined words and pauses denoting emphasis here, the final line is punctuated by the stage direction, 'he raises her face towards his with the wad of notes' (*ibid*), suggesting that a threatening tone might characterise this moment of their exchange.

⁸ This argument is perhaps best supported by reference to a moment in scene ten in which the two male characters, alone in Larry's surgery, have a confrontation prompted by the fact that both wish to be with Anna (Marber, 1997: 87).

character in her initial meeting with Dan. Her answer to his question, 'What do you want?' is merely, 'To be loved' (Marber, 1997: 10). Moments later, having persuaded Dan to spend the day with her, she introduces herself for the first time as Alice Ayres and the following scene establishes that the two have become a couple. The female character is thereby shown to have secured heteronormative 'desire' and 'love' under an appropriated identity: a collapse between the female subject and Lacanian femininity.

Despite this assessment, potentially subversive representations of the female subject and femininity may also be discerned. Although these are arguably more obvious in terms of Anna, as I will outline, I would suggest that the delineation of Alice is not without its transgressive potential. The analysis above makes reference to the notion that, if Alice is largely constituted through movement between multiple guises, the notion of performativity is brought to the fore. If an audience is to read a performance in such a way that the 'clues' as to the suggestion of a 'core' identity are not discerned, it is possible that the very contingency of her personae is that which comes to be privileged. Should the differing female roles attached to her have the capacity to be seen, in their multiplicity and temporality, as parodies of certain archetypes, highlighting their constructedness, and, by extension, that of historically normalised female identities, the play could be read as having a subversive quality. As Butler notes, 'parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture [...] of the claim to naturalized or essentialist [...] identities' (Butler, 1999: 176). Conversely, one might argue that a performative construction of the feminine does little to upset masculinity. Indeed, in this context, it may rather perpetuate

the feminine as always already changeable, or 'fake', in contradistinction to the masculine realm of the 'fixed' or 'real'. However, the male characters are also depicted in appropriating temporary identities, through the taking on of others' names. It is 'the character of "Anna" whom Dan anonymously adopts' in his online exchange with Larry (Saunders, 1998: 21) and, in meeting Alice in the strip club, Larry tells her that his name is Daniel in the knowledge that she knows this to be untrue. Although the (textual and visual) imagery related to Alice might still be seen as a problematic reification, such themes as fetish and objectification feature in such abundance that they may, paradoxically, serve a subversive function.

A (re)consideration of Anna's photograph and Alice-as-stripper may best serve to unpack this suggestion. In the case of the scene set in the gallery, a director of the play could opt to stage the 'huge' image of Alice in such a way that the audience could not fail to look at it, rather than, for example, having the actors playing Alice and Dan convey a sense of it hanging on the fourth wall. This decision may see the spectator aware of her or himself regarding the photograph, rather than the actor playing Alice, when the character responds to Dan's observation about her image being beautiful ('I'm here'). The audience member could thereby be both invited to, and made aware of, their complicity in constructing the female character as an object of the gaze. The staging of the strip club scene for the premiere of *Closer* can be seen to have functioned in a comparable capacity. Saunders notes that 'Rabey makes the observation that "we never actually see the character (or performer) of Alice strip"' (Saunders,

2008: 44). By making the audience aware of Alice's role, but never actually showing her remove her clothes, it is arguable that this scene serves to highlight the fetishism attached to the eroticised female body without perpetuating it as such. Saunders goes on to explore the means by which 'Marber uses the properties of theatre to accentuate the voyeurism of the lap dancing environment' by exploiting the meta-theatrical potential of the play: '[t]he scene [...] self-consciously draws attention to the [...] "fourth wall" that situates the audience when Alice draws Larry's attention to their activities being monitored by cameras' (*ibid*: 45). Thus, whilst Alice necessarily 'becomes objectified by the [...] audience' (*ibid*), possible and actual productions of *Closer* lend themselves to staging opportunities that might make an audience aware of the female character's realisation as a figure of fetish, and their role in this process. Such techniques may draw attention to the 'feminine' characteristics that comprise Alice, thereby having the capacity to trouble their normative (subordinate) status.

If the portrayal of Anna also contains transgressive elements, these are in contrast to those I have read in relation to Alice. Despite her duplicitousness perhaps signifying as a stereotypically feminine trait, other key aspects of the character evoke a historically masculine space. As a photographer, she is an artist who shapes and frames the lives of other characters, as Evelyn is positioned to do in *Shape*. That she is successful is suggested by the gallery exhibition, as well as references to the postcard of Alice and the existence of a book of her work. If such factors imbue Anna with institutional artistic credibility, it is possible to conclude that the formation of this character goes some way to problematise the binaristic

associations between 'high art' and [the] male', and 'low art' and '[the] female' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 60). Saunders aligns Anna with Dan in his suggestion that both are drawn to 'share a trait of appropriating the lives of others for their own ends' (Saunders, 2008: 25). This parallel is made explicit in an early scene in which Anna is seen photographing Dan in her studio. Having been told that Alice is the subject of the latter's novel, Anna is seen to ask him, 'How did she feel about you stealing her life?' (Marber, 1997: 13). A line of Dan's echoes this seconds later, in his enquiry about the subjects of her photographs: 'How do your strangers feel about you stealing their lives?' (*ibid*). The complicity between them is arguably underscored by the contrast between this exchange and that which Anna has with Alice, later on in the same scene. Echoing her question to Dan, Anna asks the other woman, 'How do you feel about Dan using your life, for his book?', to which Alice responds, 'None of your fucking business' (*ibid*: 20).⁹

This apparent similarity made between Anna and Dan thereby aligns the former with a male character, and, moreover, one who is a writer. This profession has particular significance in considering representations of masculinity in terms of Lacanian theory. If the male subject 'has' the

⁹ By extension, the interplay between the two women in this scene establishes the fraught, competitive nature of their acquaintance. Before she appears in Anna's studio, 'Alice knows from eavesdropping that she is [...] threatened' (Rosenthal, 2007: xvii) by her partner Dan's attraction to the other woman. This prefigures the tone of the only other occasion on which the women are depicted alone, by which point Anna and Dan have become a couple. As their terse discussion revolves around the absent male characters, the women are situated to enable exposition. Aside from Alice's evident hostility towards Anna, expressed by such lines as 'You should come [...] and watch your husband blubbing [...] it might help you develop a conscience' (Marber, 1997: 82), what is revealed, primarily, relates to Dan and Larry. By this token, it is possible to claim this scene as evidence for the way in which representations of men are privileged by this play, repeating the norm of canonical western playwriting. This notion resonated in various reviews of *Closer*, that of London's *Time Out* magazine being but one example: '[w]hile Marber penetrates the dark corners of the male psyche, he can't do the same for the women' (Edwardes, 1997).

phallus as the organising principle of the Symbolic, this 'possession' can be seen to privilege his access to the construction of meaning. Thus, the (successful male) writer can be taken as a symbol that both underscores the legitimacy of, and perpetuates, this privilege. Despite the subversive potential of the male sex organ only ever figuring as a metonym for the phallus, Elizabeth Grosz underlines how '[t]he symbolic function of the phallus envelops the penis as the tangible sign of a privileged masculinity, thus in effect naturalizing male dominance' (Grosz, 1990: 123). Indeed, as the distinction between the penis and the phallus can become blurred to this effect, so too can that which separates the male writer from the fact of his sex and the claim to a legitimate or idealised masculine script. Such a collapse, or misrecognition, is claimed by Doane and Hodges when they observe that '[m]en have long approached the power of writing by maintaining as natural and inevitable the metaphorical link between pen and penis, author and patriarch' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 70). That this is a 'link' which requires protection or reiteration, in a period of 'crisis' for masculinity, can be noted by referencing Hare's *The Blue Room* (1998). In a scene between two characters, the (male) Playwright and the (female) Model, the former is shown to state: 'I'm known for my enormous vocabulary. [...] My work is throbbing with big words! Trouser-bulging with polysyllables!' (Hare, 1998: 59). In both this, and the following scene, the Playwright is shown to brag about his professional and personal successes, and his narcissism is rewarded by the Model having sex with him (just as another character, the Actress, is shown to do in a later scene). The explicit and potentially humorous quality of these lines may mean that the link made between phallic power and the penis is imbued with

irony. However, what is interesting about the quote cited here is that it is not, like much of *The Blue Room*, a re-working of lines from *La Ronde*.¹⁰ One might therefore conclude that this aspect of the later play is prompted by an awareness of the potential rupture between male and pen, or penis and phallus, at a post-structuralist moment in which the 'link' between them cannot easily retain its formerly naturalised status. As I have established, the trend for drama about male artists comprised a distinct trend in contemporaneous, 'traditional' play; hence, *The Blue Room* is anything but an anomaly.

The Blue Room thus reflects, if not an alarmist portrayal of a 'crisis' in masculinity, then an awareness of a culture in which the potential separation between the 'fact' of bodily sex and concomitant gender practice prompt the desire to re-assert certain patriarchal 'norms' in the interest of the heterosexual (white, middle-class) male subject. Whether such 'norms' are drawn to be desirable or otherwise, in the context of this play, would require further analysis which extends beyond the scope of this enquiry (although it may be valid to mention that the self-involved Playwright hardly seems to be a sympathetic character). However, read

¹⁰ Compare, for example, the following two excerpts from *La Ronde* and *The Blue Room*, which are from later on in the same/equivalent scene as/to that cited above.

POET I thought it would be so beautiful, just the two of us together for a week or two, somewhere alone, in the woods. I can see it now, communing with nature, living the natural life. Just us... in the wild. And then one day, goodbye!

(Schnitzler, 2007 [1900]: 67)

PLAYWRIGHT Go and live in the woods. In the depth of the forest. It's what I've always wanted. Get away from all this. And then one day... just look each other in the eye and say goodbye.

(Hare, 1998: 61)

alongside *Closer*, this moment in *The Blue Room* provides a noteworthy contrast in terms of representations of the male subject as writer.

Unlike the Playwright, Dan is an unsuccessful novelist. The impact of this may perhaps be best evaluated through exploring the extent to which gender binary switches can be discerned in the construction of him, and of Anna. For, if the latter can be seen to be partially associated with the masculine, one might argue that this functions to underline the extent to which the former is emasculated, or, indeed, to enforce that emasculation. If the two are initially positioned to be read as comparable, the similarity begins to slip as the action progresses. This is hinted at in the photo shoot scene I have detailed — the first moment in which they are pictured together — by virtue of the fact that the audience see Anna '[standing]' behind the camera, whilst Dan is '[sitting]' (Marber, 1997: 11). The female represented is active and the man, passive. The next time the audience sees the pair together, it is in the context of Anna's exhibition, at which the audience are made aware that Dan's book has been unsuccessful. Referring to himself as a 'failed novelist' prompts the following dialogue:

ANNA I was sorry about your book.

[...]

DAN Why can't failure be attractive?

ANNA It's not a failure.

DAN It's perceived to be, therefore it is. Pathetically, I needed praise. A real writer is . . . above such concerns.

ANNA Romantic tosh.

DAN Ever had bad reviews? Well, shut up then.

(*ibid*: 37)

The male character's 'failure' is heightened by the context of the scene: a visual symbol, for the audience, of Anna's achievements. That a

connection is made between being successful (as a writer) and being desirable to women (as a man) underlines the way in which a phallic masculine identity is validated, or otherwise, through evidence of the male artist's ability to create discursive meaning. Just as *The Blue Room's* prize-winning Playwright is shown to have his masculinity authenticated through (hetero)sexual congress, so Dan's literary failings are mirrored in his personal ones. In a moment that can be taken as a point of explicit interconnection between the two, the audience see the character say to Anna, at a moment in which she has rejected him, 'All the language is old, there are no new words... I love you' (*ibid*: 19). As his failure to impact through words both reflects and performs his inability to secure the object of his affection, this line can be taken to underpin the way in which the male writer's inadequacies prevent the enactment of an 'ideal' phallic masculinity. An audience may thereby perceive a disruption between the male body, playing Dan, and the privileged identity position historically reserved for the white, middle-class male creator that he represents.

Aside from being portrayed as a respected artist, Anna also contrasts with this male figure in her ability to create meaning by and through the spoken word. This is shown in the scene in which she breaks up with Larry, who interrogates her about her affair with Dan. Initially reluctant to respond, the female character ultimately divulges graphic information about her illicit sex life:

LARRY You like his cock?

ANNA I love it.

LARRY You like him coming in your face?

ANNA Yes.

LARRY What does it taste like?

ANNA It tastes like you but sweeter.

(*ibid*: 56)

The male character retains a link to the masculine through being the one positioned to construct the terms of their discussion. Moreover, this duologue provides one of several examples of how the women represented are positioned *between* the men as objects of homosocial exchange (Sedgwick, 1985). It is Dan, after all, who is the subject of Larry's interest. This notwithstanding, it is credible that Anna figures as capable of definitions that may partially transgress a normative feminine role, insofar as her words can be seen to construct both of the male characters. Whilst the desirability of an 'ideal' masculinity is attributed to the absent Dan, Larry's status as a lover is shown to be undermined. Larry's asking about his rival's genitalia has particular pertinence, recalling the way in which possession of the penis cannot ensure the 'having' of the phallus; as Grosz terms it, 'being a man is no guarantee of warding off lack' (Grosz, 1990: 118). In verbally stating a preference for Dan's 'cock' over Larry's, Anna functions to highlight the vulnerable and metonymic status of the penis as phallus, and the potential for crisis inherent in revealing it as such.¹¹

Although her role may therefore be deemed to contain subversive aspects, it is worth noting the resonance between Anna and the 'feminist' characters that feature in the 'nostalgic' novels of Doane and Hodges' analyses. In considering representations of women in these texts, the claim

¹¹ The implication that Larry appears 'in crisis' due to this exchange can be claimed on the basis of his final line, which can be read as a summary of the bitterness and anger he displays throughout the scene: 'Now fuck off and die. You fucked-up slag' (Marber, 1997: 56).

is made that 'successful feminist writers are "unnatural" monsters bent on castrating men' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 40). Anna is, of course, not a writer, and there is little evidence to suggest that the character has feminist sympathies. Nonetheless, she is an artist whose professional and sexual autonomy reflect upon the contemporaneous setting of *Closer*. If the break-up with Larry can be taken to depict a woman who has benefited from feminism symbolically castrating a man, so too does it tally with the more general claim that '[w]hen a woman moves out of her "proper" position [...] she breaks the mirror of mimesis that establishes the "reality" of male identity and shatters the illusion of his superiority' (*ibid*: 57). One might therefore conclude that, like Evelyn, Anna figures to personify second-wave feminism as that which is 'responsible' for the 'crisis' in masculinity, flagging up an additional opportunity to read *Closer* as a nostalgic or reactionary drama.

My reading of the scene between Anna and Larry may seem to contradict the claim that Dan appears as emasculated, insofar as the female character's words authenticate his 'having' of the phallus. However, that 'it is in the place of the Other that the subject gains access to [...the phallus]' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 83) is of pivotal significance here, insofar as Anna's desire for Dan is shown to lack longevity. The first scene in which the audience sees them together as a couple involves a discussion of Dan's sexual failings, prompted by Anna's admittance that she has slept with Larry in order to persuade him to sign their divorce papers:

DAN You fake it with me?
[...]

ANNA Occasionally... I have faked it. It's not important, you don't make me come. I come... you're... 'in the area'... providing valiant assistance.

(Marber, 1997: 73)

The lines that precede this extract echo those of the exchange discussed above, in that Dan fires questions at Anna about the details of her infidelity. Despite the fact that she claims not to have enjoyed the sexual encounter, attempting to downplay the 'other man' in contradistinction to the scene with Larry, the feelings she expresses about Dan bear little resemblance to those she voiced to Larry. These later sentiments concur with the thoughts Anna is seen to air in a conversation with Alice about sex, in which she responds to the claim that '[...] Dan's better' with the words, 'Rubbish, at least Larry's there' (*ibid*: 84). Occurring at a moment in which Anna is still in a relationship with Dan, this line hints at her ultimate preference for, and final return to, Larry. Finally, that Anna discloses information about her sex life with Dan to the other male character is made clear during a scene featuring the two men, in which Larry informs the other, 'Anna tells me you fucked her with your eyes closed' (*ibid*: 88). This takes place after Anna and Larry have been reunited, in the context of Dan unsuccessfully attempting to 'win' her back. In tandem with the other moments I have cited here, it is feasible to conclude that the 'praise' afforded to Dan by Anna is primarily in the interests of undermining Larry's masculinity, which is ultimately re-affirmed by the fact that Anna 'chooses' him in her final move between the two men. That she is positioned to shuttle between two men, represented in competition for her, underpins the homosocial dimension noted above. This further legitimates a reading of the play as comprising a backlash against the

penis/phallus rupture, or 'crisis' in masculinity, insofar as '[t]he circulation of women among men is what establishes [and maintains] the operations of [...] patriarchal society' (Irigaray, 1985 [1977]: 184).

Crucial to this reading of Dan is the fact that he is not privy to Anna's words about him to Larry during their break-up; indeed, his absence is underlined by the fact that the audience see him positioned on stage in another location (his flat), throughout the scene. This staging strategy recalls the argument that '[t]he phallus always belongs somewhere else' as a symbol that 'stands in for the recognition that desire cannot be satisfied' (Homer, 2005: 57). The audience are invited to read Dan as the 'other man' who is capable of fulfilling Anna, yet later moments reveal this capability as flawed.

Closer contains numerous other instances in which the effect of the phallus 'belonging somewhere else' may be seen to be produced. The above citation about Dan's sexual ability is part of a longer exchange constructed between him and Anna, punctuated by flashbacks to her liaison with Larry. In this case, the male characters are not depicted to be in two separate locations simultaneously; rather, the actors take it in turns to appear with the woman playing Anna, 'at a table with a drink' in a restaurant (Marber, 1997: 68), their passing on the stage functioning to signify a change in time and location. Here, the two interconnected duologues work to foreground homosocial bids for phallic validation. Although Anna denies having enjoyed her unseen sexual encounter with Larry, there is some ambiguity apparent in her responses to Dan's

questions. When he asks, 'So you hated every second of it?' the play text indicates that the other's response is non-verbal: Anna merely 'looks at Dan' (*ibid*: 73). It is conceivable that this silence could convey a desire to avoid words that would hurt the other party, thereby underlining the possibility of Larry figuring here as the absent, phallic male. Larry's words to Anna are of comparable note. She responds to the line, 'I love you. Please come back' with further rejection: 'I'm not coming back. She spreads the divorce papers on the table' (*ibid*: 71). That Larry's desire for a 'final fuck' (*ibid*) is drawn in the interests of his masculinity is made plain by the consequences of Anna acquiescing. He asks her, post-coitally, 'Will you tell [...] [Dan]? [...] Better to be truthful about this sort of thing...', and in a later exchange between the two men alone, admits to Dan, 'I fucked her to fuck you up' (*ibid*: 76 and 88). It is Dan and Larry's relationship that may emerge as the most significant here; for, as Gayle Rubin suggests, '[i]f it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it' (Rubin, 1975: 174).

The staging of the restaurant scene can furthermore be seen to play out the notion that the phallus is perpetually elusive, and only ever seemingly possessed by whichever male character is absent. So, for example, although Anna's refusal of Larry may temporarily reify Dan's masculinity whilst he is not depicted on stage, her following admission that 'you don't make me come' rapidly undermines it, in his presence. By presenting both of the male characters thus in this series of exchanges, this scene may be read as subversive, undercutting the certainty or permanence of

identifying with phallic masculinity as a heterosexual male subject. Furthermore, the interlinked themes of desire and fulfilment evincible here can be taken as central to the play as a whole. The notion that the lover that would gratify is perpetually out of reach resonates in the title, which can be read to suggest that there is always the possibility of being 'closer' to someone other than the present (onstage) partner. As in Lacan, desire is thereby delineated as 'demand for love that has no hope of satisfaction' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 82), insofar as this 'demand' is always in the service of an unattainable 'wholeness'.

If the scene above renders masculine identity unstable through both of the male characters, other events reveal divergence in their functions, reinforcing a perception of Dan as emasculated. For aside from the state of his career and relations with Anna, various other facets of the character may register as a break with the hegemonic masculine mould. Following the scene in which he is photographed and rejected by Anna, Dan is pictured initiating cybersex with Larry under her name. Larry, at this point, has yet to meet the 'real' Anna. Positioned in 'separate rooms'—Dan 'in his flat' and the other 'at his hospital desk'—the two type appear to type 'dialogue' that the audience can see 'on a large screen' (Marber, 1997: 21). At variance with the 'verbal savagery' (Brown, 1997: 44) of much of the play's dialogue, the words of this scene comprise 'clichés drawn from the annals of pornographic writing' (Saunders, 2008: 38):

DAN I want 2 suck you senseless.

LARRY B my guest

DAN Sit on my face Fuckboy.

LARRY I'm there

(Marber, 1997: 22)

This representation can be taken as an instance in which Dan is able to 'construct' both Anna and Larry, thereby going some way to secure his phallic masculine status. However, the fact that he creates such meaning in a virtual space only highlights his inability to 'name' through 'actual' interaction. The online liaison is, furthermore, the catalyst that enables Larry and Anna's first meeting; they later share in the private 'joke' of referring to him as 'cupid', whom, as Alice points out to Larry, 'wasn't a bloke' but a 'little boy' (*ibid*: 41 and 62).

As formerly noted, the virtual exchange sees Dan realised through appropriation. Saunders observes that '[he] is not only able to retain his male gender [...] but can simultaneously pose as "Anna" to Larry with the audience aware of both personas' (Saunders, 2008: 37). Although the duality by which Dan appears is a point I would wish to emphasise, the use of the word 'gender' in this description is somewhat problematic. For despite the fact that the spectator can see the male body performing Dan as a signifier of the character's sex, the gendered role he takes on is that of the archetypically insatiable female of pornographic discourse. When asked about 'her' sexual fantasies, 'Anna's' response reads, 'Strangers [...] form a Q and I attend to them like a cum hungry bitch, 1 in each hole and both hands' (Marber, 1997: 24). The male construction of a woman witnessed by the audience thus can be seen as a repetition of a particular female figure, echoing the types of mould in which Alice is cast (especially in her capacity as a stripper). However, that it is a male character who literally performs this role grants this scene a transgressive power. If the

portrayal of Alice may work, in part, to draw attention to the constructed and slippery nature of identity, this effect is all the more pertinent here by operating through a dislocation between the 'male' and the 'masculine'. Whilst the performance of 'Anna' reveals the fictional, male-authored status of the lascivious female 'porn star', the visibility of Dan's maleness foregrounds the possibility of a 'radical splitting' between sex and gender, rendering the latter a 'free-floating artifice' (Butler, 1999: 10). In meeting the 'real' Anna for the first time, Larry expresses his anger and disbelief in finding out that the person with whom he had had cybersex was merely Dan in virtual drag.

LARRY [...] I was talking to a woman.

ANNA How do you know?

LARRY Because... believe me, she was a woman, I got a huge... She was a woman.

ANNA No, she wasn't.

[...]

LARRY What a CUNT.

(Marber, 1997: 28)

The mode of Larry's response feasibly represents the 'threat' to his masculinity contained in the possibility of homosexual desire, and, by extension, the very fragility of the normalised link between gender identity and sexual orientation. As Saunders observes, '[m]ale cross-dressing often hints at a [...] latent homosexuality [...] it is only by recourse to the internet that Dan is able to vicariously explore any homoerotic fantasies' (Saunders, 2008: 38). As the audience know him to represent a heterosexual man, the expression of desire that is conveyed in this exchange might highlight the contingency of heteronormative borders,

just as Larry's cited response may demonstrate the threat of this contingency to masculinity.

Despite the potential for subversion in performance, it is noteworthy that femininity, here, adheres to the Lacanian model of signifying through masquerade, just as it does in the case of Alice. If Dan's (apparently convincing) enacting of a female role works to destabilise the 'having' of masculinity through a binary switch, it does not, necessarily, trouble the privileged gender itself. On the contrary, a reification of masculinity as 'authentic' can be identified, insofar as the scene's success relies on the tension between 'Anna', as artifice and Dan, as 'real'.

The abbreviations or 'text speak' used in this scene reflect upon the contemporary setting of this exchange; indeed, 'theatre-goers in 1997 perhaps for the first time witnessed an onstage representation of two people communicating through the internet' (*ibid*: 8). The presence of this new technology bears relevance to evaluating the extent to which *Closer* might be viewed as a postmodern play text. Certainly, this moment concurs with the Baudrillardian vision of a 'postmodern universe [...] of hyperreality in which [...] communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of [...] everyday life' (Kellner, 1994: 8). Whereas much of the play's dialogue is concerned with discussions of sex, this is the only moment in which the audience actually witness any type of erotic coupling. As one newspaper critic observed, 'women are [...] absent in this most skewed but most successful exchange of intimacies in the play' (Taylor, 1997: 19), a fact which can be

deployed to support the argument that *Closer's* representations of men are privileged over those of the opposite sex. Given the male characters' apparent obsession with being able to sexually satisfy Anna, it is worth noting that it is just in this instance that a character posing as a woman 'appears' to climax, as Dan types: 'Wait, have [sic] to type with 1 hand ... I'm cumming right now... ohohohohohohohohohoho [...] +_)(*&^%\$£!_*)&%^&!""£\$%^^%&^%&&*((*(*)&^%*((£££' (Marber, 1997: 24). Dan is not masturbating at this juncture and the only orgasm in the play is a fake.¹² The way in which this 'climax' signifies underpins the hyperreal quality of the scene. At a distance from verbal or bodily representation, it is drawn to be effective in maintaining dramatic irony; Larry responds with, 'was it good?' and agrees to a meeting with 'Anna' (*ibid*). This representation chimes with Baudrillard's claims of the operations underpinning late twentieth-century western life:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication [...]. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, a [...] perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.
(Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]: 2)

As the only sex scene in a play about sex is virtual, this representation lends itself to be read as a representation of the effective power of proliferating media technologies. There is no 'real' 'Anna' in the world of the play, yet she is a construct that functions catalytically. The fact that she is realised through the virtual plain posits the internet, in this instance, as a medium that invests the action with a source of subversion. If 'the disappearance [...] of the individual' (*ibid*: 162) is partially the consequence of a media-saturated culture, it is this condition that allows

¹² Saunders notes that 'the deception practiced in Dan's virtual orgasm is later humorously revisited when he is wounded to learn that [...] Anna has [...] faked sexual climax [...]' (Saunders, 2008: 39).

performativity to be enacted to seemingly transgressive effect. For, as 'the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of referentials' (*ibid*: 2), it is precisely the absence of a signified 'Anna' that allows for binary systems of gender to be unsettled. Indeed, the very means by which Dan/'Anna' function as a rupture between sexed and gendered identities, depends, here, upon the state of hyperreality in which 'subjectivities are fragmented and lost' (Kellman, 1994: 9).

Should this scene have further resonance with Baudrillardian theory, it is, conversely, in respect of its melancholic aspect. The fact that the only explicit act of intimacy occurs online through deception, may be taken as a lament for the loss of possible, actual 'closeness', against an alienating Jamesonian cityscape. In writing on the nihilism that he perceives to define contemporary culture, Baudrillard asserts that '[m]elancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning' (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]: 162). As this 'disappearance' is aligned with that of 'the social' (*ibid*), the view expressed here pre-figures Saunders's reading of the cybersex event as 'essentially [sterile]' and imbued with a 'sense of human isolation' (Saunders, 2008: 39). In evoking the characters' separate environments, the distance and lack of literal interplay between the two actors is a visual element that reiterates this idea.

Despite the lack of 'real' sexual contact elsewhere, the stage picture of the internet scene is at odds with those in which fleeting moments of intimacy take place. For example, when Alice and Larry meet during their affair, the stage directions indicate that 'They kiss, warmly' (Marber, 1997: 77).

Whilst the virtual 'intimacy' represented may be taken as a paradox, a pretence, through drag, that only serves to distance, heterosexual closeness in 'the real' remains the desirable goal. Such success, as I have outlined, enables the validation of phallic masculinity, underscoring the fact that this 'real' is synonymous with heteronormative hegemony; 'feminisation' (Dan as 'Anna'), on the other hand, signifies its loss (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 141), as may also be the case in *Shape*. It is thereby possible to conclude that this scene takes on a melancholic postmodern agenda, nostalgically reifying a 'real' in which masculinist sex/gender positions are secure and consistent.

The only scene in which the two male characters are 'actually' pictured alone together unfolds in Larry's 'sleek' private surgery (Marber, 1997: 87), not long before the end of the play. Their meeting is shown to be instigated by Dan, whose first line reveals to the audience that his lover has returned to the other man: 'I want Anna back' (*ibid*: 86). What follows is an exchange in which, through various strategies, Larry's masculinity can be seen to be authenticated at the expense of the other character. Dependent on the way in which the encounter is staged, Dan may be perceived to figure in a position of weakness before any words are spoken. Whilst 'Larry is seated at his desk', he is 'standing, distraught' and, as at Anna's gallery exhibition earlier, set against evidence of the other's professional success. Larry makes the comment, early on, that he '[looks] like shit' (*ibid*: 86).¹³ Concomitant with such scenes as those in which Anna is questioned about her affairs, and evoking parallels with *Shape*, truth and

¹³ The film version of *Closer* showed Jude Law, as Dan, walking through the rain to Larry's surgery. Thus, by the time the characters are in conversation, Dan appeared all the more pathetic for being utterly soaked.

knowledge surface as hurtful weapons throughout the unfolding dialogue. For example, Larry initially denies the sexual liaison he had with Alice after being left by Anna, admitting, at the end of the scene, 'I did fuck Alice. [...] I'm just not big enough to forgive you' (*ibid*: 93). Here, Larry's voicing of apparent 'facts' grants him phallic power. That this can be read as a means by which he seeks to emasculate Dan is perhaps shown most pertinently by the revelation that 'Anna [...] tells me you wake in the night, crying for your dead mother. You mummy's boy' (*ibid*: 88–89). Aside from demonstrating exclusive knowledge of both of the women, Larry appears to be the more authoritative in his opinions of them. When Dan asserts that Alice got her scar through being in a car crash, the other contradicts him by detailing 'a [medical] condition called "dermatitis artefacta"' in the case of which, 'The patient manufactures his or her very own skin disease' (*ibid*: 89). Larry's ongoing assessment of Alice concludes thus:

LARRY [...] She didn't want to be put in a book, she wanted to be loved.

DAN How do you know?

Beat.

LARRY Clinical observation.

[...]

Dan breaks down, uncontrollably.

(*ibid*: 90)

That Dan is reduced to tears is a pertinent example of his being dislocated from an 'ideal' masculinity, both in terms of its denoting his inability to speak, and as an 'unmanly' act. This is a moment that sees the other onstage character deploy his professional knowledge to secure his 'victory', and its effect is repeated at the end of the scene when Larry writes Alice's work address upon his pad and presents it to Dan as 'your prescription' (*ibid*: 91). In reifying his right to name, Larry also functions to

reduce Alice to a remedy: a further means by which she can be seen to figure through objectification and, like Anna, as an object of exchange.

As Larry calls upon the status afforded him by his job, so too does he use the fact of Dan's against him. When the latter states, 'You think the heart is a diagram?' Larry is heard to retort,

Ever seen a human heart? It looks like a fist wrapped in blood. Go
FUCK YOURSELF... you... WRITER. You LIAR. Go check a few facts
while I get my hands dirty.
(*ibid*: 88)

The dissimilarity between them is underlined by the fact of Dan's 'day job' as an obituarist: the audience know at this point that his 'deep freeze' is 'a computer' on which he can 'find [...] [a] dead person's life' (*ibid*: 6), and not something that contains anything corporeal. It is thereby possible to see Larry's profession as a means to underline his association with the masculine realms of 'truth' and 'the real', as distinct from Dan's link with the 'feminine' site of representation. As a successful masculine identity is aligned with economic and (hetero)sexual achievements, this aspect of the play may be seen to repeat key patriarchal norms. Furthermore, as Larry is depicted alongside an emasculated male in a state of desperation, one might perceive this scene to represent a backlash against a result of the perceived 'feminisation' of society, recalling the potential effect of the cybersex exchange. Just as Adam's pliability renders him heartbroken and alone at the end of *Shape*, being 'more feminine' sees Dan suffer symbolic castration through professional and personal failure.

This argument can be supported by reference to the conclusion of *Closer*, in which no ambiguity is left as to the position of each character in relation

to the other three. As I shall outline, the play's definitive close evokes Doane and Hodges claims of 'nostalgic' texts in which the ending is 'never [...] open', and 'meant to provide the definitive answer to the threat of women's desire' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 42–43) in the phallogentric economy. Having been left by Anna and reunited with Alice, Dan quizzes her about the relationship she has had with Larry. Once again concerned with establishing the facts of a particular coupling, Dan's repeated desire to know the 'truth', in this instance, culminates in Alice asserting, 'I don't love you any more' (Marber, 1997: 100) and the couple breaking up for the final time. Once again, Dan's creative inability is brought to the fore, and, as with Anna earlier, can be seen as interlinked with his incompetence as a partner. Alice greets the insistence that he is in love with her by asking 'Where is this love? [...] I can hear some words but I can't do anything with your easy words' (*ibid*: 101). The scene closes with her asking, 'Do you have a single original thought in your head?' (*ibid*: 105). In line with my reading of comparable scenes, Alice's refusal to satisfy his questioning and continue their relationship is a strategy by which she is positioned to thwart his claim to masculinity. By the end of the play, then, Dan is shown to be single and doubly rejected, both by a woman he stated a desire to marry, and one whom might be defined as only ever his 'second choice'. This places him in contrast to Larry, who leaves Alice for Anna and then terminates his relationship with the latter, as the final scene reveals. At this point he is in a relationship with another woman, whom it appears may have prompted his break-up with Anna; when Larry advises her, 'Don't give your love to a dog,' she replies, 'Well, you didn't want it, in the end' (*ibid*: 105). If Larry's ability to both regain and reject Anna can be read as a

definitive 'victory' over Dan, it is one compounded by the fact that he has secured the desire of somebody else. Larry is the one who ultimately shapes both Anna's fate and his own.

This conclusion sees a closing down of the female characters as subversive functions. Indeed, it is possible to surmise that their final states represent a reaction against a loss of phallic power and sexually autonomous women. While Anna has been rejected, Alice's final scene sees her hit by Dan once she has finished their relationship. This occurs several minutes after she states, 'Fuck me', to which he says, 'Again?' (*ibid*: 94). Having asserted the right to make choices about their sexual relations, the female characters are ultimately 'punished'. In so doing, the final reactions of the men to their one-time partners bear out the notion that 'female sexual energy and aggression is dangerous to male potency and authority' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 31). As it is also at the close that Alice is posthumously revealed as 'Jane', the shifting identities of this character are replaced by a 'truth' permanently fixed by the fact of her death. Essence thus displaces performativity in the final moments.

This analysis of the ending positions *Closer* as a play that rehearses normative sexist values. Should a certain nostalgia be deemed inherent to this aspect, it is through evidence of a crisis within the male subject's access to an 'ideal' masculinity, a theme I would suggest persists until the final curtain. Although Dan may temporarily appear 'less feminine' through exerting physical power over Alice, he is finally at a contrasting distance from Larry. The 'victory' of the men is limited to one of its

representatives. It is also important to establish that there are certain limitations to Larry's final 'success': when Anna asks if his new girlfriend is 'the one', he answers, 'I don't know' (Marber, 1997: 104). Once again, a fulfilling heterosexual 'closeness' is deferred, and, with it, the assurance of a complete or perpetual masculine identity within the phallic economy. Such factors can be seen to construct the play as a lament for the perceived loss of 'fixed sexual difference' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 7) between men and women; certainties about gendered subject positions that would appear to allow for the possibility of being 'closer'. There is, then, credibility in suggesting that the close of the play perpetuates the notion of an 'authentic' (white, heterosexual, middle-class) masculinity as something both lost and desirable.

Analysis of *The Shape of Things*

Although the shifting relationships in *Closer* are played out rather less ambiguously than those of the other play, *Shape* includes hints, many of which figure as subtext, that point to the occurrence of sexual encounters and attractions not played out before the audience. For example, towards the end of a scene in which Jenny and Adam — both in relationships with other people — are positioned to have a conversation about the former's love-life, they kiss. When she informs him that, 'I've wanted to do that for a long time', he responds by saying, 'me too. [...] And now we take it out in the woods and bury it... don't we?' (LaBute, 2001: 57). At the close of the scene, Adam's words are echoed by Jenny ('[...] come on, we should go bury this. Out in the woods...'), before the stage instructions denote that 'they kiss again, then stand up slowly and walk off. She puts an arm

through his' (*ibid*: 58). Although there is no subsequent point in the play at which it is established, definitively, that the two had sex, there are moments which suggest as much. For example, having been seen to inform Adam that Jenny told him about the kiss, in a scene featuring only the two male characters, Philip presses him: '[...] nothing else happened, right, [...] between you and Jenny?', to which 'Adam stops cold [as if he has walked] right into a trap' (*ibid*: 83). Comparatively, in the same exchange, Philip tells Adam, 'I might even kiss you, with a few drinks in me' (*ibid*), a verbal suggestion of an attraction that tallies with hints of his jealousy over Evelyn's influence.¹⁴ As the details of what Jenny and Adam did 'in the woods' remain unconfirmed, so too does the implication that Philip has homosexual desires.

Both of these instances, in which a relation or attraction is suggested but not confirmed verbally, underline the Lacanian notion that desire cannot be contained in language:

as long as his needs are subjected to demand they return to him alienated, [...the unspeakable excess of which is repressed and] reappears in a residue which then presents itself in man as desire.
(Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 80)

One could argue that this theory is never fully put to the test inasmuch as the characters are not shown (like *Closer's* Dan) to attempt to put their 'true' feelings into words. Adam is never heard to say to Jenny that they should have sex, while Philip's comment is conditional: he only 'might' kiss Adam, and would have to be drunk to do so. It is possible to read what happens next as an attempt to show Philip undermining the

¹⁴ These can be claimed on the basis of the way in which Philip responds to the aesthetic changes that occur in Adam, to which I will return.

possibility of his being serious. When Adam responds by 'laughing' and saying, 'I'll [...] hide the liquor', the other responds, 'Please, I'll help you!' (LaBute, 2001: 83).

This notwithstanding, the very fact that the 'demands' represented in the characters are conveyed through suggestion may highlight the degree to which 'desires' are unconscious and perpetually displaced by spoken expression. Of course, it is possible to discern that Adam does get that which he desires in the form of some sort of sexual intimacy with Jenny. However, he is not shown as capable of putting into words that which he seems to want, beyond metaphorical implication. '[The] effects [...] [of language] are determinant in the institution of the subject', the 'having' of the phallus granting the male an advantage contingent on his fulfilling a normative masculine gender role termed, by Lacan, as the 'ideal type of his sex' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 79 and 75). In the scene with Jenny, Adam's appearance has already changed owing to Evelyn's 'sculpting' of him, prompting the former to pass comment on his transformation. That Adam is, in this sense, in the process of being 'feminised' is commensurate with the way he looks to be emasculated by not being able to convey a 'meaning' that one could read as transparent, in terms of the psychological realism in which he is conceived.

This point may be underlined if one compares Adam's words, in the scene with Jenny, with those given to Evelyn at the later moment in which she reveals to have kissed Philip. In a conversation with Adam and Jenny, she makes assertions that the pair interpret as her wishing to know the truth

about what happen between them. When Jenny responds by saying, 'What do you want to hear? We kissed', Evelyn states, '[...] I meant about my kiss. With Philip' (LaBute, 2001: 103). Although Evelyn and Philip's encounter is likewise not witnessed by the audience, this direct report of it is in contrast to the metaphorical innuendo that precedes Adam and Jenny's.¹⁵ Furthermore, Adam's response to Philip's enquires about what happened between him and Jenny, noted above, is bodily rather than verbal (he merely 'stops cold' [*ibid*: 83]). It is discernable, therefore, that Evelyn is shown to be able to 'formulate meaning' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 13) more transparently than Adam, a capability that tallies with Bigsby's suggestion that 'language [...] is her primary tool' (Bigsby, 2007: 93). A female artist is thus paired opposite a male whose relationship to masculinity appears impaired by her claim on the Symbolic. To this effect, Evelyn and Adam are comparable, respectively, to Anna and Dan in *Closer*.

Doane and Hodges argue that, as the binary opposite of male characters with masculine attributes, representations of the 'female [...] [are aligned with] image (which is opposed to reality) [and] fiction (which is opposed to "truth")' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 9). These associations appear to be reified by *Shape* as they are in *Closer*, in that it is Evelyn's lies that stand as the play's catalyst, and are therefore key to the female character's function.¹⁶ The way in which Adam and Evelyn speak (or don't speak) about their respective infidelities also comprise an example of how it is the

¹⁵ This argument might be undermined by the possibility that an audience would suspect Evelyn of lying. However, during a later scene, Philip is seen to offer Adam an apology that shores up her claims: 'I'm sorry about that. I was pissed off, but, I mean... no call for that "eye for an eye" shit' (LaBute, 2001: 114)

¹⁶ Whereas Evelyn's 'relationship' with Adam not only changes him, but affects Jenny and Philip and relations between the three, Alice's construction of herself and initial meeting with Dan is what sets into motion the subsequent action of *Closer*.

female character who figures as the far more articulate of the two. This notion finds support in an early scene set in Philip's flat, in which a discussion about the 'defacement' of the nude statue descends into an argument between Philip and Evelyn. While she is heard to make confident remarks ('Of course, that's the beauty of statements, like art, they're subjective'), he resorts to derogatory comments, including 'Adam, you can really pick 'em' (LaBute, 2001: 33 and 35). Adam figures to have no opinion; only a desire to diffuse the situation. Lines of his, such as 'Look, Phil, it's no big deal, let's just...' are structured to be interrupted (*ibid*: 35). In a further echo of Anna in *Closer*, this facet of Evelyn tallies with her position of artist as potential controller of a discursive power which is 'always phallic' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 26). As she is associated with the masculine here, Adam is aligned to the feminine. This concept evokes Doane and Hodges' comments on the murder of a female character in the novel *Confessions of a Lady-Killer*, by George Stade (1979). As in *Shape*, this American, male-authored text relies upon psychological realism in its portrayal of white Western characters. Here, it is in her death that one of the women represented 'becomes [...] silent and [...] truly feminine' (*ibid*: 31), underscoring the correlation between the subject who cannot, or struggles to speak, and patriarchal notions of an 'ideal' femininity. Adam's inarticulacy, by extension, can be seen as in keeping with the way in which, like *Closer's* Alice, he is 'feminised' as a work of art, and literally objectified. A transgressive quality may be evinced in this reversal of binary gender roles.

If the Lacanian phallus is the controlling signifier of linguistic meaning, it is Evelyn that can thus be seen to 'have' it through her position as an artist. The construction of Adam, concomitantly, resonates with the concept of the female subject who does not have, but 'is', the phallus. Lacan notes that 'in order to be [...] the signifier of the desire of the Other [...] the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity [...] through masquerade' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 84). It is in a male character that the possibility of signifying as 'the desire of the Other' is played out through considerable (and mainly aesthetic) changes. Despite admitting to having been attracted to him for a long time, it is only when Adam appears differently that Jenny actually kisses him. Hence, it is through being depicted as something other than that the audience initially see that Adam functions as a phallic symbol of heterosexual desire. As it is an onstage man to whom the feminine trait of changeability is ascribed, the presence of masquerade provides a point of contrast between this play and *Closer*. If the taking on of the role of 'Anna' constructs Dan as changeable while simultaneously affirming the masculine realm as one of 'reality' and 'truth', Adam's malleability sees a 'real' break with what is conveyed as an well-established identity.

The character is first presented as an unfashionable 'geek' who is overweight, bites his nails, wears glasses, and 'never got up the nerve' to ask Jenny for a date before she met Philip (LaBute, 2001: 29). His shyness is established from the outset, when he meets Evelyn in the museum in which he works. When she gets too close to a sculpture, the lines that

follow — the first of the play — can be seen to set the precedent for this trait, and the way in which it is figured in contrast to Evelyn's confidence:

ADAM You stepped over the line. Miss? / Umm, you stepped over...

EVELYN I know. / It's 'Ms.'

ADAM Okay, sorry, Ms., but, ahh...

EVELYN I meant to.

(*ibid*: 1)

As with the scene in which Evelyn is seen to argue with Philip, the incomplete and disfluent lines assigned to Adam are consistent with the awkwardness he is shown to display throughout, at least, the play's opening few scenes. It is arguable that an audience would read this persona as deep-seated given the way in which they see his friends respond with surprise to the changes that occur in him. For example, in noticing that his fingernails have grown, Jenny exclaims, 'You have nails! This is crazy... [...] ever since I've known you, three years now, your fingers've looked like raw meat... [...] and now you just quit?!' (*ibid*: 55). Philip is likewise shown to struggle to believe that Adam has replaced his jacket with a new one, having begun to date Evelyn: 'You've had that frumpy-looking fucker for three years, probably more, and I've never seen you out of it. Ever' (*ibid*: 87). Despite the changes that take place, various parts of Adam's 'original' character can still be traced after his transformation has begun. His quoting of canonical literary texts, for example, recurs in duologues with Evelyn, from the opening scene through to the final moments. Although Adam does display the confidence to kiss Jenny, it is only after she, first, has ventured to kiss him on the cheek. By the end of the play, when Adam finds out that he has been the subject of Evelyn's project, it is possible to read the way in which

he is portrayed as that of a character 'reverting to type'. Having lost weight through eating healthily, he 'stuffs a few cookies in his pocket' and, in the closing moments of the play, 'pulls on his old jacket' (*ibid*: 123 and 138).

By contrast, Philip appears resistant to the possibility of changing. Jenny describes him to Adam as 'six "things" away from being amazing' and, having terminated their engagement by the penultimate scene of the play, her final line to him includes the words 'you never change' (*ibid*: 94 and 115). This aspect of Philip may underline the argument that, after the Lacanian model of femininity, being available to alter is necessary for the men represented here to be 'desired as well as loved' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 84), an idea that further sees the play align with a Baudrillardian vision of feminisation. That it is in the character of Adam, however, that change is wrought, is significant in respect of how masculinity is configured in *Shape*. Unlike Philip, his 'geekiness' is constructed in part by various characteristics normatively associated with femininity. First, he is a student of English Literature: a subject that is commonly perceived as 'feminine' in opposition to such 'masculine' disciplines as mathematics and science. Second, his awkwardness is complemented by a sensitivity made most explicit in the scene between him and Jenny, in which he engages empathetically with her concerns over her relationship with Philip. This encounter may be read in contradistinction to all of the other scenes that depict a man and a woman alone together, both in this play and *Closer*. For example, when Jenny concludes her concerns about Philip's fidelity with the words, '[...] I'm just being stupid', Adam

responds with, 'Look, if you feel it, it's not stupid' (LaBute, 2001: 51). In response to his supportive behaviour, Jenny tells Adam he is 'lovely'. This contrasts with her view of Philip, whom Jenny asserts could not be defined as 'sweet' (*ibid*: 48). Adam responds to her compliment with the words, "'Lovely?'" Jesus, why don't you just call me gay and get it over with?' (*ibid*: 53). In line with my reading, this scene underpins how Adam's identity is constituted through associations with the feminine.

It might be valid to argue that such a portrayal of the heterosexual male subject is progressive, especially in light of the 'masculine qualities' that I have suggested appear in Evelyn: gender identities, in this capacity, are not determined absolutely by the 'facts' of anatomical sex, even if the masculine attributes applied to the female character and vice versa constitute a switch which does not deconstruct the binary. However, this transgressiveness has its limitations. First, as noted above, the construction of Evelyn reifies the notion of the deceptive female archetype. Second, that Adam is depicted with 'feminine' traits can be claimed as a means by which he is then made available to be altered, to 'masquerade'. To this extent, then, masculinity itself is not problematised. On the contrary, the fact that the 'masculine' attributes ascribed to Evelyn enable her to appear as 'having' the phallus only reinforce the privileged relation of a masculine identity to the transcendental signifier, and the signifier's hegemonic power in '[governing] the relations between the sexes' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 83). Doane and Hodges underline the limitations of such a '[...] reversal of [...] phallic power', in arguing that: 'women in power will be just like men, sexuality will still be phallic, a matter of domination and

submission. In other words, everything still revolves around the phallus' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 25). If Evelyn figures, in a certain sense, in a masculine role, the fact of the stereotypical female traits with which she is invested can be seen to point to some notion of an 'authentic' gender identity, collapsing the fact of her representing a woman with associative facets of femininity, and thereby working to naturalise the latter. If this is the case, it can be viewed as a means by which she is distanced from the patriarchal privileges afforded to the male subject as the 'real' or legitimate bearer of the phallus.

With this in mind, a consideration of Philip is valid at this juncture. That this character, the more 'masculine' of the two male figures, does not appear to change, might be read as a strategy deployed to guarantee the security of hegemonic masculinity. This can be perceived despite the fact that the audience witnesses Philip being visibly affected by the agency of Evelyn and subsequent alterations in Adam. For instance, in noticing that Adam has a new jacket that he bought on the basis of Evelyn's approval, Philip's words to him look to be marked by aggression:

well, isn't that just neat? And [...] whatever other [...] shit you wanna spout [...] I begged you to throw out the farm coat our freshman year [...] so do me a little favour and let's not pretend that [...] [it's] no big deal.
(LaBute, 2001: 87–88)

If the 'crisis' in masculinity can be discerned in the play, it is, in no small part, through Philip's disconcerted manner. The changes that he witnesses can be seen as proof of the changeability of the male subject, and, by extension, the contingency and constructedness of all gendered positions. The 'threat' of feminisation figures here, then, as a feeling of insecurity

'that comes when identity, so long linked to sexual difference, begins to slip' (Doane and Hodges, 1987: 140). Although, as with Dan, the heterosexuality invested in Philip is never substantially put into question, his apparent jealousy of Evelyn, and the suggestion that he 'might' kiss Adam recalls the homoeroticism which can be traced in *Closer's* cybersex scene. For just as Dan's performing of a female both troubles his and Larry's masculinity, the fact that Philip's comment is motivated by a process of feminisation points to the vulnerability of the masculine, and its dependence upon excluding same-sex desire.

Without refuting the subversive capacity of Philip, there is only one line in which he indicates that he may find Adam attractive, and he is sexually linked to three women (the third being an ex with whom he cheated on Jenny, as she details whilst confiding in Adam). The consistency with which Philip is portrayed may, then, still be perceived to evince a nostalgic assertion of an 'authentic' and enduring white masculinity. The fact that he does not change despite his response to Adam can stand as a masculinist backlash against both the possibility of feminisation and (what features here as) the embodiment of masculine characteristics in the female subject. As the former of these two concepts is conveyed through the actions of a strong, female character, it might be feasible to suggest that feminisation and a product of feminism — if Evelyn, like Anna, can be read to represent the latter — are collapsed into one another by virtue of her construction, underscoring the link with Baudrillardian theory. Even in the face of such a 'threat', the personification of normative masculinity endures in the figure of Philip. That the hierarchical relations of

masculinity and femininity are not only left untroubled but reified by this play can be discerned, furthermore, by recalling the way in which I have argued that the 'femininity' attached to Adam is that which enables him to be changeable, while the 'masculinity' of Evelyn enables her to do the changing. This notion also concurs with Baudrillard's claim that '[a]ll that is *produced* [...] falls within the register of masculine power' (Baudrillard, 1990 [1979]: 15, my emphasis). Thus, the play can be seen to reinforce the central and unshifting nature of the phallic economy: everything 'still revolves around the phallus' as 'a term privileging masculinity' (Grosz, 1990: 122).

In arguing for the way in which the exclusivity of phallic power is perpetuated by *Shape*, it is worth exploring further the construction of the relationship between the play's two female characters. Another connection between Evelyn and *Closer*'s Alice is interlinked with their shared capacity for deception: the former, too, appears to 'make herself up':

[w]ho is Evelyn? She offers Adam one version of herself. She is, she explains, twenty-five years old, with a history of self-mutilation and [...] Jewish parents. At the end of the play she insists that she is twenty-two, non-Jewish, and despite what appear to be scars on her wrists, had never mutilated herself. Which is the truth?
(Bigsby, 2007: 91–92)

That the 'truth' is never ultimately confirmed may appear to figure somewhat subversively; like *Closer*, 'the extent to which character is a performance and identity a construct' (*ibid.*: 87) can be traced here. However, whereas the ambiguities that surround Alice arise from a series of female archetypes to potentially transgressive effect, Evelyn ultimately provides Adam with all the apparent 'facts' about herself. Following the degree show speech in which, amongst other things, she indicates that the

engagement ring that belonged to Adam's grandmother will comprise part of the exhibit, it is hard to conceive that she has any further care for his opinion of her. It is therefore credible that what she finally reveals about herself is the truth; yet, like Bigsby, a spectator may leave a performance uncertain. Indeed, even if an audience member did feel sure of one version of Evelyn, the capacity for her figure as a 'shape shifter' (*ibid*: 92) is a device that sees the play further foreground identity as contingent.

In terms of Evelyn's acquaintance with Jenny, there is, as with Anna and Alice, little suggestion of any interest between the women, or investment in one another unrelated to the two men depicted. In the first scene in which they are together, at a dinner party, Jenny only comes to address Evelyn in response to Philip's claim that he 'stole Jenny away from Adam': '(to Evelyn) Adam and I had had a class together, but he never got up the nerve to ask me out' (LaBute, 2001: 38–39). When the four discuss the 'defacement' of the statue, Evelyn responds to Jenny's single observation, 'it was pornography' (*ibid*: 32), interrogatively, in an attempt to make her justify her claim:

EVELYN [...] Jenny, did you like what you saw? Did it get you hot?

PHILIP [...] All she said was...

EVELYN I know what she said, why don't you let her speak? (To Jenny) Did you wanna say anything else, huh? Okay, then.

(*ibid*: 33)

Although this could look to position Evelyn as encouraging another woman to speak, that this exchange is a means by which she figures to embarrass Jenny can be argued on the basis of the preceding dialogue.

When the topic of the statue first arises, Jenny's use of the word 'penis' is voiced in a whisper, something Philip explains to Evelyn by stating, '[...] you don't say "penis" in Jenny's house' (*ibid*: 30). In tandem with the fact that Jenny only makes a single comment in the following discussion, it is clear that Evelyn is made aware of her shy and conservative nature. Her questioning, therefore, can be read as wholly unsympathetic. As with Anna and Alice, this first scene in which the female characters are positioned together establishes an uneasy relationship between them. That this suggests that Adam and Philip are all they share in common is underlined by the dialogue of the only scene in which they are featured alone. Despite Jenny asking Evelyn about the progress of her work, their conversation soon shifts to focus on Adam and Philip before the former joins them. The very fact of his intrusion is also significant in being comparable to the two exchanges between the women in *Closer*, which occur after Dan, in one instance, and Larry, in the other, has left them alone together. There is no complete scene in either play that does not include at least one of the male characters: a fact which caters to the argument that heterosexual coupling is less a theme than a vehicle for representations of white male subjects.

As with Evelyn's power over Adam, her dominant position in relation to Jenny does nothing to subvert the way in which representations of gender remain within a phallic paradigm. The absence of female same-sex desire is important in this context. To quote Lacan:

[...] masculine homosexuality, in accordance with the phallic mark that constitutes desire, is constituted on its axis, whereas the orientation of feminine homo-sexuality [...] follows from a disappointment which reinforces the side of the demand for love.
(Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 85)

If lesbianism is the result of a 'disappointment' with phallic desire, rather than a pleasure in a different desire, it is defined as existing outside the former system as a negative. As Butler outlines, perhaps it is because of the potentially disruptive force that such a desire may represent that female homosexuality is not conceived of as a desire at all, but rather as 'a demand for love that is pursued at the expense of desire' (Butler, 1999: 62). That Lacan does not venture to consider the possibility of an alternative economy in which lesbian desire may figure as such results in 'the desexualised status of the lesbian' (*ibid*: 63). The positioning of the lesbian subject thus is commensurate with the way in which I have read *Shape* as a reiteration of phallic power. That there is no depiction of desire between Evelyn and Jenny (or, for that matter, between Anna and Alice) means there is no possibility of desire that is other than phallogentric. Hence, the phallus and its binary organising of gendered subjects 'around a being and a having' (Lacan, 1982 [1966]: 83) are left intact.

The ending of the play, as with that of *Closer*, sees a shutting off of its subversive elements. If the verbal and physical attack on *Oleanna's* Carol represents a symbolic retaliation against the affective power of feminism, the backlash in *Shape* occurs somewhat differently, despite the comparable misogyny directed at the figure of Evelyn. In addressing this, it is worthwhile highlighting a dialectical quality enabled by the play's penultimate scene. Evelyn's introduction of her work was delivered as direct address for the play's premiere and subsequent New York production, with the other three actors seated in the auditorium so that '[the] audience for her exhibit becomes the audience who's watching the

show' (Bigsby, 2007: 98). In allowing for the delivery of a long monologue that would perhaps take ten or fifteen minutes to perform, this mode of staging foregrounds both the female character's voice and perspective in a way that may well have been detracted from if Adam's reactions were visible to all, on stage. Like some of the intertextual references, this points to the play of meta-theatricality in *Shape*, reminding the spectator that 'the play is no less a construction than the project [...] Evelyn undertook' (*ibid*: 99). Simultaneously, this forum allowed for audience members to respond directly to the events they had seen. Bigsby notes that they 'frequently' took this opportunity, '[w]hether [...] [to say] "Hey, you want to do that to me?" or [...] "Why are you such a bitch?"' (*ibid*: 98). While the character is positioned to enable an explanation of her actions, one could argue that she is also 'put on trial', facing the possibility of abuse in the moment at which her mendacity is revealed. In this sense, a staging aspect with inherently transgressive qualities may also be read as one that invites the condemnation of a female drawn to stray into 'masculine' territory.

Ultimately, however, the chance to undermine patriarchal norms is stemmed, and the final image with which the audience is greeted works to privilege Adam's suffering. After Evelyn has left him alone in the gallery, he is positioned 'huddling [...] on the ground' (LaBute, 2001: 138). Krasner argues that '[a] silent body onstage can generate an intense relationship with an audience. When it is represented as a body in pain it can embrace empathy' (Krasner, 2006: 148). Although Adam's 'pain' is psychological, it is credible that this moment would induce such a response. He is a hurt and isolated figure who, like Dan, can be read to symbolise the results of

feminisation. In representing Western men in such a state of distress, *Shape*, like *Closer*, appears to validate the existence of a 'crisis' in masculinity, recalling postmodern nostalgia for the 'death of the (white, male, heterosexual) subject'. This legitimates an assessment of both plays as overwhelmingly masculinist, and evocative of the 'backlash' discourse. Here, too, are the perceived effects of feminism cast as the cause of problematic ruptures in hegemonic masculinity.

The 'Crisis', the Closet and Queer

Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

Introduction

The gay male subject, homosexual identity and same-sex desire are at the forefront of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004) and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (*Angels*) (1992 and 1994). 'Positioned towards the start of the Thatcher regime' (Taylor, 2004: 2), the historical setting of *The History Boys* parallels that of the other play, for which 'Reagan's presidency and the neoconservative hegemony of the 1980s provides [...] the background' (Savran, 1995: 227). Concomitant with these contexts and the title of the British play, history features as a central theme that comprises a further point of convergence between the dramas.

The History Boys and *Angels* will be read as case studies of mainstream plays that offer treatments of gay Western men, and, more broadly, gay and queer (male) identities, cultures and histories, to evaluate cultural engagements with the 'crisis' in masculinity. Key to this analysis is a consideration of whether or not each play stands to reinforce or undermine the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1993) that underpins the hegemonic masculine script. This will be enabled through applying a strand of Butlerian queer theory to discuss the extent to which each drama may be deemed nostalgic for the 'secure',

historically abject position of the gay subject, or celebratory of those late twentieth-century shifts by which masculinity and 'othered' gendered identities might stand to be reconfigured. In order to unpack these concepts, and provide a historical/theoretical framework for the chapter at large, an account of the impact of gay and queer activism will precede an introduction to *The History Boys* and *Angels*. Not least as both of the plays are set in the 1980s, this section will emphasise the relationship of AIDS to queer projects, aesthetics and theory.

Following these introductions, surveys of relevant playwriting trajectories will be informed by reference to recent conceptualisations of homosexuality, abjection, the closet and queer, by such theorists as Foucault, Edwards, Sedgwick and Jonathan Dollimore, in order that some sense of a relevant 'gay history' can emerge. With this broad terrain as backdrop, the two play texts under analysis may be considered as part of a historically subjugated or 'hidden' trope. The central theme of history shared by the dramas will be next addressed, a section that will encompass an assessment of their relationship to the postmodern. For, if postmodernism comprises 'a kind of stylistic opening for a gay/lesbian presence' (Roof, 1997: 177), the degree to which each play might be seen as such will be approached with an awareness of what is, at least, the *potential* for subversion inherent in so doing. Simultaneously, however, the reactionary potential of a postmodern aesthetic or sensibility will be kept in mind, with reference, in part, to discourses on the 'end of history'. Postmodernity may appear to allow for the reclamation of gay histories through the 'splintering autonomy of micronarratives' (Connor, 1989: 32) that disrupt the singular, 'linear logic' (Felski, 2000: 2) central to

modernist notions of history. However, if, as Francis Fukuyama claims, this state comes to denote a 'de-ideologized world' that is the 'end point of mankind's [...] evolution' (Fukuyama, 1989: 15 and 4), or 'the end of philosophy' (Jameson, 1998: 3), it may represent a threat to those continually marginalised identities for which history and ideology are imperative tools for progress, thereby condoning the perpetuation of patriarchal hierarchies. As Stuart Sim succinctly states, '[t]o abolish history is at the same time to abolish the possibility of political change' (Sim, 1999: 25). The relevance of the 'end of history' is further validated by the socio-political contexts in which each of the case studies are set: Western capitalist, liberal democracies that Fukuyama defines as 'the final form of human government' (Fukuyama, 1989: 4). That the representations of such an infrastructure determines the position of the gay subjects it hosts, is something for which I will argue during the analyses of the plays. As the Butlerian theory to be used here can be read, in part, as a critique of this political model, the focus upon history will serve as a link to the subsequent discussion of each of the plays in turn.

Gay activism, AIDS and queer

Commensurate with philosophical tropes that proclaimed the 'death' of the (white, middle-class, heterosexual male) subject, the political activism of the late 1960s and 1970s furthered socio-political rights for lesbians and gays in the UK and US. Such movements as the Gay Liberation Front, first formed in New York in 1969 and taken up in London one year later, signalled an 'assertion of self-worth' (Edwards, 1994: 26) on the part of a historically subjugated minority. Citing Lyotard, Judith Roof makes the claim that 'the loss of 'legitimizing metanarratives' [...] would seem to permit the emergence

of homosexualities as subject positions' (Roof, 1997: 177). If these 'positions' came to figure as doubt was cast over the notion of a 'natural' or fixed subjecthood, they may be deemed part of a postmodern, deconstructive apparatus and, thus, a catalyst for the 'crisis' in masculinity.

It is in respect of this apparatus that the possibility for gay subjecthood anticipated the rise of queer cultural undertakings and theory. From the 1980s in particular, discursive and political queer projects sought to denaturalise and dismantle (hetero)normative binaries, with an awareness that 'many of the major nodes of thought [...] in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured [...] by a chronic, endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male' (Sedgwick, 1990: 1). While queer sought the critical scrutiny of other patriarchal binaries, the focus of Sedgwick's comment is of particular relevance. Given the historical backdrop of gay rights activism, queer emerged as something of a paradox: both a strategy to foreground the constructed, changeable nature of 'an abiding [...] self' (Butler, 1988: 519), in a bid to critique systems of naturalised 'otherness', and a potential 'erasure of [those very] identity categories' (Roof, 1997: 181) only attainable, for some, after 'several decades of struggle' (*ibid*). A question posed by Lisa Duggan encapsulates this concern: 'if we [as gay subjects] fracture into the multiplicity of identities [...] invoked by the term "queer", what are the implications [...] for unified or coherent political action?' (Duggan, 1996: xi).¹ This notwithstanding, the fact that the rise of queer was informed by the AIDS epidemic, points to the former's progressive and subversive agenda:

¹ I will return to address this issue in relation to the theme of history.

As Cindy Patton and Douglas Crimp have observed, [...] [the 1980s] was a critical moment in which gay identity became queer activist. While queer politics turned [...America's] health care system into a battleground, AIDS cultural criticism turned fertile new ground in gay and lesbian studies.

(Colter, Hoffman, Pendleton, *et al.*, 1996: 13)

The manifold discourses surrounding AIDS have cast it in differing medical, social, political, cultural and moral configurations, the conflicting qualities of which resist compression into a singular interpretative account. Whilst acknowledging the unquestionable ontology of corporeal and psychic suffering, Crimp states that 'AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it [...]. What [...] [this] does contest is that there is an underlying reality to [...] [it]' (Crimp, 1987: 3). The notion of resistance to an 'underlying reality' is of note, given the significant position AIDS occupied within British and American national psyches during the 1980s, especially. As a widespread, lived experience, the political and cultural centrality of the condition goes some way to explain its seminal effect upon the discursive sphere. In analysing the resistance of AIDS to homogenous definition, various scholars have noted the way in which seemingly secure modes of meaning have, in turn, been subject to rupture. AIDS is therein posited as 'an epidemic of signification' (Treichler, 1987: 31) or 'a crisis in [...] representation' (Edwards, 1994: 128): something which muddled the symbolic frame of traditionalist interpretation. Through exploiting the possibilities of this 'crisis', AIDS activism thus mobilised the slippery phenomenon of queer, which underlined the condition's nuanced complexities and the contingency of those polarised absolutes through which conservative discourses attempted to assign AIDS an 'underlying reality'. Crucial to this is the way in which 'sexual identity [...] [was] intrinsically linked to AIDS' as a 'gay plague' (*ibid*: 132 and

125). For, '[s]ince the earliest days of the epidemic, gay men have been identified nearly irreversibly with [it]' (Román, 1998: xxii). Such American organisations as ACT-UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), established in 1987, worked to undermine this associative collapse. Edwards notes of this group that

[i]ts ideas are not only premised on the identity and community politics of the 1970s, it also supplements these with a [...] post-structuralist emphasis on representation and meaning, and places a centrality on a plurality of identities.
(Edwards, 1994: 134)

Through foregrounding these concepts, and the fact that AIDS affected a diverse range of people, ACT-UP and other organisations, drew attention to the complex, insecure qualities of those 'fixed' positions necessary for conservative doctrines to distinguish the divide between heterosexuality (as normal/healthy) and homosexuality (as abnormal/diseased). If long-fought for, othered identities were risked by the endeavour of AIDS activists, so too were the structural binaries of traditional, masculinist thought that demand the secure and static status of 'radical otherness' (Butler, 1997: 139).

'[The] outgrowth of the identity politics of the gay rights movement, demonstrated [...] the possibility [...] of a [...] mass, community-based AIDS intervention' (Román, 1998: 20). Hence, the queer systems of resistance prompted heterogeneous forms of kinship which rejected that of the reproductive, familial model. Such events as 'die-ins', and memorial services, which occurred, most frequently, in such American cities as New York and San Francisco, were comprised of friends, lovers, and family members, often of disparate identities and cultural backgrounds. A 1982 American funeral for a gay man who had died of AIDS comprised 'a direct defiance of the sombreness associated with conventional memorials. [...] "It was a party!"'

(*ibid.*: 25). If such occasions can be read as subversions of normative social rituals which reify ethnic, gendered and religious distinctions, their parodic and performative qualities were also evident in queer as an aesthetic style. Further imbued with 'post-Stonewall outrage, irony and wit' (*ibid.*: 88), the use of inversion, parody, camp and satire lent queer the potency to re-inscribe masculinist conventions transgressively through cultural representation. Although this is a concept which requires further unpacking, and will be returned to in relation to influences upon *The History Boys* and *Angels*, this brief account looks to underpin the way in which 'queer' emerged as a transgression of 'gay', 'a more fluid, less locatable nomenclature which [...] tries to enact a disruption of categorization itself' (Roof, 1997: 180). At this point, it is worth noting that while AIDS is central to *Angels*, it does not feature in *The History Boys*.

Premieres and critical responses

2004 saw *The History Boys* open to popular and critical acclaim under the direction of Nicholas Hytner at the National's Lyttelton Theatre. Its success prompted an international tour and a West End transfer to the Wyndham's Theatre in 2006, where it was staged by Simon Cox. The same year saw the release of a screen adaptation, also directed by Hytner and featuring the original cast. Among the play's thirty accolades to date are three Olivier Awards, including that for Best New Play — a category in which it also won one of its six Tony Awards in New York. There were those critics who were unimpressed by the premiere; for instance, the *Sunday Telegraph* asserted that '[w]hat might have been a small masterpiece is badly marred by cheap effects' (Gross, 2004: 5). In praising the play, the overwhelming majority of reviews

underlined Alan Bennett's position as a well-established dramatist: 'one of the finest [plays] Alan Bennett has ever written' (Spencer, 2004: 18); '*The History Boys* [...] shows Bennett at his funniest, most rueful and far-reaching' (Clapp, 2004: 11). Numerous references were made to *Forty Years On* (1968), which, as the other of Bennett's plays set in a school and written forty years earlier, is perhaps no great surprise. In recalling this, his first drama, and making reference to other, more recent productions like *The Madness of King George III* (1991), the critics re-affirmed the playwright's canonical position within British theatre.

Sue-Ellen Case has observed that '[t]he seemingly dramatic standards which select the playwrights in the canon are actually the same patriarchal biases which organise the [...] social organization of the culture at large' (Case, 1983: 534). The fact that the critics' reactions reinforced the legitimacy of Bennett's ongoing position within the mainstream is one of note. If the play does nothing to upset what Case terms the canon's 'patriarchal biases', it may be assumed that heteronormativity is relatively undisturbed by it. Indeed, aside from winning awards and being transferred to Broadway, it was also made into a film. However, focusing on the fact that Case's assertion was made in the 1980s highlights an important point. That a 2004 play in which representations of gay male identity were greeted positively, *may* reflect upon the impact of progressive changes, since the 1980s, resulting from the challenges of queer and gay activism (in concert with those of feminism). Hence, while the general response to *The History Boys* might suggest it to be a reactionary drama, so too does it hint at an increased acceptance, in the

cultural mainstream, of articulations of those socio-cultural shifts taken as catalysts for the 'crisis' in masculinity.

Following its initial staging as a workshop production at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum in 1990, the completed version of *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches* opened at the Eureka Theatre, San Francisco, in 1991, and ran for approximately three-and-a-half hours. In January of the following year, its premiere performance in the UK at the National's Cottesloe Theatre proved a significant moment in the play's history. Accolades included two Best New Play awards, given by both the *Evening Standard* and the London Drama Critics Circle. *Millennium Approaches* also received critical acclaim in the States when it transferred to Broadway in 1993. As well as four Tony Awards, including that for Best Play, it secured numerous other prestigious prizes and Kushner was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. This obvious success contrasted somewhat with the guarded praise and mixed reviews that followed the London premiere. Billington saw it as a piece of 'epic energy', but one that was '[s]prawling and overwritten' (Billington, 1992: 21), while Benedict Nightingale wrote, 'the feeling grows that Kushner is too self-consciously writing an Important Play' (Nightingale, 1992). Criticism of its scale and scope was likewise expressed in *The Independent*, under the headline, 'When Thinking Big is Not Enough' (Wardle, 1992: 18). Although this review noted that 'the piece excels in the sexual here and now', it also made the claim that '[p]oliticised homosexual writers have a tendency to proselytise and Kushner is no exception' (*ibid*). Considered in terms of Case's account of criteria for the canon, it is conceivable that the reactions of such male critics point to a representation of

homosexuality more radical than that of *The History Boys*. In making his criticism specific to the playwright's sexual orientation, moreover assuming that a 'tendency' can feasibly be applied to a group in which Kushner may figure, Irving Wardle's comment can be taken to demonstrate the homophobia latent in the 'patriarchal bias' governing legitimate, mainstream responses to cultural texts. Simultaneously, its success can perhaps be read to mirror disruptions to this 'bias', as suggested in terms of *The History Boys*. That *Angels* has been considered, in part, as an 'AIDS play', highlights its relationship to queer activism, at least suggesting the possibility of its being a potentially radical drama.²

Perestroika, the second, conclusive part of *Angels in America* reached London and Broadway in November of 1993. This widely anticipated piece, while not receiving the same number of awards as Part One, nonetheless garnered considerable acclaim. Kushner won the Tony for Best Play for the second time, as well as the 1994 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play, amongst other accolades. However, as with *Millennium Approaches*, the success of the play as a whole was marred by events surrounding its run on Broadway. At the end of 1994,

in spite of full houses and the Pulitzer Prize, it closed. Marking a \$660 000 loss, the play moved on to regional commercial theatres throughout the country in a desperate attempt to reap some financial profit.
(Stefanović, 2000: 152)

As with the critical responses to Part One in London, this occurrence may highlight the affront to heteronormative hegemony that *Angels* represents. If a production is prevented from continuing to run in a populist and mainstream

² The theme of AIDS is of course no guarantee of a play's being subversive. Apart from the necessity of considering this in relation to other aspects of *Angels*, this point will later be considered in reference to such other 'AIDS plays' as William Hoffman's *As If* (1985) and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1986).

locale, despite 'meeting the canon's requirements for [...] economic recognition' (Dolan, 1991: 21), one might conclude that its ideological content is at odds with that normatively condoned by the theatre (and cultural context) in question. Like Wardle's criticism, the ultimate exclusion of the play from a Broadway stage might point to a subversive agenda.

Despite these factors, the play in its entirety was adapted as a film for television which took the form of a two-part miniseries first screened in the States in December of 2003. Kushner wrote the screenplay and Mike Nichols directed; the cast featured a host of celebrated Hollywood actors, Al Pacino and Meryl Streep among them. In this format, *Angels* achieved widespread popular and critical appeal, winning five Golden Globe awards and numerous other nominations and accolades. Given that the success of the original play, underpinned by this adaptation, was shot through with transatlantic 'failures' — the close of its Broadway run, negativity from the press — Carla J. McDonough's question about *Angels* is worth citing:

[d]o these awards and commercial acceptance indicate a willingness to examine gender issues as now being obviously relevant to America's staging of itself, or do they reflect a desire to make safe these plays by defusing their radicalness?
(McDonough, 1997: 168)

The concept of containment alluded to here offers an alternative means to consider the positive positioning of *Angels*. Furthermore, McDonough's allusion to 'gender issues' which are 'now [...] obviously relevant' stands to underline the affective force of queer concepts of identity in the 1990s.

Synopses of the plays

The History Boys is set, for the most part, 'in a boys' school in the 1980s in the north of England' (Bennett, 2004: 3). Depicting a group of eight sixth-form

pupils and their four teachers over the course of one term, the action unfolds over two acts which are subdivided into a series of short, unnumbered scenes. In his notes on the first production, Bennett stated, 'I have not included many stage directions or even noted changes of scenes; the more fluid the action the better' (*ibid*: xxviii). Much of the action features all of the boys, and one or more of their teachers, in a classroom context that sees the characters engage in a flurry of fast-paced discussion and banter. These scenes are interspersed with what are largely more sombre duologues, played out both within this setting and that of the staff room, the sound of the school bell and the pupils' singing of songs often signalling the move from one scene to the next. In depicting the boys' preparations for the Oxbridge entrance examinations, the pupils are taught by two male teachers: Hector, a middle-aged, avuncular man of 'studied eccentricity' (*ibid*: 4), and Irwin, a young history specialist recruited by the unnamed Headmaster to ensure success in the league tables. Both of these former characters are drawn at a distance from Mrs Lintott, a history teacher who espouses the merits of '[p]lainly stated and properly organised facts' (*ibid*: 9), as well as contrasting with one another. While Hector denounces A Levels as 'emblems of conformity' (*ibid*: 4), and encourages the boys to memorise Auden, Housman and Shakespeare as nothing other than a 'vaccination against experience' (Clapp, 2004: 11), Irwin introduces a journalistic approach to their studies in the interest of securing university places. This character is constructed to appear as a government spin doctor and television historian after having being a teacher. This is staged through scenes that break with a largely chronological structure, appearing at the opening of each of the acts.

What Hector and Irwin have in common is the fact that both of them are gay, something that is revealed in the case of the former through references to the daily ritual of his taking one of the boys home on his motorbike and fondling their genitals on the journey. This 'pillion duty' (Bennett, 2004: 17) ceases when the Headmaster learns of it from his off-stage wife, a revelation that results in Hector facing the prospect of early retirement. Irwin's sexuality comes to light through his flirtatious relationship with a pupil, Dakin, who is also the object of affection of both his off-stage girlfriend, Fiona, and Posner, another sixth former. While no actual sexual interaction occurs before the audience, dialogues pertaining to the same-sex desires of Irwin, Hector and Posner are central. The scene in which the latter is heard to 'come out' to the former occurs as a flashback. Towards the close of the play, after the boys have passed their examinations, the two male teachers are involved in a motorbike accident (not played out before the audience) in which Hector dies, and Irwin, through being injured, becomes confined to a wheelchair. The final scene sees the fate of each of the boys, as adults, imparted to the audience through direct address. This device is also used to see Mrs Lintott and several of the boys function as narrators, providing brief commentaries on the action as it unfolds. For instance, several moments into the opening (classroom) scene, one of the pupils, Timms, passes comment on Hector's practice of hitting them over the head with exercise books: 'The hitting never hurt. It was a joke' (*ibid*: 7). Although there are only a few moments of narration, this has the effect of setting much of the play's action in the past.

While temporal ruptures and direct address also feature in *Angels*, the play's stylistic and formal traits cover a broader and more eclectic terrain than those of *The History Boys*. Deborah Geis and Steven Kruger observe that:

Kushner's play [...] enacts what might be termed a postmodern American epic style in the theatre. This [...] is reflected in the play's two-part (eight-act, seven-hour form); in the complexity of its narrative structure; in its mixing of everyday experience with the stuff of dreams and fantasy; its interruption of the realistic mode by the [...] metadramatic; in its commingling of dialogue with monologue, diatribe, poetic and vatic voices.
(Geis and Kruger, 1997: 3–4)

Designed for an ensemble of performers, some of whom take on dual roles, some of whom cross-dress, *Angels in America's* wide-reaching themes of 'race, gender, age, religion and [...] sexuality' (Reinelt, 1997: 235) are evoked through the historicisation of events and phenomena that represent certain defining American narratives. To this effect, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s is intertwined with McCarthyism, and Mormon, Jewish, and African American histories. Commensurate with its 'epic' qualities is the five-year time span that the play encompasses; most of the action takes place in 1985–86, while its epilogue at the close of *Perestroika* is set in 1990. The backdrop of New York features through domestic settings of specific boroughs and famous sites such as the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park and the Brooklyn Hall of Justice. As split scenes reoccur throughout the play, two distinct locations are often evoked simultaneously.

As Krasner notes, it is in the development of three, interlocking narratives that much of the drama unfolds (Krasner, 2006: 160). The first two of these is each concerned with the break-down of a relationship: that of gay couple, Prior and Louis, the former of whom reveals to his lover that he has AIDS, during an early scene; and that of Mormons Joe and Harper, whose sexless

marriage is revealed to be the result of Joe's repressed homosexuality. From the outset, Harper appears agoraphobic and addicted to hallucinatory Valium pills. The audience share in her drug-induced experiences through scenes set in such surreal and ambiguous places as an 'imaginary Antarctica' (Kushner, 1994: 5). The story surrounding Roy Cohn, a ruthless and powerful Jewish lawyer that Kushner based on the real-life Republican and chief counsel to McCarthy, comprises the third of the narrative strands. Aside from functioning as a mentor to Joe, who aspires to a career in politics, Cohn is a viciously racist homophobe who is also gay and closeted. The audience see him diagnosed with AIDS at the end of act one and eventually die of the disease towards the close of *Perestroika*. Prior, by contrast, lives, and delivers the closing lines of the play. During the course of his illness, which sees Louis abandon him, he is visited by an angel who declares him to be a prophet and informs him that mankind's inexorable progress must desist. Prior meets with Harper, both in heaven and other 'mutual dream scene[s]' (Kushner, 1992: 19) that, like their individual experiences, see the unearthly and the surreal punctuate the prosaic New York backdrop. It is in this latter context that Joe is seduced by Louis, with whom he falls in love. Across political differences (Louis is a Democrat), the two are 'united by feelings of guilt and worthlessness' (Saddik, 2007: 162). Towards the end of the play, Harper substitutes her drug-induced trips for a real journey, and leaves her husband to take a plane to San Francisco. Joe is deserted, too, by Louis, who wishes to return to Prior. In much-improved health, Prior does not acquiesce, but the pair nonetheless express mutual affection. Just as all of these characters' stories interconnect, additional figures function to provide points of convergence between the three key narratives. Belize, a black nurse who

attends to Cohn, is also Prior's ex-lover and friend, and supports him throughout his sickness; Hannah Pitt, Joe's conservative, Mormon mother, eventually becomes a friend of Prior's having moved to New York from Salt Lake City when Joe informs her that he is gay. Although neither Harper and Joe nor Louis and Prior recover their relationship before the final curtain, the epilogue is optimistic in depicting Hannah, Belize, Prior and Louis as a group of mutually supportive friends united in queer kinship (Román, 1998).

British context and playwriting tropes

Although written after the millennium, *The History Boys* is, in many ways, analogous to plays and other cultural texts produced much earlier, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A year after the 1967 Sexual Offences act decriminalised homosexuality, the lifting of the Lord Chamberlain's Licensing Act allowed it to be openly represented on the British stage. This event bore witness to the increased visibility of gay and lesbian subjects through a 'new politicised identity' (Edwards, 1994: 28), furthermore mirroring the possibility for 'recovering a lost or ignored history' (Weeks, 2000: 1) in the wake of emergent postmodern thought.

What The Butler Saw, a drama by a 'major "uncloseted" playwright' (Clum, 1994: 118), Joe Orton, was produced in 1969. This play can be viewed as a response to social and philosophical shifts, comprising 'a kind of orgy of cross-dressing, gender confusion and hierarchical inversion [...] an angry repudiation of sexual repressiveness' (Dollimore, 1991: 315). By contrast, homosexuality in *The History Boys* is not represented bodily, but only ever through dialogue and implication, recalling the work of playwrights like

visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted' (Sedgwick, 1985: 1–2) to the maintenance of masculinity.

Although the parallels between *The Prisoners of War* may appear to evince a 'radical' quality in the play under analysis, the fact that the 'visibility' of such a 'continuum' was subject to representation as much as eighty years earlier, limits the validity of this argument. Indeed, *The History Boys* differs considerably from dramas written in the 1990s that depict gay male identity and desire. A portrait of two teenage boys falling in love comprises the central narrative of Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* (1993). The action is set on a dreary London council estate, and the characters are working-class. Frank dialogue around the theme of sexuality appears alongside images of tender, physical closeness: one of the protagonists massaging the other; and the two of them, in the final scene, 'dancing cheek-to-cheek to "Dream a Little Dream of Me"' (Clum, 1994: 287). Depicting a group of five gay men negotiating their love and sex lives in the wake of AIDS, Kevin Elyot's *My Night With Reg* (1997) likewise contains explicit language and moments of unguarded, warm tactility between its male characters. Whereas the boys of *Beautiful Thing* figure, at first, to be in a state of adolescent angst over their sexuality, the men of this later play are out and proud. Along with more open portrayals of gay desire that extend to bodily representation, these dramas addressed broader, socio-political themes — economic depravation and AIDS, respectively — that fell outside the scope of *The History Boys*.

As with other British plays such as Mordaunt Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree* and Coward's *Design for Living* (both 1933), in which homosexual desire is only

ever hinted at (*ibid*: 92–104), *The Prisoners of War*, introduced above, focuses upon a group of middle-class characters. *The History Boys* is not set in a public school, perhaps allowing for a representation of a broader spectrum in socio-economic terms, yet its depiction of an all-male group of students destined for Oxford recalls a middle-class, masculinist tradition, more evocative of the first half of the twentieth century than of the 1960s and after. The intertwined privileges of class and sex reliant on, and perpetuated by, such traditions, look to be reified by the play in a number of ways. First, the revelation towards the end of the play that all of the boys have won a place at Oxford is couched in celebratory terms. 'The boys erupt onto the stage' as the Headmaster is heard to announce, 'Splendid news!' (Bennett, 2004: 97). Earlier, the enthusiasm of the boys represented is conveyed by a line of Dakin's to Hector — 'We're scholarship candidates now. We're all going in for Oxford and Cambridge'— and, throughout the play, the characters are shown to be concerned about passing their exams (*ibid*: 6). Posner is seen to complain to Irwin that Hector's lessons are 'not useful'; in a duologue between Dakin and another boy, Scripps, the former advises the latter that a theory of his would be a 'Good thing to say' at his university interview; Rudge, another pupil, appears keen to ensure the accuracy of the notes he takes in Irwin's classes ('So what's the verdict, sir? What do I write down?') (*ibid*: 37, 45 and 26). Second, the function of Rudge looks to highlight the class specificity that Oxford, here, connotes, insofar as he can be read as a working-class character (and the only one of the play). During the scene in which it is established that the boys have been successful, Rudge says of his Oxford interview that 'they took on a thick sod like me' because of 'family connections': 'They said I was just the kind of candidate they were looking for, college servant's son, now an

undergraduate, evidence of how far they had come, wheel full circle and that' (*ibid*: 97–98). While it is Rudge's working-class background that gains him a place at an ostensibly more progressive Oxford, this is in lieu of his being on an academic par with his peers; a point underlined moments later when he is heard to comment that his interviewers said he was 'just what the college rugger team needed' (*ibid*: 98). By conceiving him as a tokenistic entrant to the university, the play differentiates between this character and the 'legitimate', middle-class students represented. This facet of *The History Boys* can thereby be read to privilege patriarchal traditions by which the middle-class male subject benefits. That these are largely anachronistic shrouds this move in nostalgia.

In a comparable vein, the play's cultural climate resonates with the zeitgeist of middle England in the 1950s. The boys are shown to re-enact scenes from classic films such as *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Brief Encounter* (1945), as well as songs like 'Bye Bye Blackbird' (1926) and 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' (1956). These elements of popular British culture, which included US imports from the interwar years and the 1940s and 1950s, is another aspect that can be seen to situate the drama several decades prior to that in which it is set. The presence of these songs and skits is significant, too, in terms of form. For although they are situated within the classroom scenes, the fact that it is not merely extracts from, but entire songs, that are performed, means that their inclusion at the opening/close of scenes invites them to be read as independent dramatic moments, not least when met by audience applause (as was the case in a 2007 performance in the West End). If the songs and films themselves have the capacity to lend the play a sense of a bygone era, so too

might the style and form of a performance in recalling such traditions as music hall. The intertextuality apparent here can be mapped onto Jameson's theory of postmodern nostalgia in cultural representation. Taking cinema as his example, Jameson suggests that 'the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" through stylistic connotation', thereby constructing a sense of such as "'1950s-ness'" (Jameson, 1991: 19, my emphasis). The texts cited in the play thereby function to highlight a distinctly postmodern, nostalgic aspect. That a degree of subversion might *also* emerge from their mode of realisation is an issue I will return to discuss.

Historical resonance is further apparent through the qualities that *The History Boys* shares with earlier texts set in English public boys' schools, a cultural lineage in which mainstream works like *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and *Goodbye, Mr Chips* (1934) feature. Isabel Quigly's suggestion that 'the patterns of school life [...] were [...] inclined to encourage homosexual feelings' (Quigly, 1982: 126) is reflected in the fact that '[t]he school story as love story' features as a chapter within her study of such texts. The characters and narrative construction of Victorian novels like Welldon's *Gerald Eversley's Friendship* (1895) and Vachell's *The Hill* (1905) echo in *The History Boys*, not least in relation to the homoerotic relationships they contain. For example, in the latter book, the object of desire is 'superior, in popular esteem, to the lover [...] he is charming, popular, sought after and above all, handsome; while the lover is a much quieter figure, dogged, hard-working [...] and not good-looking' (*ibid*: 138). Quigly suggests that such characterisation is not an anomaly, but rather, paradigmatic. Desired by three of the other characters

within *The History Boys*, Dakin is presented to be both 'good-looking' (Bennett, 2004: 22) and confident. Aside from his forwardness in attempting to seduce Irwin ('I was really wondering whether [...] there was any chance of your sucking me off'), he informs another of the boys that he has confronted the Headmaster after witnessing him 'hoping to cop a feel' of young secretary Fiona (*ibid*: 99 and 29). Posner, commensurately, fits the 'lover' mould: he is 'small', 'was late growing up', works hard, and informs Irwin when the other boys are 'taking the piss' in his lessons (*ibid*: 42, 21 and 39). The conclusion of comparable, 'school story' novels repeatedly depicts the 'death of the lover or beloved' (Quigly, 1982: 129). Although this is not true of the play, Posner's future is revealed to be characterised by 'periodic breakdowns' (Bennett, 2004: 108) moments before the final curtain.

If Irwin and Hector can also be considered as 'lovers' of Dakin, it is noteworthy that their fates are ones of disability and death. This reading is significant to the representation of sexual identities in *The History Boys*. For although direct references to homosexuality do appear alongside the 'innuendo and gesture' (Clum, 1994: 3) characteristic of pre-1960s plays, the qualities outlined here evoke a Victorian social order that sought 'to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction' (Foucault, 1990 [1976]: 36). One could argue that *The History Boys*'s parallels with these 'love stories', in combination with its comparative explicitness, sees an assertion of 'illegitimate sexualities' (*ibid*: 4) that 'queer' historical texts formerly 'accepted [...] as tales of noble friendship' (Quigly, 1982: 126). This notwithstanding, the play's associating of homosexuality with failure and death is important in assessing the limits of

its subversive capacity. In recalling the context and characters of both Victorian novels and the 'closet dramas' (Clum, 1994: 85) of playwrights like Coward and Ackerley, representations in *The History Boys* may appear to revoke the 'assertion of positive self-worth' (Edwards, 1994: 26) characteristic of the progressive gay subject since the 1960s.

The History Boys may, then, lend itself to be read within a trajectory of realist plays and novels that depict a group of middle-class characters in a distinctly English, closeted and homosocial environment. In this context, the play bears some resemblance to the work of Peter Shaffer, who has been configured within 'a strong tradition of English playwrights, leading down from Pinero and Granville Barker by way of Noel Coward' (Lambert 1962: 10). Although the 1967 play, *White Lies*, is something of an anomaly in its explicit depiction of same-sex desire, many of Shaffer's other works also feature two men in a significant and often torturous relationship: *Five Finger Exercise* (1958) and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964) comprise but two examples. The presence of a potentially erotic adult mentor/adolescent student relationship within the former of these two plays provides a link to *The History Boys*, evident, too, in *Equus* (1973).³ Part of the significance of these themes lies in their capacity to evoke the socio-sexual system of Ancient Greece, a state in which a (free) man could 'delight in and be a subject of pleasure with a boy [...] [without it] causing a problem' (Foucault, 1992 [1984]: 221), whilst 'truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another' (Foucault, 1990 [1976]: 61). As the middle-aged,

³ That the theme of what Clum calls 'pederasty' was a recurrence in both British and American plays about homosexuality written between the 1930s and the late 1960s is reflected in his devoting a chapter to it in his book *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (1994), further aligning Bennett's drama with plays written during this period.

'repressed homosexual' (Clum, 1994: 134) psychiatrist of *Equus* perceives his adolescent patient 'as a link to the Dionysian ecstasy of ancient Greece' (*ibid*), an intertextual allusion to this period appears in *The History Boys* through the construction of Hector. This character shares his name with a Trojan warrior of Homer's *Illiad*, and, as a gay teacher, brings to the fore the Ancient Greek intersection of erotics and education. This character thus brings to mind a socio-sexual system different from that of the capitalist liberal democracy in which this play (like many by Shaffer) are set. Foucault perceives the development of a discourse on 'peripheral sexualities' (Foucault, 1990 [1976]: 48) during the Victorian era as part of a mechanism to ensure the privilege and perpetuation of 'a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative' (*ibid*: 37): that is to say, one restricted to the married and reproductive couple. To this effect, the evocation of an Ancient society — *perceived* as one in which 'love for one's own sex and love for the other sex [...] [were not seen as] radically different types of behaviour' (Foucault, 1992 [1984]: 187) — may look to grant *The History Boys* a transgressive role.

However, there is an important distinction to be made here between the construction of a mythic, Ancient Greece, and its historical actuality as a patriarchal culture. In relation to the former: Hector's crucial battle in *The Iliad*, between him and the warrior Ajax, results not in the victory of one and death of the other, but a moment of mutual admiration and the exchanging of gifts.⁴ This aspect has been retrospectively deemed to imbue the epic poem with a latent homoeroticism, and one perpetually displaced by homosocial heterosexuality. As Mark Simpson observes of war films in a chapter entitled

⁴ The close of Hector and Ajax's battle sees the former proclaim, 'let us both give each other glorious gifts, so that people will say [...] "These two fought together in rivalry [...] and when they parted they were joined in friendship."' (Homer 1987 [c.800 BCE]: 112).

'Don't Die on Me, Buddy', such representation 'offers a vision of a world in which the privileges of heterosexual manhood' are 'combined with a [...] homoeroticism' (Simpson, 1994: 214), that remains as subtext. *The History Boys* thus looks *nostalgically* to a mythologised Ancient culture, recalling texts in which the closet looms large and secure. Both by this token, and through its similarity to Shaffer's plays, the play can then be situated as a 'classically' gay drama, in which the abject position of the gay male subject is maintained.

While this factor might undercut the subversion potential of Hector, it is worth highlighting Edwards's claim that '[a]ny perspective on pederasty is on the whole "radical" unless it is a downright condemnation' (Edwards, 1994: 61). With this in mind, it is significant that Hector is drawn sympathetically. First, the audience never see him on his motorbike with one of the boys, so that the only encounters between them are devoid of sexual contact; second, the 'pillion duty' (Bennett, 2004: 17) is something to which the pupils appear to consent with good humour. This notwithstanding, it remains clear that this aspect of *The History Boys* aligns it with older dramas like *Equus* and *The Green Bay Tree*, in which 'the older man doesn't get the boy' (Clum, 1994: 135), and homosexual identity equates with isolation or death.

Formally speaking, *The History Boys* echoes several of Shaffer's plays — *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus* and *Yonadab* (1985) — through the use of direct address for exposition. This is in contrast to the earlier play texts to which I have made reference, and signals both a deviation from a classic realist, British tradition and Brechtian influence. However, Shaffer's use of direct address has been considered 'not to explore the social truths that Brecht

required of the form, but to put into a sweepingly ambitious perspective the psychological exploration of individual sensibilities' (Cooke and Page 1987: 6). Commensurately, his deployment of this technique looks not to distance the audience from emotional engagement with the onstage action, but, rather, to invite an empathetic response. As a bitter mediocrity in *Amadeus*, composer Salieri's narrative allows the audience an insight into his torturous relationship with both God and Mozart. Salieri's machinations to bring about the latter's demise are played out alongside a lament of self-loathing, adding depth to the character's construction and encouraging an audience to sympathise. A similar strategy is employed in *The History Boys*, as the use of direct address breaks the fourth wall and see the characters soliloquise on their surroundings, or own circumstances. The only onstage female character, Mrs Lintott, is positioned to explicate the central male characters' experiences. Positioned several scenes into the second act, the words of her first direct address are explicitly self-referential:

MRS LINTOTT I have not hitherto been allotted an inner voice, my role a patient and not unamused sufferance of the [...] pre-occupations of men.
(Bennett 2004: 68)

Although this is but one example of several such breaks with a broadly realist dialogue, it is the only instance of meta-theatricality in *The History Boys*. Other lines that are spoken to the audience not only steer away from being self-conscious breaks within the action, but, on the contrary, work to further the spectator's engagement with the central characters. When pupils Dakin and Scripps abruptly end a conversation about sex when Posner appears, the latter reveals that 'Because I was late growing up I am not included in this kind of conversation' (*ibid*: 21). As in Shaffer, what is ostensibly a rupture in

the dramatic frame here only serves to further an audience reading of the character within the psychological realism in which he is constructed. That the use of direct address occurs regularly throughout the drama, again, echoing the structure of *Amadeus* and *Equus*, likewise defines its function within these terms. In contrast to the role Brecht ascribed to it, it is never the source of shock; nor does it pre-empt the conclusion of a scene or juxtapose with the audience's knowledge about the figures on stage.

This latter point is also relevant to the final scene of *The History Boys*, in which the boys' futures are detailed to the audience by Mrs Lintott. Again, here, the use of direct address grants the audience an insight into the lives of the protagonists, providing the play a conclusive final scene. This, if paradoxically, further enacts the play's adherence to realism. For, although the mode of presentation is not one of realist representation, it does not function to undermine the conservative mode of character construction in which these figures are wrought, and the audience leaves the theatre in full knowledge of the destiny of each of the boys' lives. Direct address is thereby appropriated by realism for its own ends, rendering ironic a Brechtian tool formally designed to problematise both such a closure and an audience's potential for emotional investment in character. Hence, recalling Shaffer, the use of this technique here sees a strategy of leftist resistance re-appropriated within mainstream, politically conservative drama.

While it may seem unlikely that *The History Boys* should have any point of convergence with the domestic 'kitchen sink' realism epitomised by Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*

US context and playwriting tropes

In evincing greater stylistic and formal diversity than *The History Boys*, *Angels in America* evokes a wide range of theatrical trajectories. So as to provide a sketch of certain relevant, key influences, this section of the chapter will consider earlier, mainstream US male playwrights; avant-garde, modernist European practitioners; a particular strand of American performance practice, and 'AIDS plays' produced during the 1980s.

At first glance, it might appear strange that *Angels* has any resonance with such dramas as Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (*Cat*) (1955) or *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). For while homosexual desire and identity feature in these plays, they do so 'obliquely [...] as a play of signs and images' through 'substitution' and 'concealment' (Savran, 1992: 83). Clum notes of the former that '[t]he unspeakable remains unspoken' (Clum, 1994: 149) whilst he claims *Cat* to evince 'Williams' inability, or disinclination, to forge a positive language for [...] homosexual love' (*ibid*: 156). This can be read in stark contrast to a play which concludes with a gay character with AIDS asserting, 'We will be citizens' (Kushner, 1994: 99). That *Angels* concludes thus is one of numerous factors that underlines the historical chasm between it and these dramas, highlighting its relationship to 'a queer postmodernism that has as its central aim the dethroning of monoliths' (Medhurst, 1997a: xxi) of heteronormative hegemony. To this extent, the Williams plays may appear to have more in common with the British 'closet dramas' I have deemed analogous to *The History Boys*. However, the relative subversiveness of these earlier plays is underlined by Annette Saddik in her assertion that 'Tennessee Williams [...] allowed playwrights to explore issues

such as [...] gender and sexuality during the latter half of the twentieth century at a level that had not been previously done' (Saddik, 2007: 155). Stylistic links see *Angels* linked to both the work of this playwright and the 'father of American Drama' (McDonough, 1997: 21) Eugene O'Neill. Clum observes that *Angels* is 'as grand and ambitious as the largest of O'Neill's works' (Clum, 1994: 313), whilst the theme of 'illusion and reality' evident in *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) (Krasner, 2006: 35) is readily apparent through the hallucinations, dreams, ghosts and angels that abound in Kushner's drama. In the case of *The Glass Menagerie*, 'a "memory" play' (Williams, 1957 [1945]: 1) this theme can be seen to have informed the drama's form. The character of Tom Wingfield, who functions as a narrator, imparts the story of his family's history, stepping in and out of the action to 'play his part' as the drama unfolds. Thus, 'the events unfold in the past as Tom describes them in the present' (Krasner, 2006: 29–30). This temporal rupture and duality of character function saw the drama '[transcend] pictorial realism' (*ibid.*: 33), infusing a domestic, realist style with the surreal and the meta-theatrical. That this renders it comparable to *Angel* can be seen in the moment at which Prior is heard to tell Belize about his first meeting with the Angel, who crashes through his bedroom ceiling and 'spreading great opalescent grey-silver wings [...] floats above the bed' (Kushner, 1992: 90). This report — a realist duologue — is thus interspersed with the fantastic encounter it details. Through such formal devices, that see the 'mixing of everyday experience with the stuff of dreams' (Geis and Kruger, 1997: 2–3), *Angels* bears the influence of Williams in disrupting the 'rigid formulas of naturalism' (Clum, 1994: 313) of mainstream, US playwriting. If, indeed, 'homosexuals [...are] marginalized by the very structure of realistic drama' (*ibid.*: 92), a form that

tends towards the 'political [aim] of [...] purging tendencies that oppose the dominant ideology' (Saddik, 2007: 5), it is by such strategies that *Angels* may be deemed progressive.

This argument can be extended by reference to language. In its 'poetry' and 'verbal excess' (Biggsby, 2000: 142), the spoken dialogue of the play proves redolent of the 'lyrical texture' (Krasner, 2006: 34) of many Williams plays. Although there is clear and considerable diversity between the modes of speech of the former play's characters (starkly evident, for example, in scenes between Prior and the Angel), a tendency towards the poetic persists throughout the drama.⁵ As in *The Glass Menagerie*, such a style is often most apparent in descriptive monologues. The first of the following, taken from this play, sees Tom reflecting on having left his family; the second, from *Angels*, is delivered by Mr Lies, Harper's imaginary friend, in the Antarctica she has fantasised:

TOM I didn't go to the moon, I went much further — for time is the greatest distance between two places — [...] attempting to find in motion what I had lost in space [...]. The cities swept around me like dead leaves [...].

(Williams, 1959 [1944]: 313)

MR LIES This is a retreat, a vacuum, [...] a deep-freeze for the feelings. You can be numb and safe here, that's what you came for. Respect the delicate ecology of your delusions.

(Kushner, 1992: 78)

⁵ During the dialogue set in Prior's bedroom, the Angel's grand, baroque pronouncements juxtapose with his prosaic expression of alarm. In response to her lines, 'American Prophet tonight you become, American Eye that Pierceth Dark, [...] Tongue-of-the-Land, Seer-Head!', Prior states: 'Oh, shoo! You're scaring the shit out of me, get the fuck out of my room' (Kushner, 1994: 23).

By troubling or staving away from prosaic language, this approach to style tallies with a form suited to the surreal and the fantastic in transcending the strictures of realism. As Saddik notes of American drama after World War Two, 'anti-mimetic dramatic modes [...] [worked to] question and resist those restrictive definitions of what it means to [...] count as an "American" [...] in terms of ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality and race' (Saddik, 2007: 2), underscoring *Angels's* transgressive potential.

Despite the closeted status of the gay men in Williams' dramas, this notion conforms to a further, thematic link in the figure of the social outsider. In *Cat's* feuding Brick and Maggie, *Streetcar's* destitute Blanche and *The Glass Menagerie's* disabled Laura, the unhappily married are placed centre stage alongside the dispossessed. That *Angels* is comparable owes, in part, to the absence of white, heterosexual male characters: all of the figures depicted represent a trope of 'otherness' in sexual, gendered or racial terms. Notwithstanding the central presence of the Caucasian American male in the plays of O'Neill and Arthur Miller, this factor bears witness to their influence, by extension. Whilst in the case of the former, '[t]he theme of the outsider is at the heart of [...] [his] writings' (Krasner, 2006: 37), the work of the latter took 'the American dream as [...] a problematic mythology that relied on [...] exclusion' (Saddik, 2007: 63). The critique of mainstream American idealism signified an attack on capitalism likewise apparent in Williams' work.⁶ If this is perhaps best exemplified, by Miller, in *Death of A Salesman* (1949), it is

⁶ An aspect of *The Glass Menagerie* is one of innumerable examples that may be cited to support this latter claim. As Krasner notes of the character of Laura, who lacks the confidence to pursue a career that might render her self-sufficient, '[i]n a world of unbridled capitalism, the world has little use for shy and disabled people' (Krasner, 2006: 30). That mother Amanda is desperate to find her a husband to support her underlines the correlation between economic success and social acceptability within the America that this play represents.

noteworthy that this play, despite its psychological realism, stages 'present, flashback and fantasy' within a non-linear structure (Krasner, 2006: 45).

There are numerous aspects of *Angels* that encourage a reading of the play as an indictment of capitalism, or, more specifically, its manifestation under Reagan as a culture of individualism. In broad terms, the very status of the characters as 'outsiders' is relevant to this concern. The representation of gay men and members of 'ethnic minorities' — identity positions that are imbricated to render several characters doubly 'othered' — is tied to isolation within 1980s New York. Prior is abandoned when he is diagnosed with AIDS, just as Joe is left by both his wife and mentor Roy, after coming out. The construction of this latter character is also significant here, insofar as he may be seen to personify Reaganite philosophy: a colleague underlines his political stance in terming him a 'Saint of the Right' (Kushner, 1992: 47). Roy is successful, affluent and well-connected, able to have the president's wife on the phone 'in under five minutes' (*ibid*: 32) and afford a 'lifetime supply' (Kushner, 1994: 34) of AZT, the most effective early-1990s medication for AIDS in the States. A clear marker of the play's take on its political backdrop, Republicanism is intertwined with selfishness and prejudice through this character. For example, when the nurse Belize attempts to coerce Roy into giving him some of his AZT for Prior, he tells him that 'There are maybe thirty people in the whole country who are getting this drug', to which Roy merely replies, 'Now there are thirty-one' (*ibid*). Although the patient finally assents, it is only after Belize has lost his temper and called him a 'Greedy kike'; a response to Roy's racist diatribe of 'Move your nigger cunt spade faggot lackey ass out of my room' (*ibid*: 35). By this exchange, Roy is not only

shown to be homophobic and racist, but to refuse Belize until he resorts to the aggression and abuse by which he himself has gained success. This is effectively encapsulated in a question Roy poses to Joe earlier: 'You want to be Nice, or you want to be Effective?' (Kushner, 1992: 83). If the identity and function of the characters may be seen as one means by which the play critiques Reaganite capitalism, so too is this indictment made clear through the bridge between this ideology and that of McCarthyism.

Both Williams and Miller responded critically to McCarthyism, a phenomenon evoked in *Angels* through the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, a character who haunts Roy Cohn as he nears death. This figure is based upon the convicted Communist whom the real Cohn prosecuted and saw executed, despite unsubstantial evidence of her being a Soviet spy. Ilene J. Philipson observes that, [t]o many [...] liberal-minded people [...] her imprisonment and death [...] lingers as a vivid reminder of much that is wrong with America' (Philipson, 1993: 1). This symbolic status reverberates in the play. Ethel is only visible to Roy, whose mockery of her contrasts with her sympathy for him. Just before he dies, for example, Roy dupes her into believing that he has misrecognised her as his late mother, claiming 'I'm scared' and requesting that she sing to him (Kushner, 1994: 75). After she has acquiesced, the other responds with triumphant glee: 'I fooled you Ethel [...] I WIN!' (*ibid*: 76). The sympathetic representation of Rosenberg, in contrast to Cohn, can thus be read as a means by which the play both recalls and indicts the operations of McCarthyism. By comparison, Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* takes the seventeenth-century Salem witch hunts as an allegory of the phenomena, while Williams' *Camino Real* made 'full use of [...] anti-realistic

conventions' in raising 'questions of personal freedom [...] during the height of the McCarthy years' (Saddik, 2007: 47 and 50). In the work of these earlier playwrights too, then, one sees both a damning portrayal of both capitalism and a particular Republican ideology.

At a distance from the plays of Miller, those of Williams furthermore forge links between capitalist success and 'obligatory heterosexuality' (Rubin, 1975: 199). In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, closeted Brick's inheritance of the family property is shown to depend upon his having children. The contrast between the two male characters of *The Glass Menagerie* is comparable: whereas Jim, who visits the family, is professionally ambitious and engaged to be married, Tom, who is 'likely [...] gay' (Krasner, 2006: 32), makes little money working in a factory he despises. *Angels* takes up this theme under numerous guises; perhaps most pertinently through Roy, who directly correlates his socio-economic and political 'clout' with a repudiation of his sexuality:

Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. [...] Homosexuals [...] have zero clout. [...] Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man [...] who fucks around with guys.
(Kushner, 1992: 31–32)

If these lines can be seen to signify an explicit connection between success in a capitalist culture and heteronormative masculine identity, the play may be read as an uncloseted extension of Williams's work.

Despite the fundamental difference between *Angels* and the cited output of Miller and O'Neill, especially in terms of the sexual identities of the male subjects represented, it is through resonance with these dramas, as well as those of Williams, that the play may be contextualised within a national trajectory of canonical, leftist and anti-capitalist plays, all of which critique

hegemonic American 'values'. That this is so may appear to problematise my earlier suggestions of the canon being conservative. However, in citing Sedgwick, Savran argues that 'both the American canon and the very principle of canonicity are centrally concerned with the questions of male (homo)sexual definition and desire'; for him, 'the American canon is always already queered' (Savran, 1995: 226). It is arguable that this 'queer' status may, indeed, 'always already' be, but that it is through the proliferation of radical, postmodern 'micronarratives' (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]: xxiv) that it gains its visibility. In recalling some of America's most famous twentieth-century plays through positing the gay male as an explicit, positive presence (aside from the parallels already outlined, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is actually quoted by Prior), the canon's inherent queerness can be seen to be brought to light in *Angels*. Thus, whilst the play can be viewed as part of a particular mainstream trope, its position therein is not unconnected from its transgressive capacity. It may, then, work to underline the 'radically discontinuous relationship of male homosocial and homosexual bonds' (Sedgwick: 1985: 5) upon which rests the tenets of the formal canonical script. By extension, if this 'project' perpetuates the hegemony of normative masculinity, *Angels's* decentring power may comprise a contribution to the 'crisis' therein.

Such subversion is comparable to that which can be traced in the plays of two European contemporaries of Williams and Miller.⁷ Just as 'Genet's representation of performative masculinities is [...] challenging to traditional notions of gender' (Stephens, 2006: 164), Lorca's dramas were realised through 'a [...] constructive rupturing of traditional representations of [...]

⁷ I use the word 'contemporaries' as the plays of Lorca and Genet to which I will refer were, like those of the Americans, produced during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Genet's *The Screens* (1966) comprises the only later exception.

sexuality' (Johnston, 1998: 39). Through what can be deemed progressive depictions of 'othered' identities in these terms, the plays of these gay writers invite them to be read as influences upon *Angels*. In general terms, the output of both can be classed within the school of modernist avant-gardism that was to profoundly affect the direction of American queer, postmodern performance from the late 1960s. Before exploring this through a shift of focus back across the Atlantic, key aspects of the Europeans' plays will be considered in relation to *Angels*. As with this play, what is of crucial relevance in this trope is the intersection of style, theme and form to transgressive effect, particularly in relation to socio-sexual matters. It is worth stating at the outset that, as in *Angels*, the plays of Genet and Lorca centre upon the socially subjugated. In relation to the former playwright, characters of *The Balcony* (1956) include prostitutes and sadomasochists, while the maids of the 1948 play of the same name, represented those disadvantaged by sex and class. *Blood Wedding* (1933) and *Yerma* (1934), by Lorca, depict women repressed by patriarchy; a later piece, *The Public* (1929–30) gives voice to male, same-sex desire.

Both *The Maids* and *The Balcony* have been viewed to 'challenge the boundaries between [...] appearance and essence' (Saddik, 2007: 28) through performativity. The opening of the earlier play appears to depict a maid attending to her mistress: a scenario that is soon revealed to be the project of a role-play between two female servants, characters whom the play text instructs should be played by men. A subversion of social and sexual identities is likewise apparent in *The Balcony*. This is set within a brothel: a locale that hosts diverse figures who engage in role-play. Against the

backdrop of a revolution, the former city leaders are killed and literally replaced by the brothel's patrons, who use costumes to signify their new roles. In emphasising 'the performance of the self' over 'traditional notions of the stable subject' (Bradby, 2006: 35), these dramas are comparable to Lorca's *The Public*. As in Genet's *The Screens* (1966), characters like 'Director' and 'Man 1' are no more than archetypes; as in *The Maids*, a disjunction between sex and gender is underscored; here, through the depiction of 'a homosexual object choice without a feminine attitude' (Smith, 1998: 12). By this move, the latter play, like Genet's, may be read to open up 'the possibility of transcending the confines of fixed [...] identities' (Finburgh, Lavery and Shevtsova, 2006: 16).

By comparison, the cross-dressing of *Angels* is one of several means by which the play may performatively disrupt the normative binary's 'mimetic relation of gender to sex' (Butler, 1999: 10). It is furthermore worth noting that this strategy is, for the most part, deployed in one direction, with the exception of Prior in drag: female bodies are repeatedly positioned to signify male characters. The play text states that the orthodox rabbi of the opening scene is played by a woman, as is also the case for two characters associated with Roy: Henry, his doctor, and Martin, a colleague whom Roy calls 'darling' (Kushner, 1992: 47) and requests rubs his back. Thus whilst having the potential to undermine 'safe and traditionalist representations' (Johnston, 1998: 103), as was claimed of *The Public*, the specificity of this element takes on significance in relation to masculinity in particular, perhaps working in tandem with the sexualities of the characters to undermine 'the masculine body[']s [...] conflation with the universal' (Butler, 1999: 17). To take the aforementioned moment between Roy and Martin as a case in point: what the audience

witness is a male character whom they know sleeps with men and defines himself as heterosexual, inviting physical contact with a man played by a woman. Dependent on the extent to which the female actor's sex is made clear (and, indeed, the degree to which this actor may be deemed 'feminine'), this scene hosts the possibility to radically expose those gaps between sex, gender and orientation which remain sealed within heteronormative ideology. In short, '[c]ross-dressing leads to wholesale gender confusion' (Dollimore, 1991: 317), severing links on which masculinity relies.

Paralleling the plays of Williams (and, to a lesser extent, Miller), surrealism is of importance to Genet and Lorca's plays. David Bradby asserts a connection between this aesthetic and post-structuralist theories by which 'the concept of a stable self was dismantled' (Bradby, 2006: 35). If the surrealist agenda can thereby be linked with a foregrounding of artifice and performativity, it may posit a rebuff of realism to progressive effect, underscoring the notion that 'an aesthetics of deconstruction can go hand in hand with a politics and ethics of the Other' (*ibid*: 42). Amongst *Angels's* surrealist scenes are those that are set in 'Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory' (Kushner, 1994: 91) and feature Prior, Harper and Roy alongside some of the same ghosts and angels who appear in domestic interiors. In blurring the binarisms of earth/otherworldly and human/ghost, the play recalls Genet's *The Screens*, an indictment of French involvement in the Algerian War, that 'traverses the land of the living and the dead' (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 2003: 116). When the Arab rebel protagonist is shot, he is not shown, like other characters, to enter an Underworld, but 'sink[s] into another region' (*ibid*), refuting the realm that represents death. This transgression is perhaps recalled by the final few scenes of *Angels*, in

which Prior, having been to Heaven, returns to earth alive (Roy, by contrast, does not return from the 'smouldering pit' [Kushner, 1994: 91] in which he is finally depicted). In constructing the uncloseted gay AIDS sufferer in such a way that the association between abjection and death is both evoked and repudiated, *Angels* can be seen to repeat a strategy enacted through the oppressed character in *The Screens*. Describing an aspect of the queer strategies present in her work, Sedgwick states that '[i]f what is at work here [...] falls *across* gender, it falls not less across [...] the ontological crack between the living and the dead' (Sedgwick 1994: 252, my emphasis). The capacity to cross this 'crack', then, may denote an act of subversion in exposing the fragility of monolithic binaries analogous to those that govern sexed and gendered systems. It is therefore feasible to suggest that the surrealist influence apparent on the case study play is one that enables it to be read as queer, within these terms.

By extension, the agency granted the spectral figures of *Angels* stands to queer the earthly domain of the dramatic world, traversing the life/death 'crack' through their catalytic functions. Just as the Moon, in Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, lights the night sky to enable the Bridegroom to find his missing Bride, supernatural figures of the later play inform the fates of the humans represented. It is Prior's interaction with the Angel that ultimately compels him to choose 'more life' (Kushner 1994: 89), and the ghost of Ethel who calls the ambulance that takes Roy to hospital. Similarly, the scenes of Harper's and Prior's drug-induced fantasies, of significance to the characters' trajectories, may prove reminiscent of *When Five Years Pass* (Lorca, 1931), in which the inclusion of a 'hallucinogenic scene' contributes to a 'rupturing of

the forms and planes of reality' (Johnston, 1998: 117). By intermingling earthly and otherworldly elements, *Angels* recalls these European plays in blurring the distinction between the two such that neither is privileged as a site of 'authenticity'. In tandem with the marginalised identity positions of the characters represented, this aspect might function to trouble 'essentialised notions of identity and reality' (Finburgh, Lavery and Shevtsova, 2006: 11), including those through which heterosexist gender paradigms are reproduced. As authenticity is displaced through the surreal and the performative, the notion of a masculine norm may, too, be disturbed.

Such unsettling of 'the illusory or placatory elements of representation' (Barber, 2004: 86) is later apparent in American postmodern performance practice, rendering visible those subjects of 'socio-political groups that had formerly been denied a voice [...] on the basis of social class, race, gender or sexual orientation' (Saddik, 2007: 8). To focus upon the final two categories here: that such work began to emerge in the wake of the Stonewall riots in 1969 both aligns it with a progressive zeitgeist, and underlines the relative radicalism of Genet and Lorca's considerably earlier work.⁸ The European influence upon this emerging practice can be connected to a broader movement, from the 1950s, which heralded American performance and theatres' response to Brecht and Artaud. The latter's theories, Saddik asserts, 'can best be seen in the practice in the plays of [...] Genet' (*ibid*: 27). Simultaneously, the Absurdist school (in which Genet's plays appear alongside those of Ionesco and Beckett), 'challenged traditional dramaturgy' and the concept of 'one unified, stable reality' (*ibid*: 29 and 31). Despite the

⁸ Although such a comparison may read as problematic, given Genet's French and Lorca's Spanish nationality, the fact that their plays were produced as critiques of patriarchal, homophobic cultures looks to justify this assertion.

considerable aesthetic and ideological divides between these European trends, a shared repudiation of realism began to echo across a diverse range of American practice, not least in delineations of the marginalised whom Brecht — like Genet and Lorca — placed centre stage.

That 'the roots of performance art rest firmly in off- and off-off-Broadway' (*ibid*: 15), reflects the marginalised position of both practitioners of this school and the subject matter of their work. As politicised, postmodern texts dealing in sexual otherness encompassed numerous practitioners, performance groups and solo artists from the late 1960s onwards, two will be referred to here as exemplars of a further trajectory with which *Angels* reverberates. This decision owes, in part, to the considerable diversity of this trope, which can be seen to contain, amongst others, lesbian groups (Split Britches, The Five Lesbian Brothers), and feminist artists (Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley).

Charles Ludlam, who established the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1969, produced plays of a distinctly postmodern aesthetic that anticipated later, queer projects. This included a use of playful, meta-theatrical strategies aligned to 'irony, [...] parody, [...] drag performance and [...] "camp" theatricality' (*ibid*: 121–23). Dollimore provides one definition of camp as:

less a self-concealment than a kind of attack [...] [which] works via parody, pastiche, and exaggeration [...]. [C]amp restores vitality to artifice, and vice versa, deriving the artificial from, and feeding it back as, the real.

(Dollimore, 1991: 310–12)

'Camp theatricality' can be traced in various guises in *Angels* and, crucially, in the construction of the Angel. First, given Dollimore's definition, the blurring of 'real' and 'artifice' are underscored by her simultaneously supernatural presence and catalytic function. Second, the stylistic mode of her entrance

onto the stage, on wires from above, looks to be marked by a theatrical excess: a cacophony of lights and music. While this second point is one that I will later explore in more depth, it is worth noting here, not least for the sense in which it is couched in playful self-consciousness: on witnessing it, Prior observes, 'Very Steven Spielberg' (Kushner, 1992: 90). The play's use of parody through cross-dressing and drag provides a further point of convergence with Ludlam, and one commensurate with a deconstructive approach to gendered identities. Saddik notes that '[t]he fluidity of gender is evident in Ludlam's plays, which all included at least one cross-dressing or transgendered role' (Saddik, 2007: 123). One of his works, *Bluebeard* (1970), depicted a scientist 'focusing on the creation of 'third gender' through his search for a 'third genital' (*ibid*). If this narrative can be read as a subversive critique of binaristic models of identity, so too can the fact that the Angel is revealed to possess 'eight vaginas' and 'a Bouquet of Phalli' (Kushner, 1994: 26).

The autobiographical work of queer solo artist, Tim Miller, shares with *Angels* the politicisation of personalised narratives. In *Glory Box* (1999) and *US* (2003), two of a series of pieces he has produced since the mid-1980s, 'he [critically] explores the topic of same-sex couples and their struggle for marriage and immigration rights' (Saddik, 2007: 197) in the States, drawing from his experience of having an Australian partner.⁹ In *US*, as in *Angels*, the theme of institutional homophobia intersects with strands of American history, such as the Vietnam War. In evoking the national backdrop as a heterosexualist culture, impassioned, polemical monologues are interspersed with humorous

⁹ Although the two specific texts addressed here were produced after *Angels*, the aspects of them discussed evince the same themes and strategies of those earlier produced by Miller.

observations, shared conspiratorially or flirtatiously with the audience members. A camp 'kind of attack' upon mainstream cultural narratives emerges through (re)readings of Hollywood musicals, claimed to have shaped Miller's sexual awakening. *My Fair Lady* is about 'a library shared by two men [...] who sang songs about how they would never let a woman in their life'; *South Pacific* imagined how 'you could fight bigotry while being surrounded by hunky, naked sailors and drag queens' (Miller, 2006). In *Angels*, comparatively, it is a masculinist culture and political infrastructure which stands to be queered: through, for instance, the 'outing' of a real historical figure suspected to have been gay (Cohn), and parodies of Hollywood narratives. The performative identities imagined in this play — achieved, in part, through cross-casting and drag — also evoke Miller's slippage, in *US*, between playing himself in various stages of his life, and parodically evoking such figures as Republican politician, Jesse Helms. Finally, it is relevant to note that Miller comprised one of the so-called 'NEA Four', a group of artists to whom national grants were awarded, then retracted, on the basis of their work's alleged 'indecentcy'. This event, in 1990, '[fuelled] a national debate' (Saddik, 2007: 192) as part of the so-called 'culture war' instigated by the US Right: a project defined in the interests of saving 'the soul of America', which Simpson has read as 'a defence of traditional masculinity' (Simpson, 1994: 2). The intersections between Miller's work and *Angels* thereby situate the latter as a drama that might be troublesome to masculine 'norms'.

This point is underlined by discrepancies between *Angels* and earlier 'AIDS plays'. Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1986) certainly pre-figured *Angels* in

constructing a gay couple facing AIDS within a broader, socio-political context. As Clum writes: 'Kramer [...] set his play within walls on which are painted statistics which are also accusations: of indifference or worse on the part [...] of the federal government, and of *The New York Times*' (Clum, 1994: 77). However, this drama, unlike *Angels*, has a conclusion in which the heteronormative model is reproduced: AIDS victim Felix marries his partner, Ned. While this, in itself, may be transgressive, Felix is configured to be close to death at this stage; 'there can be no [...indication of a future], only a deathbed marriage' (*ibid.*: 76). Unlike *Angels*, William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) and *Comprised Immunity*, by Andy Kirby (1985), both conclude with 'a symbolic enactment of the disappearance of the body [with AIDS]' (*ibid.*: 44). By this token, these play texts have been read to rehearse the gay male as 'the "problem" of traditional realistic drama [...] that has to be removed by the final curtain' (*ibid.*: 44–45). Aside from the conflation of AIDS and absence/death, the individualised focus and realist style apparent in all three of these dramas look to comprise what Edwards terms '[t]he story of AIDS as personal loss [which] primarily points to the importance of its personal and emotional, as opposed to social or political, impact' (Edwards, 1994: 127). Citing *The Normal Heart* as one example of a mainstream, successful AIDS play, he further notes that such representations '[tie] in neatly with typical American mom-and-apple-pie [...] sentimentality' (*ibid.*).

As outlined above, a key narrative of *Angels* also pivots around a gay couple in which one of the men has AIDS — and *most* of the scenes in which they are pictured defer to psychologically realist characterisation and dialogue. However, the way in which the picture of the States, more broadly, may

prevent the play compounding AIDS *solely* as 'personal loss', is underlined by responses to it in performance. For instance, in discussing a 1994 production, Janelle Reinelt notes how an 'industrial, urban, explicitly theatrical [set]' worked to 'place the domestic [...] within the context of the social, economic, and political [...] mitigating the tendency [...] to slip into bourgeois individualism' (Reinelt, 1997: 239). The breaks from realism that distance *Angels* from a number of earlier 'AIDS plays' do so in part through their capacity for portraying a wider America. Aspects of the drama that work to this effect thus further align it with a politicised trope of queer performance practice, informed by the European avant-garde.

History

Of the outcome of the Cold War, and subsequent 'end' of socialism, Fukuyama noted: '[t]he triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable [...] alternatives to Western liberalism' (Fukuyama, 1989: 3). By this token, he made the claim that 'the basic *principles* of the liberal democratic states could not be improved upon' (*ibid*: 5). A Hegelian understanding of history was deemed no longer applicable as infrastructures apposed to capitalist democracy were formally discredited. Fukuyama asserted that, '[t]he state that emerges at the end of history [...] recognizes and protects [...] man's universal right to freedom', allowing for the possibility of 'a universal homogenous state' (*ibid*: 5). The 'at once triumphalist and optimistic' (Sim, 1999: 17) tone apparent in this theory prompted numerous critical responses, such as that posited by Jacques Derrida:

[i]nstead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria at the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory

discourses, let us never neglect [...] innumerable [...] sites of suffering. [...] [N]ever before [...] have so many men, women and children been subjugated [...].
(Derrida, 1994 [1993]: 85)

Christopher Norris similarly conjectures that

to Fukuyama [...] 'history', like 'ideology', belongs to that class of obsolescent language-games which nowadays lack any kind of [...] power to mobilize opinion on behalf of [...] oppressed [...] interest group[s].
(Norris, 1992: 158)

The formal absence of ideology in the state of Fukuyama's imagining has, furthermore, been deemed to preclude the possibility for 'any means of criticizing consensus-beliefs [...] [of an] exploitative, class-based, chauvinistic or [...] racist character' (*ibid*: 155). Given the masculinist notions referenced here, the word 'homophobia' might feasibly be added to this list; this would certainly map onto the place of gay subjects as 'subjugated' or 'oppressed' within liberal democracies. It is also of relevance that the tenets of Fukuyama's theory tally with those of postmodern discourses more broadly: an example of 'endist' thought which likewise proclaimed the 'death of the subject'. As has been discussed in relation to queer, this theoretical shift may host problematic potential for those for whom subjecthood has proved a historical battle, or a battle reliant on the possibility of history. For instance, in arguing for the continuance of lesbian and gay studies in the late 1990s, Sally Munt states: 'we would like to caution that the end of identity is more feasible to some than to others' (Munt, 1997: xiii). Simultaneously, if subject positions appear homogenised in the Fukuyamian paradigm, queer may serve a subversive function beyond that attemptable from positions within the binary. Arguably, either gay or queer discourses may expose Derrida's 'subjugated' as proof of those polarised hierarchies which the formal script of capitalist liberalism refutes. However, it is through a queer refuting of the authority

and naturalness of the binary structure that an idealised vision of the 'end of history' may be troubled more fundamentally.

Given the masculinist ethos of the liberal state-model, as Norris conceives of it, the fact that *The History Boys* and *Angels* each combine representations of homosexuality with a focus upon history, renders each potentially transgressive in this context: not least as both are set within states that comprised exemplars of the democracy Fukuyama looked to celebrate. Both plays thus tackle the implications of the loss of 'secure' subject positions at the 'end of history', concepts implicitly related to the 'crisis' in masculinity.

The History Boys sees the role of history as academic topic inherently linked with questions of subjecthood. The poets discussed in Hector's classroom are among figures key to projects of recovering gay histories: Housman, Auden and Sassoon comprise but three examples. Although there are many cases in which the sexuality of these poets is not made readily apparent, it is of note that the first time one of them (Housman) is evoked, through Hector, one of the boys is heard to respond, 'Wasn't he a nancy, sir?' (Bennett, 2004: 5). As this moment occurs early on in the play, in the first of the classroom scenes, it may contribute to the framing of subsequent intertextual references. That the classroom is configured as a queer space is evident in the way that allusions to historic, popular culture are made manifest. In acting out scenes from such films as *Now, Voyager*, which starred gay icon Bette Davies, and singing extracts from songs written for women, like *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* (*Bewitched*), the teenage characters parody female roles. Aside from the fact that it was originally produced to be sung by a woman, *Bewitched* was

covered by two popular gay icons at a distance of forty years: Barbara Streisand in 1963, and Cher in 2003. Although it is Posner who is configured to perform this particular track, and takes exclusively female roles in the classroom enactments, it is significant to note that those boys who do not appear to represent a particular sexual identity likewise play women, or the men with whom they are romantically involved. For example, it is the relatively minor characters of Timms and Lockwood who are seen to take on, respectively, Davies's role and that of her character's husband in enacting the romantic final scene of *Now, Voyager*. In various performances, including the premiere, such as these scenes looked to be approached with self-conscious melodrama, humour and theatricality, underscoring their performative aspect. Such aesthetics see the play's stylistic qualities take on a postmodern, queer dimension.

Clum defines 'gay drama' as motivated by 'the impulse to depict and define the collective past of gay men to affirm a sense of identity and solidarity' (Clum, 1994: 200). It is perceivable that *The History Boys's* intertextual citations function in this manner, challenging exclusive and masculinist claims to subjecthood. In this context, the evocation of mainstream, cultural icons recalls the liberationist project of forging a shared identity through association with particular texts and idols. For 'it has long been re-assuring for gay people [...] to claim historic gay heroes, ranging from Sappho, Julius Caesar, and Shakespeare to [...] Walt Whitman' (Duberman, Vicinus and Chauncey, 1991: 3). This notwithstanding, it is of note that very few of the references foreground, either the sexual identities of the poets in question, or the status

of the gay cultural texts and icons as such, thereby, perhaps, maintaining the closet.

If, for a post-millennial audience, gay histories stand to be clearly evoked, the 'crystallizing of [...] gay identities' (Gross, 1993: 124) may still risk reifying the binary on which masculinity relies. This is, after all, an approach popularised by gay activists of the 1970s in particular, and one that appeared to lose its radicality in the face of queer. Having acknowledged that '[h]istory for gay men is [...] [a] necessity' (Gowing, 1997: 53), Laura Gowing notes, 'the fragmentation of contemporary [...] identities [...] is generating new needs and desires. [...] [I]dentity is not homogeneous or seamless; historical narratives cannot be seamless either' (*ibid*: 63). Despite the diversity of those texts which the drama cites, their unifying factor relates specifically to the existence of gay male subjects *as such*: those whom ostensibly share a 'collective past' (Clum, 1994: 200, my emphasis), through an essentialised position.

That *The History Boys* might appear outdated, in this respect, reflects upon its formal similarities to the earlier, modernist plays discussed above. If this denotes resistance to the political possibilities of a postmodern aesthetic, it likewise underscores a nostalgia for the certainties of 'fixed' and binaristic identities. It is, after all, in the context of a play set in capitalist, 1980s Britain — a model of 'de-ideologized' (Fukuyama, 1989: 15) liberalism — that psychological realism sees the queer space of the classroom ultimately shut down, and homosexuality equated with abjection. To this end, the play's configuration of history provides further indication of nostalgia for the closet,

and one that bespeaks the affective power of identity flux significant to the 'crisis' in masculinity. Just as, in this discourse, the heterosexual male is drawn to suffer through being paradoxically powerless in a state of patriarchy, here, a concealed position is preferable to no position at all. Gillian Rose states that '[p]ost-modernism [...] identifies itself as a process of endless mourning, lamenting the loss of securities which, on its own argument, were none such' (Rose, 1996: 11). In light of the largely modernist style of *The History Boys*, the play looks to necessarily engage with this 'mourning', whilst barely allowing for the possibility of its futility. This, what might be termed as 'powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed' (Fukuyama, 1989: 18), is reinforced through other aspects of the play. It is apt, for example, that Hector symbolises resistance to shifts in educational practice. During a scene in which Irwin is positioned to question the boys as to why Hector locks his classroom door, the responses include, 'It's locked against the Forces of Progress, sir'; 'It's locked against the future' (Bennett, 2004: 36). The fact that the direct addresses (which might configure the play as a shared memory), never occur in Irwin's lessons, underlines the function of Hector in a nostalgic turn to the past, within which a gay position is also an abject one. *The History Boys* might, then, prove redolent of the 'backlash' discourse, insofar as history is evoked to allow for a vision of secure identity positions that privilege straight masculinity.

Angels is structured so as to compress disparate threads of US history (earlier outlined). Through postmodern strategies that refute realist linearity, the queer transgressions between the present/past and living/dead bring together Ethel Rosenberg and Roy, as well as positioning Prior, in one scene,

with his ancestral ghosts. Temporal disjunction also features in constructions of the play's present, and interconnects with those of a spatial register. During the first scene in which Prior is seen to meet the Angel in *Perestroika*, and detail the encounter to Belize, the interrelated exchanges both unfold 'in the present'. Belize 'watches from the street' as the Angel appears (Kushner, 1994: 23). He is, simultaneously, drawn as absent from it, as if the encounter were a flashback: 'Whoa whoa whoa wait a minute excuse me please. You fucked this Angel?' (*ibid*: 26).

The Angel recalls the Angel of History from Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), a figure unable to ignore or rectify the devastation accumulated by human progress. Through a 'reworking' (Harries, 1997: 185) of this Angel, a dialectic emerges between resistance to, and engagement with, progress. The 'Great Work' (Kushner, 1992: 90) for which the Angel hails Prior as prophet at the close of *Millennium Approaches*, is later shown as a bid to stop ongoing human 'PROGRESS', which she claims as the source of God's deserting heaven: 'YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING' (Kushner, 1994: 27–28). This occurs during the scene referenced above, with Belize. On the basis of the Angel's words, Prior is heard to explain to him, 'As the human race began to progress, [...] everything started to come unglued,' to which Belize later responds: 'But that's not how the world works [...]. It only spins forward' (*ibid*). A scene towards the close of the play, set in heaven, sees Prior finally refuse the Angel's demands. Claiming 'We can't just stop', he returns the 'Tome of Immobility, of respite, of cessation', earlier given to him to signify his prophetic role (*ibid*: 87–88). This act, and his subsequent return to earth for 'more life' (*ibid*: 89),

correspond with his function in the epilogue. Here, Prior's closing line echoes the sentiment expressed by Belize: 'The world only spins forward. We will be citizens' (*ibid.*: 99). What figures as the inevitability of forward motion, or progress, is thereby aligned to a progressive politics. As a symbol of a right-wing, homophobic US, Roy's function highlights this point. He only appears with the capacity for change during a posthumous, erotic liaison with Joe (more about which below), and his first and last word is a bid for stasis: 'Hold!' (Kushner, 1992: 2 and Kushner 1994: 76). If the play comprises a critique of heterosexualist culture, so too does it problematise Fukuyama's theory. That gay men 'will be', but are not yet 'citizens' bespeaks an inequality hidden by idealist constructions of liberal democracy. The possibility of history is crucial then, in *Angels*, to counteracting 'the homogeneity of an America that is home for [straight] white men' (Minwalla, 1997: 116). The use of queer aesthetics that enable the depiction of the Angel, and Prior's journey to and from heaven operate subversively, exposing how — in a masculinist and celebratory 'end' of history discourse — 'the rhetoric and the reality are lethally at odds' (Norris, 1992: 157). Thus, while a largely modernist drama like *The History Boys* sees history underpin a nostalgic agenda, *Angels's* postmodern strategies are geared to looking forwards; to signposting the importance of history ongoing to imagining radical change.

Analysis of *The History Boys*

In depicting gay characters in a homophobic institution, *The History Boys* configures homosexuality as illegitimate. This factor aligns the play with Butler's notion of 'the melancholic formation of gender', which sees 'heterosexuality [naturalise] itself by insisting on the radical otherness of

homosexuality' and the latter come to occupy 'a domain [...] understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss' (Butler, 1997: 133, 139 and 135). Relevant to these concepts is the evocation of the closet. The sexual orientation represented by Posner is no secret amongst the boys: he talks to classmate Scripps of his feelings, and refers to a hug that Dakin gives him in front of their peers as a 'longed-for moment' (Bennett, 2004: 103). However, that Irwin is the sole teacher to whom Posner is shown to 'come out' undermines the possibility of reading him as wholly uncloseted. By comparison, the sexual identity invested in Hector is one marked by secrecy and repression. Touching the boys on his motorbike is the only sex act with which he is associated, and it is only through the boys' discussions that the audience first becomes aware of that to which 'pillion duty' pertains:

DAKIN What happened with Hector? On the bike?

SCRIPPS As per. Except I managed to get my bag down. I think he thought he'd got me going.

(*ibid*: 21)

The fact that Hector is never seen 'on the bike', may contribute to the closeted status of the sexuality he represents. In being something that is both secretive, and unstaged, the construction of his desire evinces the way in which the play might serve to both 'dramatize and maintain the closet' (Clum, 1994: 85). Hector's position thus is further secured by references to his 'somewhat unexpected wife' (Bennett, 2004: 41), an off-stage figure who points to his formal compliance with heteronormative convention. Irwin's sexuality is only hinted at for the first time at the start of the second act, in a scene, set in the future, that features him denying sexual involvement with Dakin. Hence, the possibility of same-sex desire is dramatised through its negation. The later scenes in which Irwin's orientation is explicated, bear key similarities to that

featuring Posner, both being comprised of duologues that unfold in private contexts.

This initial sketch looks to constitute some key examples of the ways in which homosexual desire and loss are configured in *The History Boys*. On the basis of the 'difficulty' with which the characters are drawn to inhabit sexual otherness, the school setting may be read as a paradigmatic microcosm of a heterosexualist 'culture', 'which can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty' (Butler, 1997: 133). It is in this context that the formal ideology of the school is comparable to Butler's account of the US Military, in which 'prohibition' and 'renunciation' of homosexuality governs an institutional ethos (*ibid*: 142–43). Butler notes:

the fear of setting loose homosexuality from this circuit of renunciation [...] terrifies the guardians of masculinity in the U.S. Military. For *what would masculinity 'be' were it not for this aggressive circuit of renunciation from which it is wrought?* Gays in the military threaten to undo masculinity only because this is a masculinity made of repudiated homosexuality.
(*ibid*: 143, my emphasis)

An analogous sentiment is expressed by Lynne Segal in her claim that

the maintenance and stability of contemporary heterosexual masculinity is deeply dependent upon its distance from, and obsessive denunciation of, an opposing category – that of the homosexual.
(Segal, 1990: 137)

Such assertions support the argument that the visible and legitimate gay male subject may figure as a catalyst for the 'crisis' in masculinity. Despite a discernable nostalgia, the fact that *The History Boys* foregrounds homosexuality provides an opportunity to address Butler's question.

Further analysis of the school's formal 'culture' comprises a useful point of departure. The institution's homophobic ideology appears to be personified

by the white, heterosexual Headmaster, an archetypal symbol of patriarchal law. This is underlined by the fact that he is someone to whom none of the gay characters ever intentionally reveal their orientation. Butler suggests that the prohibition on homosexuality demonstrates the fragility of heterosexual subjecthood, which relies on internalising that it has been compelled to prohibit. This repudiation is evident within the sphere of the Headmaster's influence. For example, despite being gay himself, one of the functions of Irwin is to police the boundaries of heteronormative acceptability. The above-mentioned consultation with Posner sees him offer no more advice than 'It will pass' (Bennett, 2004: 44), and, in a conversation with Mrs Lintott about the exchange, Irwin informs her: 'I sympathised, though not so much as to suggest I might be in the same boat' (*ibid.*: 42).

Perhaps most significantly, the singular occasion on which the Headmaster does become aware of a character's sexual otherness, his response is a negative one. Having been alerted to Hector's after-school dealings with the pupils, he summons the teacher to his office and interrupts his attempts at justification with aggressive intent:

HECTOR The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act.
 In the Renaissance...

HEADMASTER Fuck the Renaissance. And fuck literature and Plato and
 Michaelangelo and Oscar Wilde and all the other
 shrunken violets you people line up. This is a school and
 it isn't normal.

(*ibid.*: 53, my emphasis)

Although the final sentence can be seen to refer to the fact that it is pupils with whom Hector has been involved, the Headmaster's homophobic tone is evident throughout the scene. An emphasis, in performance, upon the

confrontational aspect of these lines, could serve to highlight the white, heterosexual subject the Headmaster represents as one dependent upon a consistently 'repudiated homosexuality'; for, 'to desire a member of the same sex [...] is to "panic" gender, or [...] to place an apparently coherent and stable heterosexual identity at risk' (Butler, 1997: 143 and 132). It is, then, the visibility of Hector's sexual orientation that might signify a threat to a hegemonic identity, in the sense that '[h]omoeroticism [...] when revealed, [...] is the greatest challenge to [...] masculinity's claim to authenticity [...] and dominance' (Simpson, 2004: 7). Referring to the night on which he was informed of Hector's behaviour, the Headmaster reports to Mrs Lintott that he 'was so pleased', he had relations with his wife: that she became an 'object' of 'sexual interference' (Bennett, 2004: 68). There are two points to be made here. First, the objectifying of an off-stage female reinforces a reading of the Headmaster as a character symbolising heterosexist structures of power.¹⁰ Second, it is of interest that the disciplining of an unruly sexual otherness is followed by the Headmaster invoking his 'heterosexual career' (Butler, 1997: 137), given 'the gender reassurance [...straight men] obtain from the assertion of heterosexual [...] behaviour' (Segal, 1990: 135). The fact that he is drawn to self-define as active and dominant, within the confines of a legitimate, heterosexual encounter, denotes a claim to 'virility': 'precisely that *which is not queer*' (Simpson, 1994: 4).

A return to the scene above, between the Headmaster and Hector, enables a transposition of this idea from the psychic to the cultural. For the allusion to context ('this is a school'), underscores the connection between heterosexual

¹⁰ This argument may be supported by reference to an earlier dialogue with Irwin in which the Headmaster appears sexist, noting of Hull University, '[and] now, we're told, women in droves' (Bennett, 2004: 11).

masculine identity and the formal scripts of masculinist infrastructures. The potentially violent quality of the Headmaster's lines tally with the argument that 'homosexual expression [is perceived to be] disruptive of the orderliness and discipline of classically all-male institutions' (Segal, 1990: 159). If 'out gay men make explicit the implicit homoeroticism' of '[places] where traditionally boys become men', (Simpson, 1994: 13), the 'outing' of Hector may imbue the play with a subversive quality. However, it is significant that the Headmaster's prejudice is in keeping with the gay characters' close relationship with the closet, aligning the identities they represent with the 'unlivable' (Butler, 1997: 135).

The degree to which this 'unlivability' is at play in *The History Boys* can be further assessed, in part, through examining both the Headmaster's allusion to queer, historical figures, and additional functions of this character. On the one hand, if the references he is drawn to make work as an 'outing' of the canon, this is *perhaps* a moment of transgression.¹¹ On the other hand, the tone in which the figures are invoked mirrors the collapse of homosexuality and abjection apparent elsewhere in the play. The inclusion of Wilde is of particular pertinence to both sides of this argument, given both his cult status as a gay icon and, conversely, the way in which his imprisonment has been perceived to highlight, symbolically, the 'dangers of deviant behaviour' (Segal, 1990: 139). While the Headmaster's explicit words may not 'maintain the closet' (Clum, 1994: 85), the 'obsessive denunciation' (Segal, 1990: 137) of the gay subject comprises another source of nostalgia for it.

¹¹ As noted above, however, it is feasible that a spectator watching a play produced in 2004 would be aware of these historical figures' sexual orientation, rendering this 'subversion' an anachronistic move.

It is arguable that the play perpetuates the views of the Headmaster through other, comparable means. The depiction of 'othered', racial identities is a case in point. When Irwin notes that Jewish pupil Posner is 'clever', the Headmaster responds by saying, 'Jewish boys often are, a role though nowadays that is more and more being taken over by the Asian boys' (Bennett, 2004: 77–78). Posner's intelligence is made apparent through the fact that he is the only one of the boys shown to secure a scholarship for Oxford. Through positioning this character as representative of the 'the intellectual Jewish male' (Brod, 1994: 91), the play reifies the stereotype attached to a particular racial, gendered subject as one that fails to '[conform] to dominant, [...] brawny standards of masculinity' (*ibid*), and thereby symbolises a 'countertype to "manliness"' (Boyarin, 1997: 4) — a point potentially underscored by the fact of his being gay.¹² In this sense, Posner can be read as a device that perpetuates the centrality of a dominant masculine script. Crowther and Akthar, two relatively minor characters, represent a black and Asian boy, respectively. In refuting Hector's offer of a ride home, the former says he is 'off for a run' whilst the latter claims to have 'computer club' (Bennett, 2004: 17). Although these may be brief, even throw-away lines, stereotypes of the hyper-masculine black subject, and cerebral/'unmanly' Asian male, may be rehearsed here. In tandem with representations of homosexuality, the marginalisation of certain racial identities can therefore be viewed to reify a '[white] masculinity [...] strengthened through [...] repudiations' (Butler, 1997: 140).

¹² During a dialogue with Irwin, the Headmaster reveals that Posner's father is a retired furrier. Although this is a minor point, it supports an argument of stereotyping insofar as this profession has historically been deemed 'a "Jewish" trade' (Elazar, 1989: 271).

As I have begun to explore, the 'unlivability' of gay subjecthood is made manifest through bodily, psychic and social limitations imposed upon the males represented. Through the death of Hector towards the end of the play, homosexuality figures as literally unlivable. Dependent on how far an 1980s zeitgeist might infuse a performance, it is possible that this gay-as-death collapse acquires additional weight through being set in the first decade of AIDS: a phenomena which prompted 'an upsurge of homophobia accompanying [...] public panic' (Segal, 1990: 162). However, it is worth noting that, by a rupture in realism, Hector is not 'expelled from the stage before the final curtain' (Clum, 1994: 107). After Mrs Lintott is seen to deliver the account of the pupils' futures, which follows a memorial assembly for Hector, the latter re-appears to deliver the play's closing lines: 'Pass it on, boys. That's the game I want you to learn. Pass it on' (Bennett, 2004: 109). As in *Angels*, a queer transgression enables the re-emergence of a dead gay character. This point notwithstanding, I would suggest that the functions of Irwin and Posner shore up the link to abjection. The former's confinement to a wheelchair is of significance, occurring after an agreement to meet with Dakin for sex. Whilst the acting upon same-sex desire is shown to result in death for Hector, consenting to engage in it results in a physical disability that might symbolise an equivalent 'punishment'. When it is made plain that Irwin and Dakin never followed through with their plans, the latter states, through direct address, 'I couldn't face the wheelchair' (*ibid*: 106). The fate given Irwin underpins the foreclosure of sexually 'other' possibilities within a 'heterosexual culture' (Butler, 1997: 139). In the closing moments of the play, Mrs Lintott describes Posner's adult life to the audience thus:

He lives alone in a cottage he renovated himself [and] has [...] periodic breakdowns. He [...] has a host of friends... though only on the internet. [...] He has long since stopped asking himself where it went wrong. (Bennett, 2004: 108)

In a 2007 production of the play at the Wyndham Theatre in London, this final scene saw all of the teenage characters sitting in a row, downstage, facing the audience. Whilst every other boy proudly shot his hand in the air in response to the details of his future, this final account saw the actor playing Posner hang his head and slowly raise a nervous, reluctant arm. It is noteworthy that this profile might be mapped onto that of Segal's account of 'male homosexuals [...] in the first half of the twentieth century' as tending to be 'guilt-ridden' or 'celibate' subjects who '[endured...] fear and anxiety' (Segal, 1990: 140), underlining the validity of deeming this a classically gay text.

If these delineations pose only a limited threat to the masculine 'norms' by which they are marginalised, the same can be claimed of the gay male characters' construction as professionals. In disciplining Hector, the Headmaster tells the teacher, 'I do not want to sack you. It's so untidy. It would be easier [...] if you retired early' (Bennett, 2004: 53). Shortly after this threat is later withdrawn due to Dakin's intervention, the character's death is reported. That Hector demonstrates regret over a sense of 'failed ambition' (Bond and Thomas, 2006: 9) is made plain soon after he has been disciplined, by a scene set in the classroom from which I have formerly quoted ('What made me piss my life away in this god-forsaken place? There's nothing of me left' [Bennett, 2004: 65]). Mrs Lintott's summary of Posner's future is prefigured by the opening of the second act, in which he, as an adult, tells a now-famous television historian Irwin that university 'didn't work out' (*ibid*: 60). This scene unfolds on the outdoor set of a documentary: Irwin is

established as the programme's presenter, while Posner appears to be paying him a visit. During the course of their exchange, it comes to light that Posner is completing a story on the other to sell to the press. Shortly after Irwin is quizzed on his relationship with Dakin whilst they were at school, he discovers that Posner is miked. Irwin's reaction, 'Jesus. How did you come to this?' (*ibid*), underscores the sorry position Posner represents.

If the construction of this character aligns gay identity with unrealised potential, the same cannot be said of Irwin. Aside from being drawn as a celebrity in the aforementioned scene, the play's opening, set further in the future, sees him working as a government spin doctor, thereby establishing the scope and longevity of his career. It is clear that Irwin's credibility depends upon his having remained in the closet; there is nothing in the opening scene of either act to suggest that he has 'come out' in the post-teaching roles in which he figures. During the duologue with the adult Posner, Irwin's response to questions about Dakin underline the necessary 'prohibition and disavowal' (Butler, 1997: 139) of a gay identity in a heteronormative culture. Before realising that Posner is wearing a microphone, Irwin refutes the suggestion that something 'happened' between him and Dakin. When Posner persists, ('You liked him'), the stage directions dictate that 'Irwin says nothing'; he re-asserts, soon after, that 'Nothing happened' (Bennett, 2004: 61). Even when pressed on the question of Dakin's feelings for him, the character only responds by asking 'why' Posner expresses a 'need to know' (*ibid*). In contemplating the 'uncertainty with which homosexual love is regarded', Butler writes,

[...] is it regarded as a 'true' love, a 'true' loss [...] worthy and capable of being grieved, [...] of being lived? Or is it a love and loss haunted by the spectre of a certain unreality, a certain unthinkability, the double

disavowal of [...] 'I never loved him, I never lost him' [...]? Is this the 'never never' that supports the naturalized surface of heterosexual life [...]?

(Butler, 1997: 138)

Positioned to deny that anything ever happened, and refusing to voice the feelings of either himself or Dakin, Irwin may be deemed to enact the 'never never' of this theory. Thus, despite being representative of a gay man, Irwin's closeted status operates to reify this 'naturalized surface' through foreclosing the possibility of same-sex desire. The duologue with Posner may be structured to make sense of his refusing such details, not least in order to create a sense of expectation in the audience: at this stage in the play, the flirtation with Dakin has yet to begin. This notwithstanding, it is relevant that a spoken expression of gay desire is reduced to 'nothing' in Irwin's report. Thus, as the 'loss' of Dakin becomes one unworthy of 'grief', Irwin's silences elude the possibility of such loss. For '[i]f this love is from the start out of the question, then it cannot happen, and if it does, it most certainly did not' (*ibid*: 139). By functioning to this effect, Irwin does not trouble the realm of masculinity any more than Hector or Posner might in this context. That his concealment affords him success reifies the link between a heteronormative, male identity and professional prosperity within a capitalist culture (recalling my earlier discussion about Roy in *Angels*). The fact that the Headmaster's position is never thrown into doubt underscores this point.

This analysis alludes to the fact that, in its 'unthinkability' (*ibid*: 138), same-sex desire is frequently denied expression through the spoken word. What might be viewed, comparatively, to further 'maintain the closet' (Clum, 1994: 85), is the form of language by which gay tendencies are suggested. In discussing a war poem in private, Hector and Posner acknowledge a shared sense of 'loss'

at the description of a soldier's unceremonious burial. Perhaps invoking a homosocial context analogous to that of Butler's military, the theme of the play which the audience see discussed here, might work to recall the 'association between soldiers' experiences and some form of homo-eroticism' (Segal, 1990: 142). Guiding Posner through the poem, the analysis which Hector conducts is heavy in subtext. Highlighting the presence of the word, 'uncoffined', he cites telling examples of other compound adjectives: 'Un-kissed. Un-rejoicing. Un-confessed. Un-embraced. [...] And with [...] a sense of not sharing, being out of it. [...] Not being in the swim' (Bennett, 2004: 56). Posner's response, 'I felt that a bit' (*ibid*), highlights his empathy with these states. If this exchange evinces a sense of abjection, it is of note that it follows immediately after Hector's meeting with the Headmaster. That the two characters only divulge their shared feelings indirectly, through the poem, concurs with Butler's theory that 'there is no public [...] discourse' (Butler, 1997: 138) by which gay desire/loss might find a valid voice. For if homosexuality 'happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal' (*ibid*), there is no language available to gay subjects to mourn that they could never legitimately have. The deference from what might read as transparent expression, within a realist drama, is likewise in play elsewhere.

To take one other instance: only after Hector has been 'outed' does Irwin have a single conversation with him that elicits his sexual desires. Without referring directly to his orientation, he merely asks his elder, 'Has a boy ever made you unhappy?' to which Hector advises, 'See it as an inoculation. [...] With the occasional booster... another face [...]... it can last you half a lifetime' (Bennett, 2004: 94). A further point to make here regards the presence

of 'ungrievability', as comparable to that for which I have argued in relation to the scene in which Irwin is a television historian. If melancholia is, after Freud, 'the unfinished process of grieving' (Butler, 1997: 132), the deferment of mourning a same-sex attachment compounds the 'domain of homosexuality' as one of 'ungrievable loss' (*ibid*: 135). Heterosexuality, then, is maintained in its dominant form, a fact that may seem problematic given that Dakin is also constructed to detail his sex life with Fiona through metaphorical imagery (as illustrated in the first half of this chapter). However, in contrast to the examples cited in relation to homoeroticism, the relevant lines of Dakin are rendered rather more transparent through being analysed by the boys. Such reflexive comments as 'the metaphor really fits' and 'the metaphor isn't exact', delivered in the context of Dakin reporting on his exploits, rupture the figures of speech through which he is shown to communicate (Bennett, 2004: 28 and 29). It is then, in part, by modes of language, that the play maintains the privilege of heteronormative desire upon which masculinity relies: the contrasting binary which can be spoken of, explicitly, and without a sense of shame.

An element that could perhaps trouble this reading is that of Posner, in terms of him being 'out' amongst tolerant peers, and directly confessing his sexuality to Irwin. However, there exist certain moments in the play that suggest his subjugated position might be obscured through being comedic. When posing for the school photograph, the character states, 'All my life I've been one of those squatting at the front. I don't care about Oxford and Cambridge. I just want to graduate to a chair' (*ibid*: 91). Aside from the way in which this latter remark may tally, dependent on staging, with a physical

embodiment of a lower status, the potential for humour in this moment is not dissimilar to that in the scene in which Dakin hugs Posner towards the play's end, a moment that concludes with the boys '[hooting] for more so Dakin [...] [will do] it again' (*ibid*: 103). Hence, comedy may function to undermine a focus on the conservative norms perpetuated by the portrayal of Posner. In revealing his sexual orientation to Irwin, this character makes two direct statements: 'I love Dakin'; 'I'm homosexual' (*ibid*: 42). While these lines might stand to undercut such desire's 'unspeakability' (Butler, 1997: 186), it is significant that the form of this scene signals a break with realism analogous to that of the play's close. Irwin and Posner's duologue is interspersed with another, between the former character and Mrs Lintott, to whom the exchange with Posner is shown to be reported as it unfolds. In light of the notion that 'homosexuals [...] are [...] marginalized by the very structure of realistic drama' (Clum, 1994: 92), it is significant that a rupture in this form concurs with the moment in which Posner is drawn to 'come out' to a figure of authority. Like Hector's posthumous appearance, this may signify a subversive aspect. However, I would suggest that the form deployed here tallies with the concept that homosexual 'love [...] [is] haunted by the specter of a certain unreality' (Butler, 1997: 138): it is only configured as 'liveable' outside of the play's governing structure. Like Hector, this character is not positioned to speak, at a crucial moment, without the play first dislocating from its realist strictures. Furthermore, as the pupil's comic function may work to mask the heterosexualism re-inscribed through him, so the poetic or sentimental quality of Hector's last words might obscure the collapse between the gay male subject and death.

It may be possible to conclude that the sexually 'othered' men depicted are not imbued with the agency to reveal what masculinity might 'be' if fashioned as a rupture within the 'circuit of renunciation' (*ibid.*: 143). Pre-supposing that '[t]enderness and delicacy between men do create new masculine images, while also subverting the inevitability of heterosexuality' (Segal, 1990: 154), a focus upon instances of tactility or support look to extend this analysis. Towards the end of Hector and Posner's discussion of the war poem, the teacher makes reference to the way a sentiment expressed in literature can resonant with a reader's experience, 'as if a hand has come out and taken yours' (Bennett, 2004: 56). Immediately afterwards, 'He puts out his hand, and it seems for a moment as if Posner will take it, or even that Hector may put it on Posner's knee. But the moment passes' (*ibid.*). In a silent exchange that both alludes to, and forecloses, the possibility of physical closeness or solidarity, this failure to touch may function to mirror the characters' failure to speak. The closet is evoked through bodily representation: if it is opened a crack by Hector's gesture, the lack of physical contact sees it shut once more. With this moment in mind, it is relevant that Posner is later shown to touch Hector in a gesture of support. During the scene in which the teacher cries in front of his pupils, having been disciplined, 'Posner is the one who [...] pats Hector on the back, saying "Sir". Then he starts, still very awkwardly, to rub his back' (*ibid.*: 65). Despite the discomfort by which this event is framed, and the fact that it is the only instance of its kind, this contact may, at least, denote the 'thinkability' of a 'new masculine [image]' through the male bodies onstage.

The anomalous nature of this final example raises the question of *how* the presence of gay characters could figure to represent how masculinity might 'be' otherwise within the school depicted. Butler argues that as a stable gendered identity insists that its binary 'other' 'must remain [...] repudiated', 'it may only be by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection is possible' (Butler 1997: 149). In making this point, she may appear to undermine the potential for agency of the signifying homo- or heterosexual defined as such through a process of introjection. Given that the characters of *The History Boys* are largely contained within a traditional, realist framework, in which there is little room for the fractured, contingent postmodern subject, there seems scarce chance of that which they represent appearing decentred or 'incoherent'. However, it is, perhaps, through the function of a heterosexual character that the troubling of these binaries may take on a partial presence.

If 'threats to heterosexuality [...] become threats to gender itself' (*ibid*: 135), Dakin's role in relation to Irwin could work transgressively. Prefiguring Butler's sentiments, Segal writes that masculinity is dependent upon 'not wishing to be the object of other men's desire' (Segal, 1990: 134): a 'wish' invested in Dakin long before he arranges a sexual liaison with Irwin in the latter part of the play. The audience witness the pupil telling friend Scripps various pieces of information, during both acts, which point to his mounting feelings for Irwin: 'I'm beginning to like him more [...]. Though he hates me'; 'I have never wanted to please anyone the way I do him, girls not excepted' (Bennett, 2004: 29 and 76). Finally, it is ultimately the pupil and not the teacher who instigates flirtation:

DAKIN How does stuff happen, do you think? People decide to do stuff.
Make moves. Alter things.

IRWIN I'm not sure what you're talking about.

DAKIN No? (*He smiles.*) Think about it.

(*ibid*: 89)

In tandem with the way that the younger of these two characters looks to stand as the 'object' of another man's 'desire', the actor playing him may be configured as an object of the gaze. This gains in significance given what Edwards terms as the 'disavowed' status of the 'male, sexual object' (Edwards, 2006: 89), and the concept that, in '[insisting] on being viewed' the male body on stage 'is itself a challenge to traditional gender roles' (Clum, 1994: 20).

While all of the key male characters, will (unlike their female counterparts) be seen by an audience, there are certain factors that allude to a privileged focus on Dakin. First, his attractiveness is repeatedly referred to throughout the play. Second, the fact that the actor who first took the role, Dominic Cooper, is a performer of conventional good looks, is a notion lent support by the fact that he has since been cast as the romantic male lead in Hollywood films such as *The Duchess* and *Mamma Mia!: The Musical* (both 2008). Third, certain staging strategies that could direct audience attention to Dakin comprise parts of the dialogue. Posner tells Scripps that Irwin 'seldom looks at anyone else'; when asked how he knows, he replies, 'Because neither do I. Our eyes meet, looking at Dakin' (Bennett, 2004: 81). Should the classroom scenes be directed in such a way as to mirror these claims, the two desiring pairs of eyes upon Dakin might work to direct a spectator's gaze to 'the best looking' (*ibid*: 50) of the teenage characters. In an analysis of the increased visibility of the male body, Simpson notes that

[t]raditional male heterosexuality [...] is now inundated with images of men's bodies as passive [...] and desired. [...] 'active' no longer maps onto 'masculine', nor passive onto feminine. Traditional heterosexuality *cannot survive this reversal*, particularly because it brings masculinity into perilously close contact with [...] homosexuality.
(Simpson, 2004: 4)

If the construction and visibility of Dakin invites such desire whilst signifying as heterosexual, perhaps this facet of *The History Boys* represents a rupture in that script of masculinity which 'cannot survive the reversal' of normative binaries. Hence, it may be through a Butlerian 'incoherence', in which 'close contact' with same-sex desire is not pictured as perilous, that masculinity, through Dakin, can 'be' otherwise.

It may appear odd that the character in question has been claimed as heterosexual, when same-sex desires feature in this construction. To this end, it is worth underlining that the relationship with Fiona is only one of several strategies by which the play appears to shore up the 'real' sexual identity with which Dakin is imbued. Despite the crush on Irwin, heterosexual activity persists as a legitimate pleasure. In the context of a duologue with Scripps, it is revealed that, after 'a prolonged campaign' (Bennett, 2004: 28), Fiona has finally consented to penetrative sex. Continuing the war metaphor, Dakin states he has 'broken through. [...] It's now the Weimar Republic' (*ibid*: 81). Scripps's response, 'Decadence?', prompts the other to 'nod happily' (*ibid*). During the same conversation, Dakin defines the possibility of a sexual encounter with Irwin as 'only a wank, after all' (*ibid*: 80). Similarly, when the teacher later responds to the pupil's advances with the words, 'I didn't know you were that way inclined', the latter states, 'I'm not, but [...] I've got into Oxford; I thought we might push the boat out' (*ibid*: 100). If the physical manifestation of Dakin makes of him a desirable, passive object aligned to the

feminine, the agency shown to inform his actions is one marked by 'masculine' power and control. He looks to steer his heterosexual relationship towards (what is for him) a state of satisfaction, and, likewise, determines what does and does not happen with Irwin. The stage directions that precede a duologue in which Dakin flirts with his teacher note that the former is 'more master than pupil' (*ibid*: 88). It is he who makes the suggestion of their having sex, and he who decides against it once Irwin is disabled. Segal writes that in being '[n]either squarely within, nor fully without, the structure of male dominance, gay sexuality can [...] perhaps more easily highlight its contradictions' (Segal, 1990: 151). That a script of 'male dominance' can be traced in the pursuit of a homoerotic relationship, may, indeed, reveal the constructedness of heteronormative masculinity as a category exclusively permitted to figure as virile. Gay desire does not 'negate masculinity' (Edwards, 2006: 80) here, and may therefore disrupt one of its defining tenets.

However, this concept loses some credibility when re-considered in terms of the depiction of Dakin more generally. Along with those elements already outlined, the description of his future can be seen to further safeguard his allegiance with heteronormativity. Irwin tells the pupil that he will be 'happy' (Bennett, 2004: 88) whether or not he passes the examinations. Dakin responds, 'Why? Uncomplicated, is that what you mean? Outgoing? Straight?' (*ibid*). Just as Posner's words to Irwin, 'I'm homosexual [...] I'm *fucked*', prove an accurate presentiment, so too does the latter's about Dakin. Mrs Lintott's final description of him as 'a tax lawyer, telling highly paid fibs' is followed by him saying, 'I like money. It's fun' (*ibid*: 42 and 107). Hence, the character is portrayed as enjoying an adulthood based on the professional,

capitalist success that eludes both Posner and Hector. In further widening the divide between heterosexual prosperity and homosexual failure, this feature of the play tallies with the way its gay characters appear as if they 'would be happier if they were straight' (Clum, 1994: 255). After Irwin's accident, there is nothing about Dakin which points to a recurrence or continuation of his same-sex desires. Indeed, in the only response the latter makes to the event, when he is shown to state that their sexual encounter never took place, there appears only a sense of guilt, rather than one of loss: 'It was the wheelchair. That's terrible, isn't it?' (Bennett, 2004: 106). Finally, then, by the very fact that Dakin is drawn as unable or unwilling to lament this loss, the character is drawn to inhabit a heterosexual position achieved through the 'abandonment of homosexual attachments' (Butler, 1997: 135). Just as Irwin, Hector and Posner's identity is 'unthinkable', so too is Dakin's mourning of the former: a fact which both guarantees and evinces the heterosexuality he represents. While the portrayal of this character does go some way to trouble a 'masculinity made of repudiated homosexuality' (*ibid*: 143), it is evident that what ultimately looks to figure as an adolescent crush is rendered starkly distinct from a gay identity. Fleeting, same-sex desire may legitimately feature in the quiet corners of this homophobic world, but only when that desire comprises the choice of a straight male character, and the gay party is subsequently 'punished'. This notwithstanding, the diverse desires attributed to Dakin, and his positioning as an object of the gaze, underpin ties to the 'crisis' in masculinity. If the masculinities of cultural representation in the 1990s can be taken as a source of this 'crisis', not least in blurring the straight/gay divide, the construction of this character might work to comparable effect.

In granting sexually 'othered' subjects a centre stage position, *The History Boys* may initially appear in the service of an oppositional discourse. In terms of characterisation alone, there can be little question that Hector and Posner, in particular, stand to evoke more sympathy than the aggressive, heterosexual Headmaster. However, this analysis has looked to underline a fundamental paradox: that the play appears to critique systems of marginalisation that it itself perpetuates. To this effect, it may be seen to reify the very ideology that it is structured to oppose, evoking a nostalgia for fixedness analogous to that of the 'crisis' discourse. While the presence of homosexuality is positioned, in part, to underline its 'threat' to the heteronormative, its depiction as 'unlivable', outside the closet, serves to maintain the hegemony of heterosexualist masculinity.

Analysis of *Angels in America*

By contrast, the '[f]lagrantly uncloseted [*Angels*]' provides a devastating critique of the closeted gay man' (Savran, 1995: 227). Open about the fact that he is 'a homosexual. With AIDS' (Kushner, 1994: 66), Prior is still alive by the play's epilogue. Roy, on the other hand, is shown to '[die] a hard death' (*ibid*: 82), having been positioned in pain and a hospital bed for most of *Perestroika*. The closeted mould in which he is cast strives to conceal the identity of both his sexuality and his illness. Having defined himself as 'a heterosexual man [...] who fucks around with guys', Roy adds, 'AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer' (Kushner, 1992: 32). Moreover, Roy appears lonely during his demise. His only visitor is the haunting spectre of Ethel Rosenberg, and, when Belize refuses him conversation, he exclaims, 'What I gotta do? Beg?

I don't want to be alone' (Kushner, 1994: 12). Comparatively, after both Louis and Harper have abandoned him, Joe is seen for the last time 'sitting alone' (*ibid*: 95), and silent. Unlike Roy, whom the audience never see '[fucking] around with guys' (Kushner, 1992: 32), Joe is positioned to embrace his same-sex desires through having a relationship with Louis and, furthermore, by coming out to Hannah. However, the final image of him as an isolated figure is concomitant with both his formerly closeted stance and, perhaps more pertinently, the problematic attitude to homosexuality that he demonstrates. In being seen to come out, somewhat obliquely, to Harper, Joe defines that 'thing' he 'might be [...] deep within' as 'wrong' and 'ugly' (*ibid*: 27); 'I'm going to hell for doing this' (*ibid*: 89) is the line that follows his holding Louis's face for the first time. Later, in *Perestroika*, the audience see Joe have sex with, and declare his love for, Louis. However, their relationship concludes when the latter finds out that Joe's job as a chief clerk of the Brooklyn Court of Appeals has seen him ghost-write an 'important bit of legal fag-bashing' (Kushner, 1994: 72). Thus, whilst the character appears to move from his initially closeted, homophobic position, the details of his professional life reveal the way in which he is constructed to reify the 'prohibition' (Butler, 1997: 135) on homosexuality. While the characters of *The History Boys* suffer in not conforming to a heteronormative culture, here, Roy and Joe are rendered abject after facilitating its workings. At a distance from both Joe and Roy, Prior receives consistent companionship and support (despite being left by Louis). Shortly after his illness is made apparent, Belize reassures him that 'Whatever happens, baby, I will be here for you' (Kushner, 1992: 45). Joe's mother, Hannah, becomes a second carer to him in the latter part of the play,

prompting a recovering Prior to tell Belize that 'She saved my life' (Kushner, 1994: 93), on his return from heaven.

If the distinction between Roy and Joe and the other male characters is reinforced by the former pair's unhappy fates, and subsequent exclusion from the play's last tableau, so too is their '[struggle] to *disidentify* from gayness' (Kruger, 1997: 152) at odds with the depictions of Louis, Belize and Prior. Alongside the romantic and sexual encounters in which Louis is shown to engage in domestic settings, he likewise makes no secret of his identity within a public realm. For example, on first meeting Joe in the Court of Appeals, shortly after learning of Prior's condition, the character, in tears, responds to Joe's question, 'What's wrong?', with the line, 'Run in my nylons' (Kushner, 1992: 17). He later tells the other that 'all my friends call me Louise' and 'pecks Joe on the cheek' before exiting the scene (*ibid*: 19). Although these discernibly camp gestures do not, necessarily, denote a particular sexual identity, that they occur within a conversation that sees Louis air his assumption that Joe is gay, underlines the former character's openness on the topic, thereby foregrounding his uncloseted status. Similarly, in a scene set in the hospital at which he works, Belize greets Roy's doctor by saying, 'may I help you [...] or are you just cruising me?' (Kushner, 1994: 9). It is of relevance that the doctor is a minor character who does not appear to represent a sexual orientation, undermining the chance to read this exchange as a mutual flirtation. It is by such moments that the three 'out' men depicted may be viewed to represent the 'positive self-identification' (Segal, 1990: 146) of the post-Stonewall, queer American subject. Edwards notes that 'in coming out one creates an identity and [...] a community' (Edwards, 1994: 30), a notion

reflected in *Angels* through the 'solidarity' and kinship that sees Prior through his illness and amongst friends in the epilogue. Here, then, it is the men who cling to the closet who find themselves 'not in the swim' (Bennett, 2004: 56), rather than those who are imagined to exist outside it.

If 'masculinity [...] [is] strengthened through the repudiations that [...] [it] perform[s]' (Butler, 1997: 140), it is key to this analysis that homosexuality is dislocated from its normatively abject space. It may then appear as if the 'culture' of this dramatic world differs from that of *The History Boys* in allowing for a positive affirmation of gay male subjects; a vision, perhaps, of how masculinity might 'be' otherwise, against the depiction of a metropolis that has historically hosted 'positive developments surrounding sexuality' (Edwards, 1994: 25). However, whilst this preliminary outline seeks to outline a fundamental difference between the two plays, the dramatic world conjured here is one that bears stark similarities to that of the British boys' school. Just as the homophobic climate of this latter setting tallies with Butler's culture of melancholy gender, so too does the Reaganite America in which *Angels* is set. In an analysis of the relationship of this period to masculinity, Susan Jeffords argues that the 'success' of the 'Reagan Revolution'

pivoted on the ability of Ronald Reagan and his administration to portray themselves as [...] distinctively masculine, [...] as decisive, tough, aggressive, strong and domineering men. [...] *Reagan became the premiere masculine archetype for the 1980s*, embodying both national and individual images of manliness that came to underlie the nation's identity during his eight years in office.

(Jeffords, 1994: 11, my emphasis)

That this 'resurgently masculinist' (Kimmel, 1997: 270) zeitgeist encompassed 'right-wing assaults on affirmative action' (Naylor, 1999: 41) highlights the play's heterosexualist context and its subsequent comparability to that of *The History Boys*. Butler argues that the problem of homosexuality's

'unthinkability' (Butler, 1997: 138) 'is made all the more acute when we consider [...] AIDS, and the task of finding a [...] language in which to grieve' (*ibid*). This latter issue is of obvious significance to *Angels*, not least given the notion that 'Reagan [...] was scandalously unshaken by the sudden springing of the epidemic to public attention' (Miller, 1997: 62). While there was a palpable lack of support for affected gay citizens, governmental attitude was not defined by a policy of denial. On the contrary:

AIDS [...was] the ideal providential symbol for a conservative sexual politics of the 1980s: a politics of fear, rage and prejudice around sexuality. Nowhere [...] [was] this stronger [...] than in the United States. (Segal, 1990: 161)

The right-wing discourse surrounding the disease can thus be deemed part of a nostalgic, masculinist agenda: 'not a passive nostalgia' (Naylor, 1999: 41), but rather one that functioned as a backlash to 'reassert the hegemony [of] white, middle-class men' (*ibid*). The homophobia of this ideology emphasises how this 'hegemony', moreover, insisted upon the cohesion of that privileged masculine 'ideal' that Reagan came to personify. Here, then, is a state that looked to maintain sexual otherness as such, thereby demanding 'the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love' (Butler, 1997: 147).

Through being presented to foreground its institutional homophobia, the America of *Angels* mirrors these critical histories. That this may function to render the play progressively political is underpinned by the fact that explicit references to Reaganism loom large throughout.¹³ For example, in a scene that occurs in the first half of *Millennium Approaches*, Roy's colleague, Martin, is

¹³ This is in contrast to *The History Boys*, in which evocations of Thatcherism might be underplayed or overlooked. The existence or effects of governmental ideology is only *directly* referenced through the occasional mention of school league tables.

constructed to provide an exposition of the governing ideology. Addressing Joe, he defines the Republican reign as one of legal proceedings against 'affirmative action' and concerns for 'protecting the family' (Kushner, 1992: 46). This, 'the end of Liberalism', is claimed as the 'dawning of a genuinely American [...] personality. Modelled on Ronald Wilson Reagan' (*ibid*). The heterosexualism apparent here tallies with other instances in which the cultural 'norms' represented are shown to negate gay identities. Martin's words are delivered several scenes after that in which Roy defines 'homosexuals' not as 'men who sleep with other men', but as those who 'who [...] cannot get a pissante anti-discrimination bill through City Council' (*ibid*: 31). The negotiation of this character's personal and public personae is then couched in these terms:

I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom that is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan [...] shakes his hand. [...] Roy Cohn is not a homosexual.
(*ibid*: 32)

These words are addressed to Roy's doctor, Henry, in the private confines of a surgery; it is the only occasion on which the former is positioned to openly admit his sexual habits and the need to differentiate between '[having] sex with men' and being gay. If, as with Irwin, this demonstrates the prerequisite of being closeted to being powerful — the knowledge that 'assimilation brings authority' (Minwalla, 1997: 107) — it likewise signals an awareness that 'homosexual desire may lead to [...] being construed as [...] a "failed" man' (Butler, 1997: 136) within a masculinist economy.¹⁴

¹⁴ It is also relevant to the notion of assimilation that Roy tells Belize, in private, that he had plastic surgery as a child to remove a spur on his nose. Alisa Solomon defines this 'symbolic circumcision' as Roy's 'refusal to participate in stereotypical Jewish victimhood' (Solomon, 1997: 120). In mind of this reading, I would suggest that this element functions as an aspect of the character, that, like the refusal to be labelled a 'homosexual', see Roy attempt to stave off association with those subject position that lack the power afforded the white, heterosexual male subject of the Reagan paradigm: and, moreover, the *performative* nature of this position.

A similar assertion might be made of Joe, who appears to tell his mentor that 'I want to be a participant in the world, in your world, Roy' (Kushner, 1992: 82). Aside from the dramatic irony at play here (Joe is not aware that Roy's world is one in which he 'fucks around with guys' [*ibid*: 32], as he himself is soon to do), it is of note that the 'world' to which Joe refers is a republican Washington. That to which he aspires constitutes an extension of a professional role in which he is closeted: before finally coming out to Roy in the play's penultimate act, the only allusions Joe makes to him about his private life is in reference to Harper. The 'important bit of legal fag-bashing' (Kushner, 1994: 72) in which he is implicated likewise shores up the correlation between his position as an upward Reaganite and as a closeted homophobe. Through Joe's collapsing 'the world' and 'Roy's world', the play text underlines the way in which a gay subject might perceive the necessity of a heterosexual appearance to being valid as 'a participant' (a citizen?) in such a culture. The fact that the orientation Joe represents is at odds with his political sensibilities, is likewise explicated through the reactions of other characters: during their first meeting, for instance, Louis exclaims, 'Well, oh boy, a Gay Republican' (Kushner, 1992: 18). Simultaneously, as a Mormon, 'Joe must navigate the rift between homoerotic desire and [...] religious beliefs that insist on the repudiation of that desire' (Kruger, 1997: 154).

By contrast, the play's uncloseted characters are drawn to demonstrate unguarded distain for the dominant culture. Louis defines 'Reagan's children' as 'Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind' (Kushner, 1992: 54), and Roy as 'a polestar of human evil' (Kushner, 1994: 60). In a duologue with Louis, Belize claims to 'hate [an] America' he sees as 'terminal [...] and mean', while,

for him, Roy is 'The Killer Queen' (*ibid*: 10). By comparison, in his terror at the descent of the Angel, Prior is heard to say, in a bid to reassure himself, 'I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble' (Kushner, 1992: 90). If the formal incompatibility of this America and queer identities aligns the 'culture' represented with that of Butler's concern, so too does it highlight the way in which a positive, uncloseted stance is implicitly oppositional.

Whilst the construction of Bennett's Headmaster may function to reveal masculinity as reliant upon the 'prohibition on homosexuality' (Butler, 1997: 139) in a play that stands to reify such sentiments, the depiction of Roy shows that the identity to which he clings is a 'masculinity made of repudiated homosexuality' (*ibid*: 143), within a drama that problematises such repudiation. In making a closeted character a legitimate authority of a homophobic play-world, *Angels* underlines the omnipresent, disavowed homosexuality therein. This is of particular significance given the professional roles attributed to Roy: former aide to McCarthy and high-ranking Republican lawyer. Savran claims that, '[b]y highlighting the (homo)eroticization of patriarchy, the play demonstrates the always already queer status of American politics' (Savran, 1995: 226–27). It is, in part, through this gay character's propinquity to a metonymic Washington that the drama can be deemed to operate to subversive effect. The formal script of that 'world' of Joe is drawn as desirable, is thus one marked by a perpetual, threatening queerness.

Aside from the fact of Roy's sexuality, the implicit homoeroticism of this culture is made apparent through various, other means by which this

character is realised. Even before the audience is made aware of his same-sex desires, certain factors might be deemed to hint at Roy's 'refused identity' (Butler, 1997: 132). In an early scene in which he is first depicted, alone with Joe, he refers to the gay musical *La Cage aux Folles* as 'Fabulous. The best thing on Broadway', and deems Joe's boss not only 'a good man' but one in possession of 'a nice head of silver hair' (Kushner, 1992: 3 and 4). These lines are spoken in a context that can be seen to establish Roy's 'clout' at the outset: he is positioned 'at an impressive desk' and engaged in a flurry of phone calls to clients and a secretary he calls 'baby doll' (*ibid*: 2-3). Hence, amongst the trappings of masculinist power, in a scene that establishes the character's political leanings, he is shown to acclaim a drag show through using a word ('fabulous') often associated with the realm of camp: one that has historically been occupied by 'gay men [...] as a survival mechanism in a hostile environment' (Medhurst, 1997b: 276). If these lines work to trouble the appearance of that 'distinctly masculine' (Jeffords, 1994: 11) Reaganite mould, so too might the complimenting of another male's looks. In configuring an absent character thus, Roy functions to emphasise the male body in aesthetic terms: a move towards that very visibility that evokes 'the crisis of masculinity as a crisis of looking and looking-at-ness' (Simpson, 1994: 6). Later moments within the play have the capacity to operate comparably. It is, for instance, during the scene which opens with his extolling the virtues of Reaganism that sees Martin, minutes later, giving Roy a back rub.

Whilst the early mention of Joe's off-stage boss might barely hint at the homoeroticism of a wider patriarchal network, later scenes suggest the concept more flagrantly. In using a father/son analogy to illustrate bonds of

loyalty between male colleagues, a short monologue sees Roy tell Joe, 'I've had many fathers [...] powerful men. Joe McCarthy most of all. [...] [H]e loved me [...] I brought out something tender in him' (Kushner, 1992: 40). Given the audience's knowledge, at this point, that Roy and Joe represent gay men who are Republicans, these ambiguous words could queer the figure of McCarthy alongside those other, 'many fathers' to which Roy alludes.¹⁵ This is an argument taken up by Savran, who asserts that *Angels's* project of queering incorporates 'those generals of the Cold War who were most assiduous in their denunciation of sexual and political dissidence' (Savran, 1995: 227). In Roy's connection to McCarthy(ism), both here and through Ethel Rosenberg, the former is situated as 'a point of continuity between the [...] 1950s and [...] the Reagan 1980s' (Garner, 1997: 180). Hence, through character and setting, *Angels* recalls that 'Cold War political context of McCarthyism [in which] the fear and persecution of homosexuality in the United States [...] reached hysterical heights' (Segal, 1990: 141). Thus, in terms of politicised intolerance and patriarchal lineage, it is the parallel drawn between Roy and McCarthy which allows one to perceive a 'queering' of the latter, as well as the political network in which both are placed. Given the 'tough' and 'aggressive' (Jeffords, 1994: 11) tropes of masculinity that marked American hegemonies of the 1950s and the 1980s, the efficacy of this task may rely upon and validate a psychoanalytic claim which mirrors cultural accounts of these decades: 'the more hyperbolic and defensive a masculine identification, the more fierce the ungrieved homosexual cathexis' (Butler, 1997: 139).

¹⁵The significance of the homosocial infrastructure detailed here may also be claimed on the basis of its being echoed later. When Joe proves reluctant to help Roy avoid being disbarred, the latter responds with what figures as a reminder of Joe's position within an androcentric chain: 'Martin's Ed's man. And Ed's Reagan's man. So Martin's Reagan's man. And you're mine' (Kushner, 1992: 50).

In a fitting paradox to this 'always already queer' state, it is feasible that the sentiments Roy is shown to express to Joe partially undercut the formal text of Reaganite masculinity, recalling Segal's suggestion that 'tenderness between men' might rupture the hetero-masculine (Segal, 1990: 154). That this dialogue about McCarthy carries a latent homoeroticism is a reading underpinned by the context in which it unfolds. Although Roy and Joe are pictured alone in a bar, the other side of the stage plays host to an anonymous, sexual encounter between Louis and another man in Central Park. Structured so that each pair of actors takes turns to deliver parts of a duologue, the liaisons inform one another through speech as through action. Roy's lines about McCarthy are thus framed, by the sight of 'Louis and the Man eyeing each other' (Kushner, 1992: 37), at the opening of the scene, and the two of them having sex a matter of minutes afterwards. The Man's choice of words is also of note, being spoken immediately before Roy's monologue: he is 'a man', and Louis 'a boy' (*ibid*: 40), just as McCarthy was once a 'father' to a younger Roy. Given these factors, it is unsurprising that this scene has been defined as one in which 'the official narrative of heterosexual male hegemony reveals the rival narrative — silenced, disowned [...] — at its heart' (Garner, 1997: 181): an image that concurs with that of an internalised attachment, through which normative gendered identities emerge only as '*uncertain* accomplishment[s]' (Butler, 1997: 135, my emphasis). Subversion is thereby apparent through the play's exposing of homosexuality's central presence within a masculinist context.

If these representations can be viewed to exploit a slippage between the homosocial and the homosexual, so too does the accelerating homoeroticism of Roy and Joe's relationship. Towards the end of the scene set in the bar,

towards the end of *Millennium Approaches*, when Joe is placed to refuse Roy's offer of a job in Washington, the latter's response is, 'You break my heart', to which Joe replies, 'I love you' (Kushner, 1992: 82). Roy's seeming frustration at his protégé's decision sees their interaction become charged with what might play out as erotic violence. Before accusing the younger man of being 'treacherous' and 'ungrateful', Roy 'pulls Joe to him in a strong clench', stating 'I love you, baby Joe'; seconds later, he '[smooths] Joe's lapels, tenderly' and tells him that 'I'll always be here for you' (*ibid*: 83–84). Should the interlinking of aggression and affection expose the internalised prejudice that distorts Roy's tenderness, this scene may enact the 'volatile tension between homoeroticism and homophobia [...] inevitable when strong and exclusive bonds between men are encouraged alongside a compulsory heterosexual masculinity' (Segal, 1990: 159). The indication of Roy's attraction to Joe in this scene also prefigures their final meeting towards the end of the play, in which the former appears as a ghost in the latter's apartment. Roy's line, 'Show me a little of what you've learned, baby Joe' is soon followed by 'Roy [kissing] Joe softly on the mouth' (Kushner, 1994: 84). This moment thus sees a perpetually unfixed homosociality collapse into a palpably gay image. As 'the sight of two men kissing is [...] a transgression of the gender order' (Clum, 1994: 11), this moment signifies a fundamentally subversive depiction of masculinist norms. Through a symbolic, internal rupture enacted by conservative, closeted figures, the play conjures a heterosexual realm 'cultivated through prohibitions' (Butler, 1997: 136), and perpetually performative. In line with post-structuralist concepts taken as contributories to the masculinity 'crisis', this is one aspect of *Angels* that represents the contingency of normative gendered positions.

It is of note that this kiss takes place after Roy has been shown to die, given the formal 'unlivability' of gay identity in the culture to which he subscribes. While this may appear resonant of *The History Boys*, insofar as such desire becomes 'thinkable' through a transcending of realist parameters, there are differences here, beyond the absence of such bodily representation in the British play. Apart from *Angels's* move to distance homosexuality from abjection, the spectral aspect here does not, of course, render it unusual in a play that repeatedly traverses various binaries in deviating, queerly, from realism. The way in which this scene could figure anomalously is through its contrast with other erotic/sexual acts in *Angels*, the vast majority of which occur in prosaic contexts between living characters. In tandem with these other distinctions, this contrast is not enabled by a lack of opposition to what figures as 'unlivable' (Butler, 1997: 135) in *The History Boys*. The aforementioned meeting between Louis and the nameless Man aside, the former's affair with Joe sees the couple engage in sexual activity during act one of *Perestroika*. Amongst numerous, similar stage directions are those which indicate, 'Louis kisses Joe, who [...] responds' and 'they begin to fuck' (Kushner, 1994: 4 and 17). Through Prior and Belize, the play also includes moments of homoerotic tactility: 'Prior kisses Louis on the forehead'; 'Belize [...] gives Prior a gentle massage' (*ibid.*: 27 and 43). These images look to lack the aggressive quality which marks the pseudo-sexual encounters in which Roy is seen (with Joe) before his death. Should moments of non-violent tenderness bespeak identities shorn of self-loathing, Louis, Prior and Belize could function to support the idea that

the place where male homosexuality is likely to have its most lasting effect on conventions of masculinity is in its unambiguous affirmation of sexuality — of the pleasures of the body [...] as a realm [...] to be enjoyed.

(Segal, 1990: 156)

Hence, the 'specter of [...] unreality' (Butler, 1997: 138) that colours Roy's single, 'soft' kiss may be deemed resultant of the disavowal for which he stands. If engaging in gay sex denotes opposition, it is always already 'unlivable' (*ibid*: 135) for a proponent of the status quo. Although it might seem problematic that Joe's function has been interpreted as one which aligns it, somewhat, with that of Louis, Belize and Prior, he is, of course, shown in attempts to leave the closet. Only the expressed desire of the vehemently repressed is restricted to a spectral sight, underscoring a subversive correlation between the closet and abjection.

As I have outlined above, the Angel both advocates stasis, and functions as a queer element which may trouble the way that 'heterosexuality naturalizes itself' (Butler, 1997: 139). Aside from having male and female genitalia, she is depicted to have sexual relations with both Prior and Hannah that differ from such of those human sex acts as that between Louis and Joe. Although Prior is heard to inform Belize that 'She fucked me' (Kushner, 1994: 26), the portrayal of this act is coloured by a poetic surreality at odds with his prosaic words. While the stage directions indicate that both Prior and the Angel 'get very turned on' and, that '[i]f they had cigarettes they'd smoke them' afterwards, there is little else that connotes images redolent of the mortal couplings depicted elsewhere (*ibid*: 25 and 26). It is the prophetic book which Prior starts to 'hump' as the Angel speaks of 'The Pulse, The Pull, The Throb, The Ooze' (*ibid*: 25) and their mutual orgasms sees her cry, 'HOLY Estrus! HOLY Orifice! Ecstasis in Excelsis! AMEN!' (*ibid*: 26); no indication exists of the pair ever touching. By extension, should a production of *Angels* choose to 'have an

airborne angel' (Kushner, 1994: vii) — something the playwright deems both 'a good thing' and 'incredibly hard' (*ibid*) — it is feasible that simulated intercourse would be no more possible than desirable. The sight of Prior's distance from what is perhaps an 'airborne' Angel with wings may comprise a subversive image, her unearthly appearance and separation from him undermining the possibility for an audience to read this scene as an enactment of heteronormative sex.

This is of importance as the Angel is solely referred to as a 'she' and, in all of the play's premieres and subsequent, major productions, has been played by a female actor. That, for an audience, the character likely signifies a woman — albeit, as Prior tells Belize, 'not a *conventional* woman' (*ibid*: 8) — is reified by the fact that the play text does not indicate that her 'Hermaphroditically Equipped' (*ibid*: 26) body should be depicted beyond the dialogue. This factor, again, concurs with landmark performances of *Angels*. Although a designer might perceive transgressive potential in visually representing her genitalia, I would argue this very absence packs a subversive punch through a later liaison with Hannah. During the scene in which this latter character is attendant at Prior's bedside, the Angel's visitation concludes with her kissing her 'on the forehead and then the lips, a long, hot kiss. [...] Hannah has an enormous orgasm' (*ibid*: 79). Notwithstanding an audience's knowledge of the Angel's 'bouquet of phalli', the sight of two discernibly female bodies in this proximity may denote a pleasurable same-sex embrace that upsets the masculinist notion that 'virility is [...] precisely *that which is not queer*' (Simpson, 1994: 4) or female. This kiss then looks to underline the thoroughly undecidable status of the sexuality represented by the Angel (as well as

unsettling Hannah's position as straight). Just as she functions to deconstruct the sexed gender binary, 's/he decisively undermines the distinction between the heterosexual and the homosexual [...and] represents an absolute otherness [...which] fills and completes subjectivity' (Savran, 1995: 212). In tandem with other elements of the play, this 'incoherence of identity' looks to foreground the 'cost of articulating a coherent identity position by producing, excluding, and repudiating a domain of abjected specters' (Butler, 1997: 149). In this way, the Angel may work to highlight and thwart that 'radical otherness' (*ibid.*: 139) key to the hegemonic culture portrayed. If the performative nature of sexuality also comes to the fore through both the body of the Angel, and her interactions with Prior and Hannah, so too are they emphasised by a meta-theatricality, which, in its playfulness, reflects the presence of queer aesthetics: Prior notes of his erotic liaison, to Belize, 'The sexual politics of this are *very* confusing' (Kushner, 1994: 26).

Despite these opportunities, the Angel's configuration as a 'she' could also be viewed as problematic. As the audience are likely to see a woman enact this role of ambiguities, the association between changeability, artifice and the female subject may be reinforced, shoring up the normative connection between women and femininity: the latter being '[re-]cast as the spectacular gender' (Butler, 1993: 235). Although this argument is contingent on casting (not only the actor's sex, but how 'feminine' they might appear), *Angels* herein runs the risk of preserving the male/masculine link, reifying the privileged gender as 'authentic', secure and enduring. The tool that has transgressive potential, also, perhaps, posits what is troublesome to masculinity as feminine and queer: the very tropes of otherness collapsed in paranoid projections of

the gay male subject, not least by those claiming a 'crisis' in masculinity. To this extent, the Angel's role in imaging how masculinity, *per se*, might 'be' otherwise could prove to have some limitations.

A final point about this supernatural character provides a link to the construction of Belize and Prior. Andy Medhurst observes that:

[...] in the context of the AIDS crisis, the righteously furious activists of the queer generation recognized the appropriateness of camp strategies [...] which often drew on cross-dressing, gender-blurring and flagrant theatricality.
(Medhurst, 1997b: 281–82)

To return to a point I made in comparing the play to the work of queer performance artists, the 'gender-blurring' with which the Angel is imbued appears in tandem with other means of creating a 'flagrant theatricality'. The baroque quality of such of her lines as those quoted, are structured to meld with spectacular visual and sonic features. Whilst her first appearance is preceded by 'a great blaze of triumphant music', and a range of lights that culminates in a 'royal purple' (Kushner, 1992: 90), her kiss with Hannah is followed by an exit 'to the accompanying glissando of a baroque piccolo trumpet' (Kushner, 1994: 79). In his notes on producing the play, Kushner advises that the 'moments of magic' of these supernatural elements should figure as 'bits of wonderful *Theatrical* illusion — which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's a good thing if they do' (Kushner, 1992: v). Underlined by Prior's reaction to seeing the Angel ('*Very* [...] Spielberg') and his comment on 'sexual politics', inherent to the Angel is an emphasis upon unconcealed, camp spectacle, comparable to that of the 'always obvious queens' (Medhurst, 1997b: 277) that comprised the Stonewall army.

Assuming that, on this basis, one can read such directions as implicit to the Angel's subversive function, it is noteworthy that 'camp strategies' are also attached to Prior and Belize, as what is discernibly another move to 'lay bare the superficial and constructed nature of gender identities' (Segal, 1990: 146). That the 'strategies' that surface through Prior and Belize may represent a '[counter]attack' (Dollimore, 1991: 310), is arguable on the basis of the former's illness: that very 'crisis' for which Medhurst notes camp's applicability. When Prior is first in hospital, he greets Belize as 'Miss thing', who responds, 'Ma chérie bitchette' (Kushner, 1992: 42). It is here that Prior realises Louis has left him, prompting a tirade in which he is heard to say, 'I want my fucking boyfriend, where the fuck is he? I'm dying' (*ibid*: 43). Minutes later, 'as Hepburn', Belize proclaims that 'Men are beasts', a comedic parody that Prior embraces in replying, 'also [as] Hepburn', 'the absolute lowest' (*ibid*: 45). An allusion to a gay icon becomes a survival tactic, as the constructedness of their enactment and its filmic origin carries a 'vitality' that thwarts the patient's former distress. That Belize figures to comfort Prior thus, underpins the role of camp in structures of kinship which see 'the reproductive dictums of heteronormativity [...] rejected for a queer politics invested in sustaining life' (Román, 1998: 213). This scene thereby looks to pre-figure the epilogue, in which 'the romantic dyad (as primary social unit) is replaced [...] a new definition of family' (Savran, 1995: 209). In this sense, 'camp strategies' feed into to the play's oppositional take on the Reaganite "'moral revival" [...] of America' (Fitzgerald, 2000: 24), ostensibly based on a concern for 'protecting the family' (Kushner, 1992: 46).

It is also during this hospital scene that Belize refers to 'when we gave up drag', a line which anticipates the later revelation that he once was a drag queen and may be one again (*ibid*: 44 and 71). This is relevant to the character's function as a symbol of Stonewall, not least in evoking those various accounts which have suggested that 'the queens at the epicentre of it all were black or Latino' (Medhurst, 1997b: 286). The phenomenon of drag is represented visually early on, through the 'mutual dream scene' between Prior and Harper that starts with the male character 'at the make-up table, applying the face' (Kushner, 1992: 19). Notwithstanding an awareness that 'drag is merely one incarnation of camp' (Medhurst, 1997b: 282), its presence here can be taken to sharpen the play's critical edge. Opening the scene, Prior quotes a famous line of another of Hollywood's gay icons, Gloria Swanson, in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950): "'I'm ready for my close-up, Mr DeMille'" (Kushner, 1992: 19). Like the exchange with Belize, this moment reifies the queering of cinematic texts and figures, such that the play recalls, intertextually, historical means of identification for those subjects normatively confined to 'a domain of abjected specters' (Butler, 1997: 149). The depression apparent in Prior, over the fact of his condition, is infused with performativity and wit that may look to trouble its being depressing in performance. He notes, 'I look like a corpse. A corpsette. [...] [Y]ou know you've hit rock bottom when even drag is a drag' (Kushner, 1992: 19). A crucial event occurs moments later, in which Harper observes, 'You're wearing make-up', to which the rejoin is, 'So are you' (*ibid*: 20). When the female character responds, 'But you're a man', the other, 'feigning horror and dismay [...], mimes slashing his throat with his lipstick and dies, fabulously tragic' (*ibid*). Positioned to parody those 'guardians of masculinity' (Butler, 1997: 143) in reacting thus to an accusation

of gender transgression, Prior's only death is rendered a 'fabulous' one of 'flagrant theatricality' that he himself opts to perform. Death for the uncloseted gay character with AIDS is transferred from a space of abjection to one marked by agency, '[upending] easy assumptions about the virus' (Minwalla, 1997: 114) and the identity positions attached to it by nostalgic, conservative forces.

The spotlight cast on gender performativity is enhanced by the artifice of the death enacted, and the fact that both are contextualised by a 'dream' sequence. In tandem with the Angel, these elements prove key to a queer illustration of an all-too-real period, highlighting both the play's own constructedness and that of the identities portrayed. Just as the homosocial/sexual slippage surrounding Roy bespeaks the threat of the other, those 'workings of gender that do not "show"' (Butler, 1997: 144) are colourfully unleashed through camp/non-realist strategies. Despite a repetition of the gay subject as feminine, the male body performing Prior, and (to a lesser extent) that of Belize, is shorn of normative associations with the masculine realm. Along, too, with the functions of Joe and Roy, this unconformity may herald a bid to 'declare the conventions of masculinity oppressive' (Segal, 1990: 146). Indeed, in being placed in propinquity to the feminine through the verbal and the visual, the male body in drag 'exposes [...] the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualised genders form themselves' (Butler, 1997: 146). Finally, through the absence of heterosexual characters, the evocation of Stonewall and the presence of AIDS, the oppositionality at play may be viewed to represent that '[q]ueer activism [which] sought to re-gay camp, to reclaim it from the widened-out heterosexualization that it had

undergone' (Medhurst, 1997b: 282) in the face of the identity fluidity postulated by post-structuralist thought.

While this analysis has relied upon a partial alignment of two of the 'out' characters, it is important to stress the divergences in the play's representations of homosexuality. This is relevant in terms of Roy and Joe as counterpoints to Louis, Belize and Prior, and both within and across these two groupings. Louis, for instance, does not appear as an obvious function of camp after the scene discussed above in which he first meets Joe at work. Furthermore, despite always appearing, on stage, as openly gay, he confesses to 'get so closety at [...] family things'; Prior is drawn to observe that if not for their relationship, he'd 'swear' Louis 'were straight', and Belize later asks him, 'what kind of homosexual are you, anyway?' (Kushner, 1992: 10 and 76). To an extent, the subversive power of these characterisations is strengthened by this variance, rupturing a stereotype and perhaps suggesting that 'the very notion of a homosexual sensibility is a contradiction in terms' (Dollimore, 1997: 308).

Segal argues that, 'homosexual sub-cultures have a tantalising relationship with the masculine ideal — part-challenge, part-endorsement' (Segal, 1990: 144). Through the construction of Joe and that of Prior's dealings with him, this is a concept of relevance to the diversity of the gay male identities staged. Having seen Joe, and learnt of his relationship with Louis, Prior is seen to define him as 'the Marlboro Man' and 'Mega-but'ch' (Kushner, 1994: 57 and 58). That such characteristics pose a threat is confirmed through Prior's telling Belize, 'He made me feel beyond nelly. Like little wilted daisies were

sprouting out my ears' (*ibid*: 58). This seeming 'endorsement' of a cowboy-style masculinity, aptly redolent of Reagan, may appear to limit Prior's subversive role as addressed in relation to camp.¹⁶ He is configured to lament what reads as his own masculine lack. However, if these lines denote aspiration to an idealised gendered image, transgression figures through the otherness that Joe, too, represents. For his 'butch' quality might work as mimicry, through a different kind of camp: that of '[g]ay machismo' that can '[expose] the absurdity of masculinity [perhaps] more effectively than effeminacy' (Segal, 1990: 149). If the actor playing Joe conforms to Prior's account, his hyper-masculine body is divorced from that male identity it personified in the period depicted. As Jeffords notes, 'the Reagan years offered the image of a "hard body" [...] for a rearticulation of masculine strength and power' (Jeffords, 1994: 13). Propounding the function of Roy, Reagan/ism becomes subject to queering through its embodiment in Joe. Staging the character in these terms may see him subversively positioned an object of the gaze, potentially fitting that mould of 'window-display Ken doll' (Kushner, 1994: 40) in which Prior places him. Apart from highlighting insidious, cultural pressures, the latter's apparent envy looks to trouble normative identity structures. Whilst being associated with the feminine through scenes of camp and drag, it is feasible that, in this scene, he appears to '[desire] what he still is, or wants to be, which is masculine' (Edwards, 2006: 80). The character operates to resist static identification with either side of the binary. If this dimension of Prior signals a queer strategy, disturbing a normative collapse between sex, gender and desire, the play further exploits

¹⁶ Kimmel notes, of this era, that 'Reagan represented the triumph of [...] right-wing cowboys' (Kimmel, 1997: 296). The 'Marlboro Man' first appeared in American advertisements during the 1950s, that decade evoked in the play as that 'for which Reagan and his followers were [...] nostalgic' (Naylor, 1999: 41).

the vulnerability of that masculine realm that Joe might also symbolically trouble. By this token, it is not only across, but within the characters, that a 'homosexual sensibility' becomes subversively splintered.

Queer representations may then perform 'a parodic critique of the [very] essence of sensibility' (Dollimore, 1997: 308). If the play's 'interrogation of gayness [to this effect...] recognizes the nonunitary nature of such a category' it is in part through 'its differential constitution [...of] other determinants of identity' (Kruger, 1997: 153). Religious and racial representation is of clear relevance, given that "'hyphenated" [male] Americans', such as "Jewish-" and "African-" [...] [compose] the majority of American men. So manhood is only possible for a distinct minority' (Kimmel, 1994: 134–35). Just as the play's exclusion of heterosexual males is progressive, so too is a cast of characters comprised to reflect Kimmel's 'majority'. The angle of this reading has, of course, privileged sexual otherness. However, it is of importance to consider the implications of a few key examples of characterisation which allow for the place of *racial* otherness to be examined in more depth.

It is arguable that these complex portrayals are not without their problems. The portrayal of gay Jews, for instance, may run the chance of perpetuating scripts of homophobic anti-Semitism. The risks of representing this identity category find support in the notion that 'the alleged failure of the Jewish male to embody "proper" masculinity [...] [has become] the indelible evidence of the racial difference of all Jews' (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, 2003: 2). There is little doubt that Louis and Roy figure as contrasts, thereby staving away from embodying a singular Jewish queerness or queer Jewishness. This

notwithstanding, there are aspects of Louis, in particular, that might cater to reify prejudicial perception, not least given that 'modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other', rendering the former 'as much a category of gender as of race' (*ibid*: 1 and 4).

The argument that Louis 'is no [...] self-loathing Jewish stereotype' is one with which I take issue, not least as it is based, in part, on his representing a 'victim made victimiser' (Solomon, 1997: 125 and 126). During the one-night stand set in Central Park, the character responds to realising that the condom has broken with: 'Inject me. I don't care' (Kushner, 1992: 41), (the first word of which is perhaps intentionally close to 'infect'). Later, in a scene with Belize, Louis claims, 'I could be sick too'; 'I'm dying' (*ibid*: 76). Of Prior, Belize states, 'He's dying. You just wish you were' (*ibid*), a sentiment the scene validates through both the presence of Prior's lesion-ridden, naked body on the other side of the stage, in hospital, and the monologue in which he is seen to update a nurse on a long list of complaints. Although Louis is, by such scenes, more 'victimiser' than 'victim', it is credible that what reads as guilt-ridden self-pity only serves to render him unsympathetic. In addition, the image of the Jewish 'victimiser' who perceives himself as 'victim' figures as a staple of anti-Semitic imagery. Herein is a risk that may be furthered by Roy, placed to tell Joe that 'If it wasn't for me, Ethel Rosenberg would be alive today', and paranoically to assume that his potential disbarment is based on his being perceived as a 'filthy [...] Jewish troll' (Kushner, 1992: 82 and 49). The notions that '[Louis's] gayness, perhaps, removes him from the lineage of [Jewish] sexual incompetents like [...] Woody Allen [...and that] his sexual assurance with Joe declares him a hunk' (Solomon, 1997: 125) may also be deemed

flawed, on the basis of the dialogue set after Joe and Louis first have sex (an act which is not staged). Despite the fact of Louis's being positioned to seduce Joe, instigating their first kiss, his first post-coital line is, '[...] You were great. Was I? Great? Or good, even?' (Kushner, 1994: 15). Moments later, he tells the other that 'if I failed to suffer the universe would become unbalanced' (*ibid.*).

That much of the neuroticism apparent springs from corporeal concerns of illness, death and sex, allows the portrayal of Louis to fit with Prior's description of him as one who 'can't handle bodies' (*ibid.*: 63). While the Jewish legacy of 'a culture that valorizes intellectual over physical prowess' (Boyarin, 1997: 91) may come to mind here, Louis is not figured to show disinterest in the latter 'prowess', but rather to fail, self-pitying, in coping with mortal realities. In this context, one may discern an echo of masculinist, anti-Semitic tropes which re-configure this Jewish legacy to render its male subject 'physically puny' (Kimmel, 1994: 134), and 'sexually impotent' (Brod, 1994: 91) or perverse. Although this could be undermined by Louis's being queer, and displaying virility in his interaction with Joe, traces of stereotypical male Jewishness can still be evinced. For instance, when Louis is seen to confront Joe over his link to Roy — a scene that signals the ends of their affair — intellectual superiority is conjoined with a certain physical ineptness. Louis is configured to quote the (real) repost Army attorney Joseph Welch posed to McCarthy, during his interrogation in a 1954 trial: "'Have you no decency?'" (Kushner, 1994: 70). Joe does not understand the reference, prompting the other to call him a 'moron' (*ibid.*: 72). However, as they descend into a fight, it is Joe who appears to gain the upper hand: 'Louis tries to hit Joe, and Joe

starts to hit Louis repeatedly. [...] Louis falls to the floor. Joe stands over him' (*ibid*: 73).

Fittingly, it is clear that Louis's inability to 'handle bodies' is informed by an intellectual conceit. In a duologue with a rabbi towards the start of *Angels*, the abandonment of Prior is prefigured when Louis states that

maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress [...] can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. [...] Maybe [...] sores and disease... really frighten them.
(Kushner, 1992: 15)

The character's philosophical reasoning thereby intersects with a verbal admittance in line with future events. A later monologue, in which Louis refers to 'being Left in this country' (*ibid*: 67), foregrounds the political position for which he stands, '[putting] the discourse of democracy in play [...] as a kind of "red thread"' (Reinelt, 1997: 235). Given the potent evocation of McCarthyism, this is key in denoting the presence of those Leftist politics and readings of philosophy to which the play subscribes. As outlined above, it is precisely Prior's desire for 'constant historical progress' that sees him with friends, in the epilogue. Just as the gay subject Louis represents may work to at least partially reclaim a stereotype, the ideology he is shown to espouse is flavoured with oppositional hope. Similarly, this character's inclusion in the epilogue comes as a result of his agreeing to say the Kaddish prayer for Roy, with (the ghost of Jewish, McCarthy victim) Ethel and (black, queer) Belize. Louis faces a dead body before he is once again in close proximity to the 'immune-suppressed' (Kushner, 1992: 43) Prior. Having left Joe, the Kaddish scene casts Louis as part of 'a new community based on [...] solidarity' amongst 'a queer assortment of mourners' (Cadden, 1997: 87). If this moment figures as one of redemption, it also might operate to cast gay Jewish identity

positively. Thus, notwithstanding those concerns already addressed, it is perhaps the very collapse, in Louis, of queer, left-wing and Jewish, that represents something more worryingly significant. These are, after all, tropes of otherness interwoven by prejudicial forces, such that just as 'Jewishness and queerness are bound up with each other' (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, 2003: 1), so too is the figure of the Leftist/Communist with both of these positions, at a site of 'radical otherness' (Butler, 1997: 139) for American masculinity of the McCarthy/Reagan mould. To this extent, it is conceivable that the complex construction of Louis may at least partially diffuse the play's threat to the masculine.

This is obviously limited, too, by the double otherness of Roy, seeing the identity he represents activated from 'that [...] repudiated place' (Butler, 1997: 149). However, dependent on the degree to which this character is realised as a 'discomforting [Jewish] caricature' (Solomon, 1997: 127), it is conceivable that the play may reify the interconnected tropes of 'tough Jew/tough queer' and 'self-dramatizing Jew/self-victimizing queer' (*ibid*: 120) through him and Louis respectively. Kimmel outlines a racist perception that clearly agrees with the construction of Roy: '[t]he Jew was [...] conniving; he got his way insidiously, by passing himself off as a real man' (Kimmel, 1997: 91). Despite the fact that this character's 'toughness' is symbolically thwarted by AIDS, and perhaps, the kiss with Joe, the final scene in which he is posthumously realised, 'in a smouldering pit' (Kushner, 1994: 91), sees a persistence of the aggression with which he displays earlier. Positioned to tell the God who abandoned heaven that he will be his lawyer, Roy states: 'I'm an absolute fucking demon with Family Law. [...] I will bully and seduce' (*ibid*: 92). It is

noteworthy that the two Jewish characters are kept at a distance: Roy is only pictured with Louis after he has died. This tableau's subversive slant is apparent through the fact that the (still, silent, closeted) dead character is juxtaposed with the 'out' gay Jewish character, undergoing redemption.

As has perhaps become apparent in the course of this analysis, Belize's primary role is one of support. Through this portrayal, it is credible that 'the black man [...] is [...] tokenized [...] insofar as he is the great caretaker of the play' (Reinelt, 1997: 242), an idea major productions have reinforced, in part, through not yet exploring the potentiality of casting an actor of an alternative racial identity. This, of course, might present certain problems, dislocating the association with Stonewall queens. However, casting of this role as it has generally been done thus far runs the risk of fetishising the black male body. Whilst in hospital, a drug-induced Roy says to Belize, 'Dark strong arms [...]. Deep and sincere but not too rough, just open me up to the end of me. [...] The Negro night nurse [...]. Come on' (Kushner, 1994: 46). Defined as 'a serious sexual invitation' (*ibid*), this moment casts the African American character as an object of the gaze; a notion underscored by Harper's earlier interaction with her imaginary friend Mr Lies, whom the play text instructs should be played by the actor cast as Belize. In a scene set in her fantasy Antarctica, Harper is figured to state: 'I can have anything I want here — maybe even [...] someone who has... desire for me. You, maybe' (Kushner, 1992: 78). The 'sexy' companion which she is shown to '[dream] up' (Miller, 1997: 66) thus takes the form of that male body of which Roy is also desirous. By these flirtations, the black male subject is represented as both desirably hyper-masculine and sexually passive. Not only do Belize and Mr Lies figure

to refuse Harper and Joe, but neither one of them is constructed in another erotic encounter. Just as the threat of drag is contained, in Belize, to verbal allusions, 'pleasures of the [gay male] body' (*ibid*: 156) are restricted to other (white) characters. The camp, queer strand of the identity that Belize signifies can, of course, work to effects analogous to those possible through Louis, reclaiming an association between that which is racially othered and that is less, or more, than masculine. However, whereas a hyper-masculine Joe may provide oppositional parody, the racial identity of Belize problematises his positioning as an object of the gaze.

Comparable to Jewish subjects being reified as victimising 'victims', Belize may then figure to support a prejudicial script, in which

[those] very groups that have historically been cast as less than manly were also [...] cast as hypermasculine. [...] [This worked to create] the screens against which traditional concepts of manhood were developed. (Kimmel, 1994: 135)

What can be evinced in these representations is, perhaps, a hierarchy that subjugates racial identities, at least in terms of unsettling normative binaries. In so doing, it is feasible that *Angels* re-inscribes certain differences on which white, heterosexual masculinity 'is purchased', and 'naturalizes itself' (Butler, 1997: 139). It is, after all, Prior, the only 'WASP' depicted, who represents the gay AIDS survivor, and delivers the closing polemic. Underlining those themes and identities that the play appears to privilege, the agenda conveyed in the epilogue echoes earlier strategies for a queer reclamation of identities presented as 'worthy and capable of being grieved, and thus worthy and capable of having been lived' (Butler, 1997: 138): 'This disease will be the end of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated [...] we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore' (Kushner, 1994: 99).

Concomitant with *Angels* at large, this symbolic refusal for invisibility underpins the difference between the workings of this drama and those of *The History Boys*. Notwithstanding those elements which may operate subversively, the latter's nostalgia both resounds with constructions of the 'crisis' in masculinity, and largely maintains patriarchal 'norms'. The male identity celebrated in *Angels*, by contrast, is marked by structures of queer kinship that allow for fluidity, nurturance, support and emotionality: a picture of how masculinity might 'be' otherwise. It is, then, through a dramatisation of certain subversive tropes deemed part of its catalyst that the 'crisis' is evoked — or exploited — by this play.

The Threat of the 'Other' Man

Diasporic Masculinities in Roy Williams's *Clubland* and David Henry Hwang's *Bondage*

Introduction

Roy Williams's *Clubland* opened at London's Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in 2001. *Bondage*, by David Henry Hwang, premiered almost a decade earlier at the 1992 Humana Festival of New American Plays in Kentucky: a significant annual event in mainstream US playwriting. While *Clubland* depicts a group of British characters, three black, two white, all but one of whom are men, *Bondage* features two masked figures, positioned to '[take] on different racial identities' (Lee, 2006: 204) as American subjects, and revealing themselves as an Asian American male and a Caucasian female towards the close of the drama. Through contrasting depictions of the intersection between identity axes, both of these dramas can be read to reverberate with the claim that '[r]ace and gender are ineluctably intertwined' (Dyer, 1997: 30).

In examining theatrical responses to the 'crisis' in masculinity through *Clubland* and *Bondage*, representations of various racial tropes and identities will constitute the concern of this chapter. Given that '[i]t has long been recognized that races do not exist in any scientifically meaningful sense' (Maynard, 1994: 10), this task may appear to run the risk of further ossifying a

hierarchical category as something which has historically enabled the naturalisation of racisms in the interest of white masculinity. This notwithstanding, 'in many societies people have often acted, and continue to act, as if 'race' is a *fixed* objective category' (*ibid*). To dislocate the term from such a position, 'race' will be understood here as a culturally contingent, or 'floating signifier' (Hall, 1996); that which 'always appear historically in articulation [...] with other categories [...] of class, of gender and ethnicity' (Hall, 1988: 28). It is within these terms that I will assess how far the plays' portrayals of 'race' are constructed to reify or undercut hegemonic masculinity's dependence on its retaining a fixed, 'natural' appearance. Thus, aside from foregrounding the notion that 'gender never operates [...] in isolation from race' (Stacey, 2000: 1193), representations of class, sexuality and national identity will come to bear upon the readings herein. Razia Aziz argues that constructions of the black/white binary reify 'a racial essentialism' that sees 'each category [take] on a deceptive air of internal coherence' (Aziz, 1997: 72). That *Clubland* and *Bondage* are concerned with dissimilar, racially 'othered' subjects, and were produced out of different cultural contexts and diasporic histories, allows a reading of them to emphasis the contingent conditions under which 'race' and masculinity are normatively configured.

Mindful of the fact that '[n]aming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance' (Frankenberg, 1993: 6), this chapter will encompass a concern with 'whiteness' as a key component of the privileged masculine script. The issue of shifts within subject positions, in the wake of postmodernity, will be framed by the

post-colonial theories of such as Kobena Mercer and Stuart Hall, and recent feminist writings on 'race' by Avtar Brah and Lola Young, among others; theoretical tropes to be read in concert with such socio-political advances as civil rights movements. I will apply this historical thread to the section of this chapter that is to follow an introduction to the plays, combining it with an account of those theatrical trajectories to which each bears similarities. The degree to which *Clubland* or *Bondage* might operate progressively shall be assessed here through considering engagements with the postmodern strategy of a 'diaspora aesthetic' (Hall, 1988; Mercer, 1988), a concept to be later outlined, and one which informs the subsequent reading of each play through a post-colonial theory of Homi Bhabha's.

The playwrights

Despite the fact that *Clubland* and *Bondage* were staged in venues synonymous with providing platforms for emerging writers, both Williams and Hwang were established playwrights at the point these dramas were produced. Claimed by Sierz as 'the foremost black playwright to emerge in Britain during the 1990s' (Sierz, 2006: 177), *Clubland* was Williams's ninth play and he had already garnered considerable recognition prior to its premiere in 2001 (see Sierz, 2006: 177–78). Securing the Writer's Guild New Writer of the Year award for his 1996 debut, *The No Boys Cricket Club*, 'his follow-up, *Starstruck*, won three major awards' (*ibid*: 177), including the John Whiting Award for Best New Play (1998). The fact that this latter prize had previously been won by several white male playwrights for landmark dramas within post-war British theatre, underlines the way in which Williams was recognised within

the mainstream several years before *Clubland*.¹ Comparatively, Hwang received widespread acclaim for *M. Butterfly* in 1988, preceding *Bondage* by four years. The Broadway production which followed the premiere of this play at the National Theatre in Washington is defined by Esther Kim Lee as '[t]he single event that put Asian American theatre on the national and international cultural map' (Lee, 2006: 1). A seminal success on the 'Great White Way',

[*M. Butterfly* was the] longest running nonmusical play since [...] Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (1980). It grossed over \$35 million in [...] the United States and several million dollars more internationally and won the Outer Critics Circle Award and the Tony Award for best play of 1988. (Kim, 2002: 128)

As with Williams, Hwang's established position as a mainstream playwright is apparent in both the reception of this work and the venues in which it was staged.

***Clubland*: critical responses**

Clubland itself received mixed reviews. The themes of 'race', gender, sexuality and the play's portrayal of their interconnection, were highlighted for praise in numerous reviews: 'a steely urban comedy about the clash between racial and sexual identity' (Smith, 2001); a 'blistering study, [...] [in which Williams] moves rituals of sexual display into a new area of racialism and rivalry' (Coveney, 2001b: 55); 'a fascinating exploration of racial attitudes [...] equally perceptive about the current crisis in masculinity' (Spencer, 2001b: 27). Critics were impressed, too, by the play's dialogue. *The Independent*, for instance, noted that 'Williams has a sharp ear for chat' (Bassett, 2001: 11) and that 'duologues flow by with smooth, easy realism and [...] cunning wit'

¹ For example, the award went to Tom Stoppard, for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, in 1967, Edward Bond for *Saved*, a year later, and David Edgar, for *Destiny* (1975).

(Myerson, 2001: 12). These comments are commensurate with others that went some way to frame the drama as social realism. While Billington perceived 'a vivid picture [...] of the tensions that exist within what we [...] dub the "black" community' (Billington, 2001b: 23), Jane Edwardes claimed that '[t]he characters [...] are so real, they could easily have walked into the theatre off the street outside' (Edwardes, 2001). Among numerous allusions to the playwright's talent was Michael Coveney's description of him as 'gifted' (Coveney, 2001b: 55). If such comments reified Williams's mainstream credentials, so too did the fact that *Clubland* secured him the 2001 *Evening Standard* Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright.

A key criticism levelled at the play stemmed from the view that characters, theme and plot alike were somewhat underdeveloped. Echoing the views of other journalists, Alastair Macaulay expressed the concern that '[i]t comes awkwardly close to soap [...]. And its ending feels like a synthetic feelgood wrap-up. All a bit too neat' (Macaulay, 2001: 20). If this performance of *Clubland* did indeed recall 'the stuff of soap operas' (Myerson, 2001: 12), it can be presumed that focus remained upon the interpersonal and apolitical, through characters presented as fundamentally unchanging. In this sense, the premiere might have staved away both from subversive exposure of the ways in which identities are culturally and 'politically constructed categories' (Young, 1996: 176); 'not neat and coherent, but fluid and fragmented' (Aziz, 1997: 74–75). Given the importance to white masculinity of 'a freezing of cultural identities to accentuate difference' (Nayak, 1990: 91), readings of the play as soap operatic thereby position it as lacking in transgressive force. Macaulay's account of the drama's close relates to this point. Assuming that

the play's narrative appeared contextualised within a 'realist [...] [system] of "closure"' (Aston, 1995: 40), it seems probable that the 'clashes' and 'tensions' the critics observed were not left unresolved by the final curtain. While the interwoven portrayals of gender and 'race' might subject each to rupture, stylistic and structural factors stand to thwart subversion here, diluting or allaying any threat to the coherence of white masculinity.

Bondage*: critical response and *M. Butterfly

Bondage received significantly less critical acclaim. One review described the 1992 Humana Festival as 'disappointing' in general (Liston, 1992: 112), while *The New York Times* said of Hwang's play that '[a]n hour is too long for this escapade' (Gussow, 1992). Notwithstanding potential weaknesses, in dramaturgical and aesthetic terms, alternative possibilities for such as these negative responses to *Bondage* are worth consideration — not least in light of the success of *M. Butterfly* and Hwang's subsequent positioning by many as 'a spokesman not only for Asian America but [...] for mainstream American theater' (Kim, 2002: 138). Numerous scholars have noted connections between *M. Butterfly* and *Bondage*. For instance, in defining 'the leitmotiv of Hwang's work' as 'the fluidity of identity' (Kondo, 1997a: 238), Dorinne Kondo notes that: '[w]hile [...] *M. Butterfly* thematizes shifting gender and sexual identities, in [...] *Bondage*, it is race that shifts and changes' (*ibid*). In mind of this continuity, it may be valid to highlight points of divergence between the two plays on the way to establishing at least *some* conceivable reasons why *Bondage* was not well-received. Unlike the latter, the landmark Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* saw it produced as a spectacle. Realised on the sizeable stage of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, the set design of a 'long and

tipped curved ramp' served as an 'enclosure' for the 'interior scenes' (Skloot, 1990: 60), which ranged from a courthouse in Paris to domestic spaces in Beijing. The integration of various sound and music included types of Chinese 'classical music' (*ibid*) alongside extracts from the Puccini opera, *Madame Butterfly* (1904), which were played in tandem with Chinese percussion. The form of Peking Opera was utilised through music and choreography. That such elements reflected designs for a large-scale production are mirrored in the play text's extensive instructions for properties and costume (see Hwang, 1988: 75–84). As a one-act two-hander, *Bondage* does not call for such variety or scale in terms of style and staging. The play further contains no music or significant changes in costume.

In narrative terms, *M. Butterfly* pivots around a white French male diplomat, who misguidedly believes that his Chinese lover of twenty years (Song Liling) is female. The play has been deemed to extend beyond a subversive exposition of gender performativity, as the staging of national identities and East/West relations imbricates this concept with themes pertaining to sexism, racism, and imperialist/colonialist histories. As David Eng observes, '[w]hat [...] *M. Butterfly* so incisively illustrates is the impossibility of thinking about racism and sexism as separate discourses' (Eng, 2005: 2). However, through the construction of Song Liling as a 'convincing' woman, the play has also been read to rehearse the collapse between 'the East' and the feminine, which has historically functioned to legitimate colonial and imperial pursuits. Edward Said's choice of words are telling in this context: 'the space of weaker [...] regions like the Orient [in the nineteenth century] was viewed as something inviting [...] penetration, insemination — in short, colonization'

(Said, 1978: 219). It is perhaps the case that the play might then reify the “feminization” [that] constitutes but one form of Asian men’s racial gendering in America’ (Ling, 1997: 314) as a means to shore up ‘the white man’s virility and the white race’s superiority’ (Kim, 1990: 70). Both through characterisation and the largely conservative form of the Broadway spectacle, transgressive strands of this drama risk being subsumed by reactionary ones. Hence, ‘one could argue that *M. Butterfly* [...] reinscribes the very trope it is contesting’ (Kondo, 1997a: 18). Magdalene Ang-Lygate makes the observation that:

[s]ome forms of Otherness are recognized as appropriate and tolerated because they support and perpetuate unequal relationship of power, e.g. when ‘authenticity’ is demarcated and controlled by a dominant western discourse. But when forms of Otherness that break out of the confines of dominant defined identity enclosures are articulated, these are perceived as subversive and rejected or repressed.
(Ang-Lygate, 1997: 180)

If *M. Butterfly*’s mainstream success can be explained on the basis of the matters discussed, perhaps it does stand to represent ‘forms of Otherness’ that ‘perpetuate’ hegemonic Western privilege. In this sense, the negative reviews of *Bondage* could be read to *partially* support the idea of it being a more provocative challenge to naturalised identity constructs which shore up hegemonic masculinity — and must, therefore, be ‘rejected or repressed’. Notwithstanding the fact that further analysis might situate *Bondage* within non-subversive ‘confines’, the contrast between the reception of this and Hwang’s earlier play may suggest that a greater radical element is at play in the later text.

Synopses of the plays

Clubland unfolds over two acts, each of six chronological and episodic scenes comprised, for the most part, by duologues. Lasting eighty minutes, the

premiere was defined as 'deft' (de Jongh, 2001: 50) and did not include an interval. Alongside one black female character, Sandra, who is in her late twenties, are four males of a similar age who represent different racial identities. Kenny is of West Indies origin; Ben and Nathan are white, and, Ade, who is black, is revealed to have moved to Britain from Africa as a child, and been bullied by Ben and Kenny at the school that all the men once attended. He is heard to inform Sandra midway through the second act, 'Every mornin when I had to go into that school, I was shaking with fear' (Williams, 2004: 117). Settings include various domestic spaces: the living room of Sandra's flat, the garden of Ben's house, and the exterior of Nathan's front door. While the former of these contexts reappears on several occasions, the majority of the action is confined to a nightclub called the Palais. Given the drama's cultural backdrop of South-East London, it is likely that this setting may evoke the real Hammersmith venue of the same name. In line with some of the critical responses discussed, this aspect is suggestive of an engagement with social realism.

The drama opens here to establish Ben and Kenny as friends: laughing together, 'drool[ing]' over women and 'singing lewd songs' (*ibid*: 61). Meeting muscular Ade by chance for the first time since school, Ben comments to Kenny in a private moment that he used to be 'so skinny' (*ibid*: 63–65). Throughout much of the play, Ben is shown in attempts to pressure Kenny into pursuing women for meaningless sexual encounters. Kenny is drawn to be reluctant to comply, and repeatedly tells Ben, 'I ain't doin it' when the other attempts to arrange a meeting with a prostitute on his behalf (*ibid*: 100). He proposes to Sandra, not long after they begin dating towards the end of

act one. At the start of the play, she is involved with Ade, whom she leaves on the basis of her belief in his numerous infidelities. However, it is made apparent that Sandra's desire for Ade, and vice versa, persists during her relationship with Kenny. Of a meeting with Ade after they have separated, she admits to Kenny that 'I did not fuck him. I wanted to' (*ibid*: 123), before terminating their relationship. Nathan is configured to try and advise Kenny, telling him to 'Stop getting led around by Ben all the time' (*ibid*: 91). Ben's apparent disregard for Nathan is repeatedly apparent. He mirrors the latter's advice in instructing Kenny to 'Forget Nate', whom he deems 'a fuckin snide' (*ibid*: 78 and 95). During the play's final scene, Kenny reveals he has built up the confidence to ask out a woman. At this stage, Ben admits that he has been left by his wife, kicked out of his house and lost the job he had working for his father-in-law.

In featuring only two characters and being confined to one location, the one-act of *Bondage* is less complex in terms of plot and setting. It unfolds in linear, chronological time. Characterisation provides a further point of divergence. Whereas the racial identities staged in *Clubland* remain consistent in each character, those represented by the two figures of the American play shift throughout the action. Set in '[a]n S&M parlour in San Fernando Valley, California' (Hwang, 2000: 251) the play charts the interplay between a Caucasian dominatrix, Terri, and her customer, Asian American Mark, during a session together. As mentioned above, the actual racial identities of these characters is not revealed, either to each other or to the audience, until the final moments, as both wear 'full face masks and hoods' (*ibid*: 253). The play opens with Mark posing a question — 'What am I today?' — to which Terri

responds, 'Today — you're a man. A Chinese man' (*ibid*). Repeated use of the word 'today' works to indicate at the outset that this is not the first meeting between the pair in this context. Indeed, as the drama progresses it becomes apparent that this is a longstanding arrangement: Mark is heard to state, fairly early on, 'I've been your client for more than a year now' (*ibid*: 261). Both characters are realised to take on four racial identities, each of which is shown to be selected by Terri. For as long as Mark is an Asian American whom she dubs 'Mark Wong', at the start of the play, she is a white, 'blond woman' (*ibid*: 253). This section comprises the longest of the play and is about twice the length of that which follows, in which Mark is cast as a white man and Terri plays an African American woman. The final two sets of roles see both figures occupy the same racial category: as Asian Americans, and finally, as Caucasians. Likely to take almost as long in performance as the first section, the third is considerably longer than the fourth, which is the shortest of all of them. By this token, most time is spent with one or both of the characters 'playing' Asian Americans, and this is the category in which Mark is configured for the majority of the play.

Each of these pairings is framed by Terri to explore the possibility, or impossibility, of various erotic couplings between every one of the imagined pairings. She also functions to evoke stereotypes in situating Mark's roles as a series of clichés. 'Mark Wong' works in an 'engineering factory', wears 'horn-rimmed glasses' and is told that, 'It's not really likely I'm gonna love you' (*ibid*: 253–54). In his guise as a Caucasian opposite an African American, the male figure is deemed a 'white [liberal]' who '[hunts] a little off the beaten

track' (*ibid*: 262). When both characters are drawn to inhabit the guise of Asian Americans, the female party states that

you Asian men are all alike — you're looking for someone [...] [w]ho'll smile at the lousiest jokes and spoon rice into your bowl [...]. Well, I'm not about to date any man who reminds me even slightly of my father.
(*ibid*: 267–68)

Although Mark, in turn, looks to defend or refute interpellation as such, it is not the case that he does so through situating Terri's personae in a comparable fashion. For instance, the opening exchange sees Mark resist the other's suggestion that he is either 'a Chinese gangster' or 'a nerd', by claiming 'I'm neither!' and asking, 'Isn't there something inbetween?' (*ibid*: 259). Terri's role as a dominatrix is thus conveyed by her looking to define and control the identities she assigns to herself and her customer, in order to accommodate what she terms his 'fantasies about race' (*ibid*: 272).

However, while Mark pays to be put into what he terms 'a position of weakness' (*ibid*: 265), the characters' games are infused by power struggles which transgress and undermine formal strictures of the dominatrix/submissive dynamic. All four of the roleplays are subject to rupture through moments which see Mark attempt to undermine Terri's show of authority. Such occurrences are enabled through errors and fissures in the latter's performance. During the first of the roleplays, for instance, Mark claims to be unaffected by Terri's 'rejection' on the grounds that he 'never said I [love] you' (*ibid*: 255) as she had supposed. This sees the pair 'stop in their tracks', and, moments later, the female party exclaim, 'Damn. [...] I fucked up. [...] I'm having a rotten day' (*ibid*). When she later states that each one of their games persists 'until I get the upper hand', Mark retorts, 'So prove it. [...] [T]ry not to break down again in the middle of a fantasy' (*ibid*:

257). It comes to appear that 'winning' one of the games is contingent upon not only maintaining a role, but inducing the other party to admit feelings of attraction. Whilst he is playing an Asian American for the second time, for instance, Mark concedes, 'All right! You win! I love you!' (*ibid*: 269). Terri breaks out of character soon after this line, asking him, 'how the hell can you talk about love? When you can't approach me like a normal human being?' (*ibid*: 270). Such hints at slippage from the sentiments expressed by the racialised roles undertaken, to those of the pair who enact them, anticipate the close of the play. Claiming to 'give notice as we speak' (*ibid*: 277), the dominatrix removes all of her costume except her underwear and hood within the final few minutes. She invites Mark to have the final 'victory' by removing her hood; he, instead, takes off his own hood and tells Terri that he loves her before stripping down to 'simple boxer shorts' (*ibid*: 279). She then, too, reveals her face. During this exchange, each character tells the other that they are 'beautiful' and the play closes as 'Mark touches Terri's hair. They gaze at each other' (*ibid*: 278 and 279).

British context and playwriting tropes

Heidi Mirza defines the formal text of British 'national identity' as a 'hegemonic masculinist discourse' (Mirza, 1997:16), and suggests that the presence, in Britain, of racially othered subjects 'disrupt[s] all the safe closed categories of what it means [...] to be white and British' (*ibid*: 3).

Comparatively, Segal argues that:

'outsiders' do have a special relationship and troubling presence in their own societies, which gives them a certain power [...]. From its vantage-point inside and outside mainstream society, Black culture continues to assess and criticise white culture and consciousness [...and] serves as a means to taunt [...] white masculinity.
(Segal, 1990: 191)

If a threat to the homogeneous appearance of the British cultural fabric may also be a threat to masculinity, these two concepts can be viewed as partially interdependent. Just as a privileged masculine trope is dependent upon invisible imbrications of certain axis, mainstream notions of nation and national identity similarly require 'the active silencing of the disruptive relations of ethnicity, [...] gender and [...] class' (Hall, 1992: 206). That the formal script and 'character' of a nation is always a historically contingent 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), underlines its vulnerability: a 'sense of national identity' is thus one 'which can always be challenged' (Hall, 1992: 205). The following discussion of *Clubland* will situate it in relation to earlier play texts and tropes in mind of this mutual connection. As the work of a black playwright, and one which foregrounds the theme of 'race' relation through representing diverse British men, it is feasible that this play might be read to harbour that 'special power' to which Segal refers. As Deidre Osborne notes: 'this interrogation of the concept of British-ness [...] frequently appears in Black British drama' (Osborne, 2005: 134).

The intersection between national identity and masculinity in 'crisis' can be seen to predate the latter phenomenon's reverberation in cultural texts of the 1990s. For example, of the protagonist of Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* (1956), Susan Bennett asserts,

[i]n Jimmy Porter's disaffection lies both frustration and rage brought about by the changing social conditions in England as well as a nostalgia for Britain's imperial might; [...] what Jimmy is upset about is the diminution of British male privilege through the political and cultural shifts in the post-war era.
(Bennett, 2000: 38)

These 'shifts' included the influx of black and Asian subjects from formerly colonised countries of the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean and Africa, and

prompted bids to reassert the dominance of a white, masculinist Britain on political and cultural stages. *Look Back In Anger* premiered in the same year that inhabitants of Nottingham and London (Notting Hill) engaged in 'race riots', the first of their kind since the Second World War to warrant widespread national attention. The 1940s and 1950s also included 'efforts to forge the sense of a national theatre movement' (Kershaw, 2004: 350). This period of uncertainty and flux thus saw 'black settlers' positioned as 'an illegitimate intrusion into a vision of authentic British national life that, prior to their arrival, was [perceived] as stable [...and] ethnically undifferentiated' (Gilroy, 1993: 7).

Michael McMillan observes that, during the 1960s, 'the ideological and political positions of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements provided the impetus for [...] an emergent black arts movement in Britain' (McMillan, 2006: 49). Such expression of a 'Black 'consciousness' (*ibid*) anticipated a re-appropriation of 'black' in the 1980s. This saw

the naturalized connotations of the term /black/ [...] disarticulated out of the dominant codes of racial discourse, and rearticulated as signs of alliance and solidarity among dispersed groups of people sharing common historical experience of British racism.
(Mercer, 1992: 426–27)

It was also during this period that an emergent cultural trope looked to reflect the 'doubleness' (Gilroy, 1993: 4) of identity experienced by black and Asian Britons of diasporic heritage: a 'diaspora aesthetic' (Hall, 1988; Mercer, 1988).

The way in which this developed bore witness to 'the diaspora experience' as

defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.
(Hall, 1990: 235)

As cultural articulation of this 'experience' look to 'exceed the containing fixity of definitions, categories and labels' (Procter, 2002: 97), the 'diaspora aesthetic' is one which

explores and exploits the creative contradictions of a clash of cultures [...] a *syncretic* dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and *creolizes* them, [...] rearticulating their symbolic meaning otherwise.
(Mercer, 1988: 57)

The transgressiveness of this approach owes both to its potential for "'othering" inherited discourses, [such as those] of English identity' (*ibid*: 59), and, in infusing aesthetics of the 'dominant culture' with those of its 'others', forging a mode of representation that resists a simplistic rehearsal of either. 'What is in question is not the expression of some lost origin' (*ibid*: 56), but rather a means to articulate identity as always already hybrid. By the dislocation and parody of 'authentic' aesthetic tropes, a 'diaspora aesthetic' opposes nostalgic projects that cast identity in rooted, essentialist terms, such as reactionary texts on the masculinity 'crisis'. That this post-colonial strategy might expose and unsettle the binary recalls queer strategies surveyed in the last chapter. This, too, is a subversive, postmodern technique.

The politics and output of 'independent Asian and black theatre companies [...] [such as] Black Theatre Cooperative, Talawa and Tara Arts' (Verma, 1996: 193) were informed by this counter-cultural trend. By this fact, they can be used to illustrate practical constructions of a 'diaspora aesthetic'. The founding member of Tara Arts, Jatinder Verma, coined the neologism, 'Binglish', to reflect upon this engagement; a term, in itself, that aptly reconfigures 'English'. Aside from the exclusive casting of black and Asian performers within autonomous productions by black and Asian practitioners, the use of multicultural styles and forms looked to 'challenge the dominant

conventions of the English stage' (*ibid*: 194) as an institution governed largely by Western, realist aesthetics. For example, usage of 'African and Caribbean music' and 'ritual forms' were utilised by Talawa and Black Theatre Cooperative (*ibid*: 200), while 'Binglish productions [...] [were] characterised by a [...] linguistic distinction' (*ibid*: 197) which infused English with the timbre and accents of formerly colonised regions. Verma cites the example of Talawa's 1994 production of *King Lear* as one in which 'the audience was [...] made to experience [...] Caribbean, West African, as much as an RSC-derived 'received pronunciation' [...] to make a rich tapestry of the *sound* of English' (*ibid*).² For Mercer,

[t]he subversive force of [...a] hybridising tendency is most apparent *at the level of language itself* where [...] patois and Black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of 'English' — the nation-language of master-discourse [...].
(Mercer, 1988: 57, my emphasis)

It is significant, then, that traces of a 'diaspora aesthetic' emerge in *Clubland* through the patios of the dialogue, as can be seen in the extracts already cited. Throughout the play — and irrespective of the speaking character's racial identity — 'just' is 'juss', 'you' is 'yu' and 'alright', 'awight'. The letter 'g' is repeatedly dropped from the end of sentences, and these often conclude with 'ennit'. That this aspect of the play stands to be emphasised in performance is supported by critical responses to the premiere, many of which highlighted the use of patois (Billington, 2001b; Myerson, 2001; Spencer, 2001b). Through deploying a verbal technique that posits identity as unfixed, this technique evokes '[c]ounter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase [...the] totalizing boundaries [...] through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities' (Bhabha, 1994: 213).

² The subversive potential of this technique was doubtless furthered by the company's choice of a canonical Western text.

Beyond the work of companies like Talawa Arts, patois appeared in plays produced by independent black British playwrights, such as Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1956). The Royal Court premiere of this drama was deemed significant to 'the development of black British theatre [...in] the postcolonial era' (Dahl, 1995: 39), not least as John 'broke the tradition of writing in perfect conditioned English by using Creole [...] of his native Trinidad' (McMillan, 2006: 50): 'Yer goin' have to use yer hands. For the way things goin' it looks to me like ye rent goin' be goin' to no damn High school' (John, 1963 [1956]: 30). Dramas of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Benjamin Zephaniah's *Job Rocking* (1987) and Paul Boakye's *Boy With Beer* (1992), also made use of this strategy.

Like *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, these later plays are 'about working-class blacks living in Britain' (Dahl, 1995: 39); aside from patois, both themes and settings align them with *Clubland*. *Job Rocking* is a depiction of unemployed, British black youth who can be read as representative of the 'underclass' by which disadvantaged 'youth, and especially minority youth' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000: 74) came to be categorised during the 1980s (see Glasgow, 1981). Aside from the locale in which *Clubland* is set, other points in the drama depict the working-class experience of the black subjects portrayed. For instance, during a scene in which Kenny is positioned to advise Sandra to save money, she demonstrates reluctance, telling him that she earns a weekly wage of £190, through what is earlier established as a job in a shop, and acquired her flat through the 'Housing Association' (Williams, 2004: 121). *Boy With Beer* (1992) also unfolds within a working-class domestic interior. Like

Job Rocking and various other plays of the 1980s and 1990s concerned with black British experience — Tunde Ikoli's *Scrape Off The Black* (1981), the first act of *Talking In Tongues* by Winsome Pinnock (1991) — it, too, is set in London.

All of these dramas came to be published in the *Black Plays* series (1987, 1989 and 1995), the first collections of plays by black British writers. The initial appearance of these compilations in the 1980s mirrored the advances made by racialised subjects 'against [...] [whom] the concept of the British "nation" has been defined in popular consciousness' (Rassool, 1997: 187). However, the fact that the *Black Plays* series emerged as late as it did can be viewed to reflect upon prevailing racisms in the sphere of cultural production. In her introduction to the second volume, Yvonne Brewster notes that 'it was the 1970s before anything approaching a major body of work [by black playwrights] began appearing in print' (Brewster, 1989: i), a point which Segal echoed in a later claim: '[b]lack people [...] have been excluded from writing and publishing until very recently' (Segal, 1990: 182). In a comment which underlines the persistence of such prejudice, McMillan wrote in 2006 that 'the work of Black theatre writers in Britain has been rarely produced, rarely published, and in some instances never documented' (McMillan, 2006: 48). It is thereby arguable that such 'work', as a tangible expression of '[emergent] black and Asian British identities', has been perceived in the mainstream as '[a] challenge to [that] white British identity' (Hall, 1992: 206) that privileges hegemonic masculinity. The polemic quality of other dramas published in the *Black Plays* series lends support to this notion. Jamal Ali's *Black Feet In The Snow* (1973) was described as '[pulsating] to the fear [...] of the London Street

post-Notting Hill riots' (Brewster, 1989: i): a portrayal of urban, racial tensions based on real, historical events. The concept of a British 'black underclass', 'economically marginalised [...] as a result of racial discrimination' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000: 74) in the 1980s, grants *Job Rocking* a comparably politicised tone, not least as the action takes place within the public space of a job centre: a setting which may allow socio-economic conditions to be privileged over engagement with individualised characters.

Clubland can thus be positioned in relation to this relatively short history of 'black plays', both as the work of a black British writer, and through points of convergence in terms of style, setting and character. However, it is of note that this drama is not 'issue-based' like *Job Rocking* or *Black Feet In The Snow*. Through the deployment of patois and (in the case of the premiere) the sight of differently racialised bodies depicting British subjects, a 'diaspora experience' (Hall, 1990: 235) may be evoked to disrupt the seeming coherence of identity structures by which masculinity maintains its dominance.³ However, in thematic and narrative terms, explorations of the diasporic are contained within dialogue about a personalised tension between the characters: the fact that Ben and Kenny once bullied Ade as an African immigrant. The play text contains no details about the domestic and nightclub settings that might work to further politicise this theme, underlining an onus on interpersonal concerns that recalls the critics' analogies to soap. This facet of *Clubland* may thus support Peacock's claim that 'Roy Williams ignores the diaspora and focuses on the definition of individual identity by young people, both black and white' (Peacock, 2008: 59). *Clubland's* divergences from a

³ Each member of the cast, for this production, was consistent with the racial identity of their character.

'diaspora aesthetic' are of relevance here, not least in regard to the multiracial focus to which Peacock makes reference. To continue with 'Binglish' as a model of this aesthetic: Verma defines a 'multicultural' production as that which is realised through 'a mixed cast' and does 'not generally [attempt to] confront the dominant [...] convention[s] of British theatre' (Verma, 1996: 194). In conforming to the first of these 'multicultural' features, the premiere of *Clubland* is rendered distinct from 'Binglish' as informed by the need for separatist self-identification.

The play's adherence to 'dominant conventions of British theatre' is further apparent through its comparability to dramas of the 1990s by white writers, which depicted urban experiences of working-class, white men: Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995), Simon Block's *Not A Game For Boys* (1996), *Serving It Up* (1996) by David Eldridge, and Patrick Marber's *Dealer's Choice* (1993). While the depiction of black subjects and use of patois distinguishes *Clubland* from these dramas, they converge through realist strategies of individualised, consistent characters (each played by one actor), prosaic settings and dialogue, and chronological time frames. One newspaper critic deemed *Dealer's Choice* 'a cool and curative glass of realism' (Coren, 2008: 21), while *Serving It Up* was described as 'a slice of it's-grim-down south naturalism' (Shuttleworth, 1996). With the exception of *Dealer's Choice*, all of these plays were also premiered at the Royal Court.

Racism functions as a defining feature of *Serving It Up's* young, single, unemployed white protagonist, Sonny. During a dialogue with his friend Nick (also white), he is positioned to comment:

SONNY [...] the darkies can't half play cricket. Viv Richards — what a player he was! Black as the ace of spades though.

NICK Why do you hate the blacks so much?

SONNY Just do. [...] Hate the Pakis more though.

(Eldridge, 1997: 45)

In this capacity, the character of Sonny is comparable to that of Ben in *Clubland*. Although the latter's closest ally appears to be Kenny, Ben's interaction with him is punctuated by racist conjectures: 'Black women go like a train'; 'Juss hurry up and find a woman, man. [...] A black woman, leave ours alone' (Williams, 2004: 103 and 127). The way in which racism intersects here with question of sex and gender is underlined by the misogyny Ben is shown to display. Aside from revealing to Kenny that he 'whacked' his wife 'right in the face', he refers to Nathan's wife as 'it' and describes a date of Kenny's as 'sum real fat bitch' (*ibid*: 104, 78 and 87). This feature is also redolent of *Serving It Up*. Sonny is heard to refer to one of his mother's friends as a 'Nice old bit of roughage', and, on being rejected by a woman in a pub, says to a male friend, 'You wait. [...] I'm going to give her a slap. Fucking bitch' (Eldridge, 1997: 4 and 36). Just as these representations of racist white men perceivably mirror a 'fin de millennium crisis of British national, postimperial identity' (Farrell, 2003: 120), their imbrication with sexism is of note to the 'crisis' in masculinity. In Lola Young's words:

[d]efining identity as being a coherent sense of self, both on an individual and group level, it is the threat of [...] dissolution of [...] identity which fuels racist supremacy, homophobia and misogyny.
(Young, 1996: 186).

Through Ben as through Sonny, the explicit construction of interlinking prejudices may function to reflect ruptures in white masculinity.

Serving It Up aside, a particular resonance between *Clubland* and other of these plays by white writers highlights a problematic aspect. Although the presence of one female character distinguished it from *Mojo*, *Dealer's Choice* and *Not A Game For Boys* — in which women are wholly absent or remain off-stage — so too does it recall other Royal Court plays like *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and *Trainspotting* (1995), in which 'a single woman holds a male milieu together' (Sierz, 2001: 156). That the dramatic world of *Clubland* is a homosocial one has specific implications in terms of the racial identities under representation. Addressing the issue of drama which reify what she terms a 'black masculinist view', Young argues:

[w]hen it comes to black male productions, audiences are presented with scenarios which regard the male expression of oppression and political resistance as being the representative black experience.
(Young, 1996: 178)

The character of Sandra is realised, in part, through monologues that *do* construct a female 'black experience'. In being positioned to challenge Ade over his infidelities during their first scene together, Sandra tells him that a friend of hers 'saw yu comin outta the Palais wid sum silly white bitch' (Williams, 2004: 73), and, throughout the drama, is imbued with a prejudice against white women that seems prompted by her awareness of Ade's attraction to them. During her first date with Kenny, she is heard to ask: 'wat is it about these fuckin girls that makes our men keep running to them? [...] Are white girls sexier than we are?' (*ibid*: 96). In concert with this, Sandra is heard to voice negative opinions of black men. She calls Ade a 'black bastard' at the close of their first scene together, and when Kenny later suggests that black men may be 'scared' of her, the response is explicitly racist: 'I'm going for a white guy, yu spearchuckers are killin me. Fuckin black men, man, sorry-arsed niggers, yer brains are in yer dicks' (*ibid*: 97). By virtue of the

realism in which they are conceived, these lines stand to be read as evidence of the way in which Sandra is hurt by Ade's actions, rather than comprising a critique of those sex/'race' hierarchies that subordinate the black female subject. Moreover, the discernibly vociferous tone in which Sandra is drawn to speak risks rehearsing this position as an attitudinal and 'controlling' stereotype (Mirza, 1997: 6). It is solely through prejudicial sentiments voiced by her that the play might work to highlight how "'blackness" is not a homogeneous experience for women and men' (Ang-Lygate, 1997: 173). That a sympathetic engagement with Sandra, could, then, be limited, is lent support by the fact of her being a minor character who provides a homosocial bridge between Ade and Kenny. While one critic of the premiere termed her a 'token female presence' (Billington, 2001b: 23), another claimed that 'Sandra isn't much of a role [...] the heart of the play is with its men' (Macaulay, 2001: 20). If *Clubland* thereby foregrounds a 'male expression of [racial] oppression', a rehearsal of masculinist binaries stands to be at play.

The drama's connection to the Royal Court provides a further means of assessing its subversive capacity. For, as Kondo argues, 'it matters centrally [...] who is performing in what venue for what audience' (Kondo, 1997a: 16–17). *Clubland*'s rarity as a 'black play' amongst those about groups of men could see it cater to an 'exoticisation of difference' (Ahmed, 2000: 117); particularly if considered in terms of Osborne's suggestion that the Royal Court tends towards attracting white, middle-class audiences (Osborne, 2005). The premiere might thereby have constituted an 'incorporation [which] allows 'difference' to [...figure as] something that simply livens up the ordinary or mainstream diet' (Ahmed, 2000: 117). This argument is

underpinned by the newspaper reviews written by white male journalists. Macaulay claimed that, as 'sociology', *Clubland* was 'interesting to those of us who have little [...] knowledge of this world' (Macaulay, 2001: 20), while both Nicholas de Jongh and Charles Spencer deemed it 'fascinating' (de Jongh, 2001: 50 and Spencer, 2001b: 27). Just as the nature of the venue could position the play as one of 'exotic' variety, so too might the working-class, urban setting have rendered it 'palatable for white audiences through locating blackness within familiar contexts' (Osborne, 2005: 145). In concert with engaging in Royal Court realism, these factors may have contained the transgressive force of the play's 'diaspora aesthetics'.

US context and playwriting tropes

As with the work of black British playwrights, that of racially othered Americans has often appeared to be informed by a sense of diasporic duality. Citing the views of Ping Chong, a Chinese American writer, Misha Berson recalls the notion of a 'diaspora aesthetic' in observing how 'a kind of double vision [...] allows one to work at the intersections of forms, at the crux of cultures, at the critical junctures where ethnic, aesthetic and social identities blend and blur' (Berson, 1990: xiii). As such strategies disrupt masculinity through casting identity as multiple and unfixed, it is worth accounting for the way in which the subversive potential of *Bondage* might owe to the fact of its being Asian American. In this context, intersections between gender, 'race', and national identity are worthy of note, mirroring those outlined in reference to Britain and *Clubland*. Karen Shimakawa defines the hegemonic script of 'US Americanness' as 'white, male, [and] heterosexual', adding that '[o]n a national/cultural scale Asian Americanness is what must be abjected in order

to constitute a coherent, normative U.S. American identity' (Shimakawa, 2002: 86–87). Hence, just as 'black' and 'British' have historically be perceived as mutually exclusive, so too has 'Asian American' been deemed oxymoronic by discourses of patriarchal nationalism. In Elaine Kim's words: 'the assumed [...] racial otherness of Asian Americans has been constructed around the premise that because we are Asians we [...] cannot be Americans' (Kim, 1990: 68). It is by this token that Asian American plays like *Bondage* may stand to figure as 'sites for the production and performance of contestory wish-images in the form of racial, gender, national, and transnational identities' (Kondo, 1997a: 10), problematising the singularity of 'US Americanness' and its constituent masculine 'norm'.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Asian American plays written by men in the 1960s and 1970s sought to '[condemn] effeminate stereotypes perpetuated in American society' (Kurahashi, 1999: 69). As already discussed in relation to *M. Butterfly*, there have long existed tropes within the masculinist American body politic that see 'the Asian American male [...] feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imagery' (Eng, 2000: 2). That this process recalls imperialist visions of the colonised 'East' as a space of 'feminine penetrability' (Said, 1978: 206) points to a slippage between Eurocentric configurations of south-east Asian nations, and those by which male descendents of these countries have been racially gendered. The fact of US occupation in Korea and Vietnam after the Second World War sees this discourse extended from colonial projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the 1950s and 1960s: indeed, Said makes the claim that, since 1945, 'America has dominated the Orient' (*ibid*: 4). In a binaristic divide

between West and East, the casting of Asian/Asian American men as a 'diametrically opposed feminine Other' (Ling, 1997: 314) can be viewed as one means by which the US has sought to safeguard the appearance of a masculine national character. Along with strategic racisms deployed to emasculate other 'ethnic minorities' like African Americans, this imperialist discourse appears to perpetuate normative, guarded links between whiteness and masculinity.

Aiiieeee! (1973), a collection of male-authored plays, was the first anthology of Asian American drama ever to be published. A passage from its introduction underlines the concern with 'Asian' men's exclusion from masculine privilege: '[t]he white stereotype of the [...] Asian is utterly without manhood. [...] At worst, the Asian American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all traditionally masculine qualities' (Chan, Chin, Inada *et al.*, 1974: 12). The publication of this anthology in the early 1970s reflects upon progressive changes brought about by the Asian American Movement.

This activist project

erupted in the [late] 1960s and early 1970s [...]. Young people of diverse Asian ancestry joined together to form a new political coalition. United under the 'Asian-American' banner, they began to exert collective political clout, seek repatriations for past injustices and challenge racial stereotyping.
(Berson, 1990: xii)

As 'a replacement for the exoticizing, imperializing epithet "Oriental"', (Kondo, 1997b: ix), 'Asian American' thus emerged as a politicised term for 'pan-ethnic identification' (Lee, 1998: 16), comparable to that of 'black' in 1980s Britain. That it allowed for the appearance of such collections as *Aiiieeee!* highlights the intertwined nature of political and cultural progress by Asian American subjects. In describing how such 'activism [...] wrought

important changes in the social fabric of American life', Josephine Lee claims the 'visibility of Asian American theater artists' as a '[s]ignificant aspect' of these broader, social shifts (*ibid.*: 3). *Aiiieeeee!* playwrights like Chinese American Frank Chin thus figured as part of a 'first wave' of Asian American work.

Parallels can be drawn between representations of Asian American men in plays of this period and those contained in *Bondage*. A 1971 drama which appeared in *Aiiieeeee!*, Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, takes as its protagonist a Chinese American writer, Tam, who is shown to '[have] a deep sense of his own emasculation' (McDonald, 1981: xvi). The character is established as divorced from a Caucasian woman (now married to a white man), and to have a father who is reported to earn his living in the domestic ('feminine') role of dishwasher. During a scene set in the realist domestic interior of Tam's friend Kenji's apartment, conversation between this pair and a third, female friend sees Tam state that 'Chinamans [*sic*] make lousy fathers. I know. I have one' (Chin, 1981: 23). Minutes later, he is heard to comment that 'I've given my folks white grandkids, right? I don't want 'em to be anything like me, or know me [...]. This guy they're calling 'daddy'... I hear he's even a better writer than me' (*ibid.*: 27). Abjection of racial identity is sounded alongside an expression of dual emasculation. The ex-wife's off-stage white husband is not only deemed a successful paternal replacement, but more skilful than Tam at a craft imbued with phallic power. The sense that Tam is not close to, or proud of, his father tallies with a monologue in which he is heard to recall his childhood search for an Asian American hero — not in reality, but on the radio. 'I'd spin that dial looking for to hear

ANYBODY, CHINESE AMERICAN BOY, [...] anywhere on the dial, doing anything grand on the air, anything at all...' (*ibid*: 32).

While the theme of fatherhood is absent from *Bondage*, that of internalised emasculation reverberates in the male character. The insecurities which Mark is positioned to espouse during the first of *Bondage's* roleplays echo in the drama's conclusion. While masked and 'playing' an Asian American, he delivers the line: 'you're a blonde. I'm — Chinese. It's not so easy to know whether it's OK for me to love you' (Hwang, 2000: 253). During the final few moments, Mark admits he 'was afraid' to admit genuine feelings for Terri, being 'an Asian man', and asks her 'Would you have dated me? If I'd come to you first like this?' (*ibid*: 278–79). While her acceptance of him sets this exchange at a distance from their earlier 'game', the doubts he expresses see a trace of those which made up part of his stereotypical role. As in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, self-perception of gendered and sexual roles emerge through a matrix of 'race' and racisms. In these terms, the depiction of both protagonists might recall Segal's summary of Frantz Fanon's concern: that 'in a white dominated culture, [...] racist images are internalised by Black people themselves. [...] Black men and women take on board the attributes [...] of white imagining' (Segal, 1990: 179) — insofar as 'Asian American' can substitute for 'Black'.

Like Tam, the 'real' Mark appears to self-identify according to tenets of 'white imagining', possibly limiting the subversive function of the portrayal. This notion is underlined by the presence of psychological realism of each of the plays, a hegemonic form within 'white dominated culture'. Despite the fact

that *The Chickencoop Chinaman's* prosaic, interior settings are interspersed with flights into the surreal (one scene situates Tam 'in limbo', for example), psychic interiority is constructed in this male protagonist as it is in Mark. Aside from the realist dialogue, staging directions for Tam's monologue about his childhood search for a hero indicate that the actor should appear in a spotlight. Thus, while some of the language here is structured less prosaically, psychological realism persists through both an insight into the character's past and the fact that — by virtue of his isolation in a spotlight — the audience is positioned for sympathetic identification. In *Bondage*, ruptures in the 'games', earlier discussed, convey a sense of a 'real' Mark and Terri. This notion is made clear by the response to Mark's question, 'What am I today?': 'A Chinese man. But don't bother with that accent crap' (Hwang, 2000: 253). On learning that Terri will play a blonde, the male party is heard to admit, 'I feel... very vulnerable' to which she replies, 'You should. I pick these roles for a reason, you know' (*ibid*). Before these words are spoken, Terri is seen '[pacing] with her whip', and Mark, 'chained to the wall' (*ibid*). The initial *mise-en-scène* works in tandem with dialogue to see the characters self-aware that they are partaking in what is always already a fantasy: the spectator is left with no doubt that there are players behind the play. Moreover, fissures in the roleplays are consistent with the final scene in that Mark is consistently drawn as interested in the 'real' Terri. As well as being positioned to point out her mistakes, he also demonstrates tenderness and concern: at one point, '[placing] his hands gently on her shoulders' and asking, 'You feeling OK today?' (*ibid*: 256). The insecurities apparent in him during the final exchange are thus inflected by a realism which might naturalise the collapse between the Asian American male and the

'unmanliness' attached to him by racist discourses.⁴ Both hegemonic masculinity and its imbrication with whiteness might remain untroubled by this strand of *Bondage*, as Mark operates to reflect 'the power of inner compulsion and [...] conformation to the norm' which hinders political progression of othered identities (Hall, 1990: 226). Despite the fact that Terri also functions to play 'othered' subjects, it is the play's male character — as with those of *Clubland* — that functions to 'represent' the 'experience' of racial subjugation (Young, 1996: 178). Aside from the fact of Mark's 'real' identity, in contradistinction to Terri's being white, the structure of the role-plays underpins how, as earlier outlined, it is him, and not her, who figures to negotiate stereotypical positioning. In this sense, *Bondage* reifies '[t]he invisibility of black [and Asian] women [...] in a racial discourse, where the subject is male' (Mirza, 1997: 4), and, therefore, 'race' and gender hierarchies. This argument is lent support by the parallels discussed between the play and *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. Indeed, the project of recuperating Asian male identity on the part of the *Aiiieeeee!* writers has 'come under attack from feminist [...] critics [...] who were deeply critical of their misogyny' (Kim, 2005: 125), and Frank Chin has repeatedly been termed an 'Asian American masculinist' (Kurahashi, 1999: 70).

As with Tam's ex-wife in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, offstage, white female characters recur in Asian American plays of the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the female blonde is repeatedly evoked as an emblem of hegemonic US

⁴ While this collapse is likewise apparent in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, the fact that this play was produced twenty years earlier is of significance, given the lack of self-representation afforded Asian Americans prior to the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the risk of reifying an abject position, the very depiction of the *effects* of abjection can be seen as contemporaneously progressive, not least as the premiere saw Tam played by a Chinese American actor (Randall 'Duk' Kim) as part of a multiracial cast.

culture; that 'dominant patriarchal discourse, which [...] prohibits Asian American men from full participation in [...] masculinity' (Ling, 1997: 319). Heterosexual relations with 'the blonde' repeatedly figure as a bid towards assimilation and 'participation' in an idealised masculine mould. In the second of Frank Chin's plays, *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), Fred, a Chinese American, is shown to demonstrate animosity towards Ross, a white man married to his sister, during a family dinner at Fred's parents' house. In an attempt at reconciliation, Ross tells Fred that 'I am not totally insensitive to Chinese like most whites', to which the latter is heard to state: 'Listen, Ross, it's the rule not the exception for us to marry out white. [...] I might even marry me a blonde' (Chin, 1981: 85, my emphasis). Use of the word 'even' looks to configure 'the blonde' at the pinnacle of hetero-masculine achievement in US culture. A comparable reference appears in *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988), by Philip Kan Gotanda, a Japanese American playwright often considered in tandem with Hwang as 'one of a core of "second wave" dramatists to [...] create a viable Asian American theater' (Kaplan, 2002: 69). The character of Vincent, a Japanese American actor, delivers a monologue at the close of this play in the guise of Sergeant Moto, 'a prototypical World War II Japanese detention guard' (Vorlicky, 1994: 191).⁵ The opening lines of this monologue comprise an assertion of Moto's 'Americanness': 'I graduate UCLA, Class of '34. I drive big American car with big-chested American blond' (Gotanda, 1991: 5). Identification with masculinist white America, appears to be sought, in part, through proof of heterosexuality via a white subject (a 'big-chested blond'). If 'the blonde' mentioned operates to signal an assimilationist drive, a parallel may be drawn between this play and *The*

⁵ This role, amongst others that Vincent is placed to take on, stages stereotypical Asian/Asian American male subjects, providing a connection to *Bondage* to which I will return.

Chickencoop Chinaman. Here, it is an onstage female character that provides a means of examining this theme in relation to questions of gendered/national identity. Tam enters into a debate with Tom, a Chinese American man who used to be married to Lee, a female character described as '[possibly] Eurasian or Chinese American passing for white' (Chin, 1981: 3). Tam tells Tom twice, 'Lee says you're not a man!' (*ibid*), and reacts badly to his claim that Lee is not of Chinese origin:

Tom, you're beautiful. You wanted to be 'accepted' by whites so much, you created one to accept you. You didn't know Lee's got a bucket of Chinese blood in her? [...] You wanted a white girl so bad [...] you turned her white with your magic eyes.
(*ibid*: 59–60)

What read as bids to question Tom's hetero-masculinity finally function through disassociating his ex-wife from whiteness. The fact Lee could figure on stage to represent the American blonde is suggested by the way in which Tam is placed to pursue his argument: 'She just peroxidized, her hair, Tom' (*ibid*: 60).

The presence of this thread in these three plays prefigures the role of the onstage blonde of *Bondage*. A degree of transgression is apparent though this facet of the drama; namely, by distinctions between Mark and Terri's initial roleplay and later interaction 'as themselves'. The Asian male's desire for the blonde female to whom he feels inferior are rehearsed in the former exchange as *stereotypical* relations. Terri functions to taunt Mark by telling him that 'you'll end up at sixty-five worshipping a Polaroid you happened to snap of me at a high school picnic' (Hwang, 2000: 253). She then justifies the claim that she is 'never gonna love' him by saying, 'It's only 199—, you know' (*ibid*:

254).⁶ By the use of hoods in performance, the stereotypical Asian male/blonde female relation resists problematic reification. Consistent with all of the other racialised roles the duo are shown to take on, the audience cannot see the hair or skin of the onstage figures: 'prime signifier[s] of the body and its social and cultural correlates' (Bhabha, 1994: 217) which preserve white masculinity as "'proof" of racial difference' (Lee, 1998: 96). The dynamics of this interaction are thereby portrayed as always already a fiction. When Mark and Terri 'really' appear as these subjects later on, the relationship depicted contrasts with that stereotypically conceived. Notwithstanding a problem already discussed — that Mark may persist in demonstrating a sense of inferiority — the tender portrayal of their union is further marked positively by Terri (and the play's) closing line: 'Anything's possible. This is the 1990s' (Hwang, 2000: 279). As the visible blonde is dislodged from a space of assimilationist fantasy, this relationship is characterised by optimism and hope. That 'inter-racial sexuality threatens the power of whiteness' (Dyer, 1997: 25) foregrounds the subversive quality of the final scene, in terms of a masculine script that demands its endurance.

Bondage's depiction of a white male subject also situates the play in relation to other Asian American dramas. In being realised to play a white man opposite Terri's white woman, Mark responds to her offer of 'a rubdown' with a line that might denote a certain fear of intimacy: 'I usually... avoid these kinds of situations' (*ibid*: 273). Claiming 'my fright is reasonable', he is then heard to exclaim:

⁶ The play is only described as being set during the 1990s (Hwang, 2000: 251). As reference to the 'actual' date is left undefined in the script, it is presumably the case that post-premiere productions may realise this line according to the year in which they are staged.

I'm a white man! Why wouldn't I have problems? The world is changing so fast around me — you can't even tell whose country it is anymore. I can't hardly open my mouth without wondering if I'm offending, if I'm secretly revealing to everyone but myself... some hatred, some hidden desire to strike back... [...]. It only there were some certainty [...] — OK, let the feminists rule the place! We'll call it the United States of Amazonia! Or the Japanese! Or the gays! If I could only figure out who's in charge, then I'd know where I'd stand. But this constant flux — who can endure it? I'd rather crawl into a protected room where I know what to expect — painful though that place may be.
(*ibid*)

The sentiments expressed in this monologue clearly reflect constructions of the 'crisis' in masculinity. While this guise of Mark's thus bespeaks the phenomena's presence in the 1990s, points of convergence with an older play are of note. During a scene in *The Year of The Dragon*, set again in the family home, Ross is shown in conversation with his wife (Sis) and her parents (Ma and Pa). Of the speech that Pa has been preparing to give on the Chinese New Year, Ross is seen to comment:

ROSS Everyone's going to love your speech [...]. You don't have to worry about hostility in Chinatown [...]. Now me, I'm used to hostility.

MA I'm so sorry to hear that...

ROSS (*overlapping*) Women hate me. Homosexuals hate me. . .

SIS (*under*) Oh, Ross!

ROSS (*having never stopped*): Hawks hate me. Doves, Republicans, Communists, Democrats. Southern whites. Freedom riders. Blacks. Chicanos, Indian, hardhats. Ecologists. The police...! I'm Mr White Male Supremacist. Middle Middle class American Liberal Four Years of College Pig. So I'm used to hostility.

(Chin, 1981: 129)

Aside from pre-figuring Mark in listing various marginalised groups as being a source of angst, Ross is placed to allude to mainstream bodies of power (political parties and the police). As Mark's personae questions the US's identity and wishes to know 'who's in charge', this earlier character is seen to position himself in an untenable paradox: 'hated' by mainstream factions

while quintessentially 'mainstream' himself (white, male, middle-class, heterosexual and educated). Although the lines given to Ross do not constitute a monologue, the stage directions suggest that these sentiments are voiced as an unbroken tirade. Structuring of dialogue on a shared theme thus denotes a further link to the later drama.

Dissimilarities between these extracts might, too, be usefully addressed. If Ross's function here, in *The Year of The Dragon*, evokes contemporaneous civil rights activism, it does not evince the sense of 'flux' to which an audience would hear Mark refer. This absence highlights the impact of ongoing socio-political and post-structuralist shifts on *Bondage*, the latter of which emerged largely after the earlier play was produced. While lines given to Ross may reflect an impact of first stage deconstruction, wrought through bids by 'others' to occupy the privileged side of the binary, those delivered by Mark reflect a third stage of flux. Ross appears to resent the sense of being 'othered'; Mark ('in role') merely wishes for secure positioning, even in a 'painful place' of abjection. If reading these extracts in tandem points to the presence of a 'crisis' in masculinity that pre-dates the 1990s, so too does it underpin how such 'crises' figure differently in two historical contexts at a twenty year distance. Formal and aesthetic divergences between *The Year of The Dragon* and *Bondage* underline the transgressive quality of the latter in relation to this representation of white masculinity. Unlike Mark, Ross only ever figures as a visibly white male, and one imbued with realist assets through being situated as a prosaic character in a domestic, two-act drama. By being shown to have a persistently uneasy relationship with his wife's relatives, the claim of being 'hated' lends itself to be read as an outpouring of formerly repressed feelings

which has the potential to evoke a sympathetic response. That this is less likely in the case of Mark owes, of course, to the absence of bodily signification and the audience's knowledge that this is simply another game. In being configured as just one in a series of roles, the 'playing' of the white male (against that of a white female) works to represent whiteness as a constructed and racialised category. Immediately prior to this part of the play, Terri states that, in their both taking on white characters, there will be 'no racial considerations whatsoever' (Hwang, 2000: 272). If Mark's monologue demonstrates the crucial nature of 'race' to constructs of gender, it looks to cast Terri's line as a naturalised assumption about whiteness, which is then subjected to rupture. In marking a hegemonic position thus, *Bondage* can be seen to fulfil a transgressive role in line with Richard Dyer's assertion that 'whiteness needs to be made strange' (Dyer, 1997: 10). Exposure of its imbrication with the masculine likewise bespeaks the knowledge that 'white male power has benefited enormously from keeping whiteness and masculinity in the dark' (Robinson, 2000: 1).

On the basis of this, and those other aspects of *Bondage* highlighted thus far, the concealing costumes emerge as key to its transgressive scope. '[C]onsidered the first Asian American play to receive staging' (Lee, 2006: 45), Henry Woon's *Now You See, Now You Don't* (1968) also employed a form of masks: here, in a depiction of 'racism in the workplace' (*ibid*: 46). Lee notes that the premiere

featured white character played by Asian American actors wearing white half-masks. The Chinese American protagonist wore a similarly shaped yellow mask which he takes off at a critical point when he finally succeeds in forcing his white co-workers to submit to his wishes.
(*ibid*)

This use of masks anticipates that in *Bondage* in being removed at a 'critical', progressive moment. In this 1960s play, it can be read as a subversive re-appropriation of the 'yellowface' tradition by which Asian and Asian American subjects were represented by white actors in heavy yellow make-up, in mainstream US theatre from at least the nineteenth century. This trend appeared in such 'popular plays [...] as *The Yankees in China* (1839), *Irishman in China* (1842), *The Cockney in China* (1848) and *China, or Tricks upon Travellers* (1841)' which rehearsed 'comedic images' of Chinese subjects (*ibid*: 10) in white-authored drama that had 'nothing at all to do with Asian self-definition' (Berson, 1990: x). Replacing make-up with masks, and whites playing Asians with Asians playing both themselves and whites, *Now You See, Now You Don't* can be viewed to have highlighted the racist practices of these earlier ventures; not least in light of its polemical theme. Given that 'colonial discourse is [...] [dependent] on the concept of "fixity" in the [...] construction of otherness' (Bhabha, 1994: 94), the unchanging masks stand to have functioned as signifiers of those 'symbolically fixed boundaries' (Hall, 1997: 258) by which subjects are normatively raced. In this respect, both plays enact a symbolic exposure and upending of naturalised processes that see the racially 'other' body 'sealed into [...] crushing objecthood' (Fanon, 1999 [1952]: 109), or 'over-determined from without' (*ibid*: 116) by cultural operations of the white male gaze. As the stereotypical roles enacted in *Bondage* are played out by masked figures, the function of costume here can be deemed to signify comparably. Pre-figuring one element of this later play, the fact that white characters are realised solely through masks in *Now You See, Now You Don't* looks to place whiteness alongside 'Asianness', as a marked category.

Disjunction between the masked and 'real' subjects staged is another point of convergence between the dramas. In the earlier play, visual juxtaposition of skin and (half-)mask allows one to read the persons depicted as distinct from, or in excess of, immobile moulds of racialisation that rely, in Fanon's words, on claiming 'ethnic characteristics' (*ibid*: 112). As 'colonial or imperial forms of domination' (Hook, 2004: 97) work to see binary constructs of the raced body as 'locked in' or 'unarguable' (Fanon, 1999 [1952]: 116 and 117), such techniques thus stand as representative means to 'throw off the burden of that [...] malediction' (*ibid*: 111) that perpetuates modes of 'othering', reflecting 'the impossibility of being fixed by a single [...] gaze in the process of identification' (Mirza, 1997: 15). The space between the masked/raced position and the one who embodies it is also highlighted by the protagonist, like Mark, being drawn to remove his mask towards the end of the play. If this latter gesture denotes resistance to the stereotyping gaze, so too may it present a challenge to masculinist, colonial scripts — or other discourses by which 'race' is essentialised in tandem with gender 'norms'. Moreover, it is significant that positivity and progress emerge through Mark's being made changeable in this respect. As in Woon's drama, identity looks to be situated in a postmodern frame insofar as it is represented in this part of the play as a 'process' which 'can be transformative through risk, desire, [...] and struggle' (*ibid*: 17). In debunking what can be defined as a symbolic mask, and troubling fixedness, this strategy evokes the 'performative mode of address' of a 'diaspora aesthetic' (Mercer, 1988: 60).

A mask also appears in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. In this play, however, its function differs from that apparent three years earlier in *Now You See, Now You Don't* and, by extension, in *Bondage*. The monologue that Tam figures to deliver about his childhood culminates in his disclosing that 'the Lone Ranger was the CHINESE AMERICAN BOY of the radio I'd looked for' (Chin, 1981: 32). The reason the protagonist is shown to imagine this figure as such is outlined a moment earlier, prior to his revealing his identity:

I heard of the masked man. And I listened to him. And in the Sunday funnies he had black hair, and Chinatown was nothin but black hair [...]
I grew blind looking hard through the holes of his funnypaper mask for slanty eyes. [...] [H]e wore that mask to hide his Asian eyes!
(*ibid*)

While this may seem to undercut my earlier suggestion that the play laments the absence of such heroes, the irony of Tam constructing the Lone Ranger as Chinese American is made plain immediately after the monologue, 'in a [surreal and] farcical scene' in which the latter character emerges as 'a [...] white racist' (McDonald, 1981: xii) who shoots Tam in the hand.⁷ Although Tam's initial account may undermine the assumption of this all-American, masculine 'hero' being white, the masked figure is not *embodied* to expose the contingent and performative qualities of 'race': he ceases to be Tam's 'CHINESE AMERICAN BOY' as soon as he appears on stage in the 'authentic' guise of a white male. On no occasion do the audience hear the Lone Ranger of the radio on which the protagonist reports and, in the play's premiere, he was played by a white actor whose eye-mask, like the rest of his costume, evoked traditional images of the Wild West icon. Hence, as Karen Shimakawa

⁷ The fact that Tam is a writer makes the specifics of this injury noteworthy. Given the correlation between this role and phallic identification, the Lone Ranger's attack can be read to represent the symbolic emasculation of the Chinese American male subject by mainstream American culture and mythology.

notes of this dramatic world, 'it is only in this state of pure language and sound that a *legitimate*, speaking [male] Chinese American subject is imaginable' (Shimakawa, 2002: 94, my emphasis).

That the depiction of stereotypes in *Bondage* unfold through games that rupture further aligns the drama to a male-authored, Asian American trajectory. Within the plays of this trope, masks also appear as metaphorical, linguistic constructs. Chin's *The Year of The Dragon* and Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* both contain male characters who are drawn to inhabit, and exceed, stereotypic racial moulds fashioned in these terms. The former of these plays opens with a monologue given by Fred, earlier discussed in relation to Ross (his white brother-in-law). In establishing the character as a Chinatown tour guide, the drama enacts and disrupts normative perception of the Chinese American subject, through language:

We'come a Chinatowng, Folks! [...] Hoppy New Year! Fred Eng,
"Freddie" of Eng's Chinatown tour 'n' travoo.
[...] I'm top guide here. Allaw week Chinee New Year. Ssssshh Boom!
Muchee muchie firey crackee! Ha. Ha. Ha...
But you're my last day of tour, folks. And on my last tour of the day, no
hooley. I like to let my hair down. Drop the phoney accent. And be me.
Just me.
(Chin, 1981: 71)

Of this and comparable passages, Shimakawa reads the persona attached to Fred as a 'mask' that is 'removed [...] to reveal the effects of laboring under the burden of abject representation' (Shimakawa, 2002: 91). That the role demanded of his tour guide job is shown to be one that Fred despises is made plain by his later comments to his family, ('on my very last [...] tour, I'm gonna swear at the tourists all day long'), and the expletives which accompany his leaving the stage at the end of the opening monologue: '([...] cussing under his breath) Goddam, motherfucking...' (Chin, 1981: 79 and 71).

The sense that the character represents a 'real self' obfuscated by the delimitations of a white racist culture creates a point of comparison with *Yankee Dawg You Die*. The monologue of Vincent's, formally mentioned, in which the character is shown in the role of Moto, culminates with a comparable assertion:

I graduate UCLA, Class of '34. I drive big American car with big-chested American blond sitting next to... Hey? No, no, no, not 'dirty floor'. Floor clean. Class of '34. Listen carefully. Watch my lips. [...] What is wrong with you? I graduated from the University of California [...] and spent my entire life growing up in California. Why can't you hear what I'm saying? Why can't you see me as I really am?
(Gotanda, 1991: 50)

In progressing to this point towards the end of the play, the character, like Fred, 'gradually drops the heavy accent' (Chaudhuri, 1997: 229) of stereotypical imagining, on which he is earlier seen to depend in order to get 'Asian' acting roles as a Japanese American.

The desire invested in both this protagonist and Fred can be deemed to prefigure that portrayed in *Bondage*: to emerge as an individual beyond the confines of a position conceived by white US hegemony. In echoing the self-conscious performances of Vincent as actor and Fred as tour guide, the suggestion of a 'real' Mark and Terri, behind the masks, are underscored. Apparent here is further evidence of psychological realism in the construction of the later play's characters, aligning it with earlier dramas calling for a viable, self-constructed Asian American male subject. That Lee's analysis of Gotanda's play can be mapped onto *Bondage* supports this notion:

[t]o construct stereotypes as human constructions rather than essential beings, *Yankee Dawg* must insist on a division between the theatrical and the real, must insist that [...] [Vincent] has a *coherent self* distinct from the stereotype he plays.
(Lee, 1998: 103, my emphasis).

Reading the play in these terms highlights something potentially problematic insofar as

the desire to be seen as one 'really' is [...] is intimately tied up with traditional Western representation. [...] [T]he narrative of individualism [...] while proclaiming the unique reality of each individual, actually fixes identity within cultural categories and pins culture to place. (Chaudhuri, 1997: 230–31)

If *Bondage* works in this capacity, in part rehearsing realist portrayals of the 'coherent self', its exposures of such intersections as those of 'race' and gender may fall short. While strategies which implicitly 'pin culture to place' see racial otherness reified as such in nationalistic scripts, the play's power to deconstruct masculinity — through such moments as that in which Mark figures to play a white male 'in crisis' — could be undermined.

However, all three of the plays under discussion here clearly deploy the stereotypical mask so as to fracture and critique it. For the most part the language of *Bondage* does not function in this manner: the one exception, however, is significant for its transgressiveness. During the first of the roleplays, as part of Terri's mocking of the persona in which Mark is placed, she is heard to give a negative response to the question, 'Would you find me sexy if I were Bruce Lee?': 'You mean, like, "Hiiii-ya! I wuv you." [...] Any other ideas?' (Hwang, 2000: 260). Aside from recalling the theme of hero figures in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (macho Asian American icons may now exist, but remain eligible to ridicule), of note is the fact that it is Terri who figures to speak in this guise. While *The Year of The Dragon* and *Yankee Dawg You Die* sees visible, Asian American males look to take on a comparable mask, here, it is realised through a female voice and 'raceless' body distinct from those to which such stereotypes are normatively applied. This part of *Bondage*, then, appears more likely to avoid a collapse between the sight of a

racialised/gendered body and concomitant racist perception. In exposing the constructed nature of a stereotypic mask through a figure who does not signify to naturalise it, this moment contributes to those strands of the play which cast identity in performative terms.

Analysis of *Clubland*

Clubland's portrayal of British identities highlights the role of 'race', class and nationality in the construction of masculinities. Despite disparity between the male subject positions represented, what they are shown to have in common is insecurities and failings that stem from these intersections. Prior to exploring this, it is worth, first, briefly recalling the relationship between white hegemony and discourses of nationhood, in mind of the multicultural society represented by the play. Avtar Brah claims that:

[post-colonial] identity formations challenge the idea of a continuous, uninterrupted, unchanging, homogeneous and stable British identity; instead, they highlight the point that identity is always plural and in process [...].
(Brah, 1996: 194–95)

Commensurate with other concepts of the 'diaspora experience' (Hall, 1990: 235), such pluralistic models may present a threat to white masculinity's bid for authenticity, as fundamental to a 'stable British identity'. They furthermore resonate with Bhabha's 'figure of mimicry' as that which 'problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the "national" is no longer naturalizable' (Bhabha, 1984: 128). Bhabha constructs this 'figure' as an implicit product of the English colonialist 'system of "interpellation"' (*ibid*: 127). For while the 'success of colonial appropriation' (*ibid*) is proved by the other's ability to mimic 'norms' of the dominant power, to reify this position as such, it also unleashes the potential for agency and movement in insisting upon the colonised subject's capacity for *change*. The formal text of

white masculinist colonialism is thereby fraught with ambivalence and subject to rupture, as the construction of 'the other' by which it self-legitimizes is *necessarily* cast adrift from its fixed position in the binary. Other subversive facets of the 'figure of mimicry' further align it with the diasporic 'identity formations' of such as Brah's account. The colonialist desire for that which is 'almost the same *but not quite*' (*ibid*) sees the formally othered identity infused with evasive plurality: neither rigid stereotype of racist imagining, nor identical mimesis of the colonising subject. Hence (to provide a relevant example of the latter), 'to be *Anglicized*, is emphatically not to be English' (*ibid*: 128). Through mimicry, then, colonialism gives rise to a 'metonymy of presence' (*ibid*: 130), which eludes ostensibly transparent modes of representation to 'radically [revalue] the normative knowledges of [...] race' (*ibid*: 131). Bhabha further notes that the emergence of metonymy in colonial discourse

inadvertently creates a crisis for the cultural priority given to the *metaphoric* as a process of repression and substitution which negotiates the difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications.
(*ibid*: 130)

The self-perpetuation of masculine hegemony can be viewed to depend upon the stabilising of 'truths' through metaphorical reproduction: for example, by processes of stereotyping that may nostalgically look to uphold normative identity tropes 'as part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order' (Hall, 1997: 258). These practices can be evinced, perhaps most blatantly, in extremist movements such as those comprised by white supremacists, defined by Abby L. Ferber as 'patriarchal' as well as 'racist' (Ferber, 2000: 36). Here, the necessity of conjuring otherness along prejudicial lines, both justifies and perpetuates beliefs in traditional gender roles and the notion that 'races are essentially and eternally different' (*ibid*).

By these terms, the crisis of signification to which Bhabha refers reveals its applicability to that claimed of white masculinity in the 1990s. Just as the constitutive boundaries of 'race' and nation may be blurred by a metonymy that 'repeatedly resists signification' (Bhabha, 1984: 130), the dominant masculine text that is constitutive of these axis also stands to be threatened. The extent to which *Clubland* can be deemed to evoke the unruly subtext of mimicry, and a commensurate diasporic/performative 'partial presence', is thereby useful in assessing its potential to subvert a position cast as fixed within nostalgic discourses of white masculinity.

The Palais nightclub comprises the setting for five of the play's twelve scenes, including the first and the last. These factors and the drama's title seem to privilege this space in ways that relate to the depiction of masculinities and its constitutive categories. Relevant to this is a discernable resonance with Brah's conceptualisation of a 'diaspora space' as:

the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them', are contested [...]. [...] [T]he site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.*
(Brah, 1996: 208–09)

In this part of the dramatic world, 'belonging', for men, is bound up with power relations determined by heterosexual coupling, and other means by which hetero-masculine identity is normatively assured. Significantly, 'race' can be seen to impact upon such 'belonging' through the configuration and appearance of male bodies in this space.

At the start of the first scene, Ben and Kenny are positioned to 'watch girls coming out of the ladies' (Williams, 2004: 61); Ade, (off-stage), is reported to

be dancing with a group of women. It is feasible that the 'girls' who are drawn to occupy Ben and Kenny's attention, like those mentioned regarding Ade, do not appear onstage, and look to be brought to mind through the gestures of the actors playing the two former roles. Such a move may work progressively to resist objectifying the silent female figure. However, there is one, later event for which the onstage presence of one such female character seems a narrative necessity. Having broken up with Ade, Sandra has a drink with Kenny in the club. The scene concludes when 'Sandra glances over at Ade [...], getting off with his girl. She kisses Kenny on the lips and tells him, 'Finish yer drink' (*ibid*: 111). Several scenes later, it is established that they went on to have sex. The staging of Ade's actions are thereby significant to the audience's reading of Sandra and Kenny's relationship, insofar as it appears motivated by her seeing Ade with another woman. Hence, the issue of whether or not the anonymous women appear onstage is rendered somewhat more complex. If the Sandra/Kenny scene necessitates the appearance of Ade and 'his girl', it is arguable that other, silent female characters may require onstage embodiment in the interest of consistency. Read in this sense, the play may be deemed to perpetuate the binary divide between a speaking male and silent female subject, notwithstanding the onstage presence of Sandra.

An initial reading of the play text looks to account for ways in which Ade is positively (if not, necessarily, progressively) constructed. When Kenny and Ben first see him in the opening moments, the former comments, 'There's ain't no one on the floor' except him; Ben responds by noting, 'He's getting amongst it' and is soon after seen to comment of the girls in Ade's company,

'I don't see them complaining' when Kenny appears to belittle him ('He calls that dancing?') (*ibid*: 61–62). Although Ade is not visible during this exchange, the suggestion of his dominance within the space looks to be established at the play's outset. While the other two characters only look at women, and remain positioned in one another's company on what might be determined the margins of the club, a spectator is led to imagine Ade at the centre of this space, accompanied only by women with whom he is physically engaged. If this literal and imagined positioning works to imbue the latter character with a masculine identification that sees him embody a higher status than that of the other two, so too does the onstage interaction which occurs moments later. After the three male figures meet, Ben is positioned to ask Ade if he could introduce him and Kenny to the girls on the dance floor: 'Don't suppose you could see yer way thru letting us in on sum of the action, yu nuh. I mean you ain't gonna have all three a' dem' (*ibid*: 64). Following the response, 'I could if I wanted to', the audience hear Ade state, 'Tell yu wat, gimme a minute, then come over' (*ibid*). Ben and Kenny are positioned alone on stage again; Ade exits and re-appears moments later to tell the pair, 'Awright, come' (*ibid*: 65), before he departs once more. Significantly, the audience do not see Kenny and Ben follow him, but remain in sight for the rest of the scene, distanced from what looks to be a means of access to masculine validation. Thus, while the two friends are constructed to remain in the same part of the space depicted, Ade appears invested with agency and territorial ownership as a representative black subject: moving about the (real/imagined) space, and determining interactions between (on/off-stage) characters.

In terms of controlling access to the bodies of the off-stage women, the superiority invested in the character tallies with physical discrepancies signalled between him and Ben in particular. Prior to the latter's request about the girls, a dialogue which occurs when all three characters are on stage draws focus to the bodies playing Ade and Ben:

BEN Damn, man, how yu get so big?
ADE Few hours down the gym, press-ups. Thirty a day [...].
BEN Thass a how yu get the six pack?
ADE Come wid me, get yu off dem kebabs.
(*ibid*: 63–64)

Shortly afterwards, Ben is seen to attempt press-ups, and asks, 'Like this, Ade?' (*ibid*: 64). Stage directions indicate that '[t]he best [...] [he] can manage is four [...]. He sits up, sweating' (*ibid*). Although Kenny is situated alongside Ben throughout this scene, it is the contrast between the latter and Ade that is of key significance within this first club scene. Aside from the fact that the white character functions to be dependent on a racially 'other' man for the possibility of access to (hetero)sexual activity (something in which he is never seen to partake), so too does he seek his advice in attempting a physical task, ultimately marked by failure. That the actor playing Ben appears dissimilar to the one playing Ade — less muscular, more overweight — is suggested both by this ineptitude and the reference to his eating kebabs.⁸ Hence, Ben embodies a male subject of lower status than that represented by Ade through intersecting physical and sexual factors. In the case that the actors' racial identities match those of the characters they play, visible differences between this pair would likely fix such points of discrepancy along lines of 'race'. While the possible reification of the black/white binary may not be *wholly*

⁸ As outlined above, this is shown to be the first time that Ade has met with Ben and Kenny since they were at school together. The former's allusion to kebabs can therefore be seen as a presumption based on the appearance of Ben's physique.

problematic, insofar as a first stage of deconstruction may be traced in Ade's ostensible superiority, Kenny's positioning alongside Ben might blur polarised, racial scripts. This second point notwithstanding, it is also in the club that Kenny is shown as physically/sexually active, kissing Sandra in a scene set towards the start of act two. Through this moment, he is drawn in a capacity comparable to that of Ade. While Nathan, the other white man portrayed, is not realised in this locale, Ben is only ever placed in the company of men and notable, physical actions by which he is realised figure at odds with certain mainstream constructs of 'manliness'. Bodily contact is restricted to his '[prodding] Ade's chest' having asked about his six pack; in a later scene in which Kenny exits to pursue a fight with an (off-stage) man, Ben is heard to tell Ade that he will not intervene ('I ain't goin on my own, yu mad?'); and, at the close of the play, Kenny watches Ben crying. (*ibid*: 64, 88 and 128).⁹

These points of contrast between the white and black subjects staged in the club positions the former in a flawed or distant relationship with certain 'masculine' pursuits. The fact that these are of a corporeal nature might work in tandem with the setting to signpost the men represented as working-class, given the celebration of physical strength and capability in historical, Western constructs of working-class male identity. Given that '[t]he idealized embodied masculinity of working class men [...] differentiates them from the [...] cerebral masculinity of middle class men, but also constructs them as inferior' (McDowell, 2003: 11), this facet of the play may situate the males represented as always already outside the boundaries of a hegemonic gender

⁹ The first of these examples, that relates to Ben's touching of Ade, will later be explored along with the construction of the latter's body, to assess the implications of racial fetishism and disavowal as it figures within the play.

script. Alongside the possibility of implicitly reinforcing the white, male, middle-class subject's 'cerebral' advantage, this also highlights the possibility for reading Ade and Kenny as doubly 'other'. Of greater importance here, however, is the way in which those actions given to Ben signify failures within a specific classed and gendered matrix.

Through juxtaposition with Ade in particular, it is Ben who looks to emerge as the most clearly 'othered' figure in a multiracial context, where 'ideal' masculinity, as territorial power, relies on prowess defined by archetypal working-class tenets. Although Ben signifies a subject other to that of hegemonic masculinity, it is through this strategy that white masculinity's imbrication with territorial ownership, in a post-colonial British space, risks being ruptured by the (hetero-masculine) 'successes' of racially 'other' figures.¹⁰ That this can be viewed as a blurring of the diasporian/native binary finds support in exposition which places Ade as the formal 'diasporian' in colonialist ideology. When the other two characters are heard to comment upon him in the opening duologue, Kenny defines him as 'that African' and later recalls the way in which he and Ben used to taunt him during their schooldays when he had first come to England and 'couldn't speak much English': 'Kunta, Kunta Kunte! (Pretends to crack a whip.) [...] Remember that?' (*ibid*: 61, 83 and 65). A discernable threat to the white male character thus stems from Ade's ability to change, and change so as to mimic 'authentically' British 'language, culture [...] and ideas' (Huddart, 2006: 57). While he figures as an 'other' through the construction of his history and

¹⁰ It is of further interest that Ben's relationship with Ade persists throughout the play as one in which he figures in bids to imitate or impress. Although this aspect warrants initial mention, relevant, as it is, to the issues addressed here, the implications of its being resonant with Bhabha's figure of mimicry is one to which I will return.

racial identity, his position stands to be unfixed through these factors' infusion with the marks of a viable subjecthood. Arguably, this sense of flux which may posit Ade as a 'metonymy of presence' (Bhabha, 1984: 130) is thwarted by aspects of the play's form. It is only the Ade of 'the present' who is embodied on stage; the puny, bullied boy is restricted to the verbal register. While this may limit chances to highlight diasporic identity in performative terms, the fact that Ben seems to self-identify as inferior to Ade shores up the latter's transgressive potential. For if Ade is shown to represent an identity 'constructed *across* traditional norms and classifications' (*ibid.*, my emphasis), the 'failures' of Ben can be deemed to evince a 'crisis' in white masculinity prompted by the presence of an 'partial presence' (*ibid.*: 129); 'the Other which [...] resists signification' (*ibid.*: 130) within metaphorical identity constructs.

The racial identities of the women depicted or evoked in the club space, lends weight to the significance of these subversions. Although these identities are not directly specified by the play text, and *may* not be signified bodily, later scenes — especially those discussed in terms of Sandra — suggest that these characters are white. The indication of their involvement with Ade feasibly compounds his transgressive function. In light of the notion that 'white women's bodies become the discursive terrain for asserting white masculinity' (Nayak, 1999: 87), and, by extension, a 'coherent' national identity, indications of Ade's access to them, in contrast to Ben's distance, might work to destabilise the subject for which the latter stands. To this degree, the element of *Clubland* that evokes 'interracial' sexual coupling has a subversive effect, rendering it comparable to the final scene of *Bondage*.

Aspects that confuse hegemonic tropes of 'belonging and otherness' also risk the repetition of certain prejudicial tropes; in particular, the 'the colonial image of the Black man [...] as [...] hyper-sexual' or a 'mere body' (Segal, 1990: 173 and 178). That which imbues Ade with oppositional effect is also problematic, inviting a negative reading of this portrayal. The physique to which Ben makes reference certainly did not fail to escape those critics who attended *Clubland's* premiere: 'Ade [...] boasts a rock-hard six-pack' (Myerson, 2001: 17); 'hulking bodybuilder Ade' (Wardle, 2001: 8). Hall outlines how bodies may be "'read" [...], for the living evidence — the proof, the Truth — of [...] "otherness" and therefore of [...] irreversible difference between the "races"' (Hall, 1997: 265). For this initial production, then, the demands of realism saw the black male body reified in a stereotypical guise 'other' to that of the white men on stage. In a move towards potential fetishisation, this dimension of the play recalls nostalgic discourses of 'race' and gender in which constructions of 'Truth', in Hall's terms, seek to legitimate the agenda of such as the white supremacist and mythopoetic men's movements, in bids to '[rearticulate] white male identity and privilege' (Ferber, 2000: 37). The configuration of Ade's body, and sexual activity, may thereby rehearse a racism implicit to masculine hierarchies.

Similarly, if a working-class masculinity does indeed appear idealised in this part of the dramatic world, the fact that Ade is positioned as 'successful' in this sense might reify a collapse between the black male subject and a position of socio-economic disadvantage, perpetuating what Aziz defines as 'a tendency to *class*-ify black people' (Aziz, 1997: 73). Moreover, if the suggested relations between Ade and the anonymous women work to contest white masculinity, so too might it evoke images constructed by racist discourses in

which '[w]hite women are depicted as being forced to turn to black men for sexual fulfilment, suggesting that white men are demasculinized and have failed to hold on to their women' (Ferber, 2000: 50). While the women's offstage positioning could limit this possibility, in leaving Ade's contact with them to a spectator's imagination, it is worth noting a convergence between this element of the play, and nostalgic ideologies that lament a 'feminisation' of the white male subject.

These concerns notwithstanding, the portrayal of the club retains subversive scope. In being a representative British space occupied by multiracial figures, it stands to recall the central role of territoriality to the colonial project: both in terms of a literal domain and one of symbolic boundaries between the white masculine subject and its 'other'. In this respect, the play's title might denote not only a 'land' of British urban nightlife, but that of a national space, or country, such as the England in which it is set. The club itself comprises a figure of mimicry, insofar as the governing ideologies of this 'diaspora space' appear 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1984: 127) as those of colonialist nationalism. Here is a homosocial, patriarchal domain in which men speak and women are almost always silent, and masculinity validated through heteronormative coupling and 'being strong, successful, [...and] in control' (Kimmel, 1994: 125).¹¹ Yet as the 'legitimate' subject of such a domain is subjugated by a racial other, *Clubland* imagines 'a form of social control which conflicts with the enunciatory assumptions which authorise [...] [colonial] discourse' (Bhabha, 1984: 127) as a source of white masculinist power.

¹¹ Arguably, Sandra may figure as a *partial* rupture to this binary divide, though she does not feature in the opening scene.

Bhabha asserts that '[t]he discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked' (*ibid*: 126). In outlining this duality, the metaphor deployed is apt to account for the contestatory possibilities of patois in *Clubland*. As a means of creating 'classificatory confusion' (*ibid*: 132), this interstitial mode of speech readily conforms to the concept of 'partial presence'. As noted above, all of the subjects portrayed are constructed to speak in a similar manner through patois. If this strategy works to undercut binaries that support the appearance of authenticity, the central theme of masculinities stands to submit this axis to particular scrutiny. For despite the function of Ade as previously discussed, it is through this male character, as well as the others, that 'ideal' scripts of gender look to be elusive. Patois intersects with moments in which the men represented are positioned in a fraught relationship to masculine identity. For instance, during a private exchange between Ade and Sandra during act two, the latter is heard to criticise the former for his actions in the Palais:

SANDRA Yu know wat, it muss be sad bin yu, Ade. Havin to prove to yerself, every night, that yer fit, yer all man. Yer come a long way from the shy guy who didn't know ware to put it.

ADE Hey, I always knew ware to put it.

SANDRA And when you finally did, it kept on comin' out, 'member? 'Is it in Sandra? Sandra is it in?'

ADE Yer chattin shit. Bitch.

(Williams, 2004: 106).

While the play provides no evidence to support Sandra's claims, Ade's reaction suggests a sense of sexual insecurity. An earlier scene between the pair set in Sandra's flat exposes Ade's vulnerability to being emasculated. Shown to initiate the first sexual encounter in which the latter appears,

(seducing him through '[unbuttoning] her shirt to reveal her bra'), Sandra functions to undermine him, ultimately thwarting the event by 'laughing' shortly after the male party figures to ask her, 'How deep yu want it?' (*ibid*: 71–72). At the end of a scene late on in act two, in which Sandra is shown to have ended her relationship with Kenny, a monologue given to the latter reflects a comparable masculine lack. Lamenting the fact that he has been rejected, the male character asserts:

I'm always missin out, me. [...] Never know wat to do. I see a girl right, look at her and that, [...] yer heart's goin mad, telling yu thass it, go fer it, but yer head, fuckin head righ, fuckin head sayin na, na, don't be silly, yer wrong, man!
(*ibid*: 124)

As in the realisation of Ade, this spoken insecurity is underscored by earlier, physical interaction: although Kenny and Sandra do kiss in a club scene, it is only after she has initiated such contact that he 'kisses her back', asking straight afterwards, 'Was that awright?' (*ibid*: 110). The use of patois as an 'inappropriate [signifier] of colonial discourse' (Bhabha, 1984: 130) could thus operate to see the characters elude fixed positions, underlining the contingency of those masculine 'ideals' which are only ever shown to be occupied erratically.

It is worth pointing out at this juncture how the portrayals of black men have the additional possibility of reflecting a 'crisis' in masculinity that is not exclusive to the *white* male subject (just as Ben functions to see it expand beyond middle-class confines). As conservative discourses of this 'crisis' often make the claim that '[m]any white males feel under attack by movements for [...] racial equality' (Ferber, 2000: 31), it can be deemed progressive that *Clubland* extends a sense of gendered dislocation beyond a position of whiteness.

Moments in the play that draw attention to the patios are of particular pertinence. The second time a spectator sees Ade and Ben in the Palais, it is during a scene towards the end of the first act that culminates in the former character taking issue with the latter. When Ben is heard to call Ade 'man', the other responds, 'Don't call me man', adding a moment later, 'Yu think yu have the right to speak like us now?' (Williams, 2004: 88). That Ade is sincere in his accusation is shored up by the fact that he then calls Ben a 'stupid white bastard', and 'shoves him' (*ibid.*). The way in which this latter line bespeaks the role of 'race' in a claim of ownership to a mode of speech finds further support in the preceding duologue which takes place in Ben's absence. Positioned to query Kenny about the fact that he avoided being bullied at school, the audience hear Ade evoke a sense of racial solidarity: 'wat made us so different, man?' (*ibid.*: 84). Although there is no great discrepancy between the way in which Ben figures to talk during this scene and in the rest of the drama, the manner of Ade's reaction allows a spectator to read the patois as a guarded part of the masculine persona the latter seeks to embody: a persona rendered vulnerable through its reliance on a parodic language. This issue allows for further assessment of Ade's subversive potential. The machismo imbued in him at the start of the play establishes this persona as one of hypermasculinity, 'widely recognised as a dominant form of contemporary black masculinity' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000: 61). Given that this identity has historically constituted a 'mirror-image of white racism' (Segal, 1990: 202) in which the 'ideal' black subject is wrought through colonialist stereotypes that reduce him to an (over-sexed) body, moments which work to denaturalise this 'other' masculinity stand to affect the binary at large. Aside

from providing further evidence that *Clubland* imagines a 'crisis' within various masculine tropes, it is possible to see here how the play exploits '[t]he desire to emerge as "authentic" through mimicry' as 'the final irony of partial representation' (Bhabha, 1984: 129).

This irony can also be accounted for through the positioning of Ben in this scene, enabling specific focus on white masculinity. The patois this character is heard to use arguably figures as an attempt to imitate, or curry favour with Ade, echoing events of the first scene. The white character's reaction to being called a 'bastard' reveals a desire for homosocial acceptance; he is seen 'getting scared' and repeats the offending word: 'Ade, man?' (Williams, 2004: 88) before Ade exits. The contingency of the position Ben represents is thus realised, in part, through his being placed so as to be read in the 'other' role of mimic, occupying a speech-mode which is always already parodic. Even before an audience experiences this scene, it is feasible that a response to both Ben and Nathan's realisation through patois reflects a sense that this is a 'race'-specific language to which the white male subject is not formally privy. Perhaps it owed to a sense of surprise that Ben and Nathan were constructed thus that one critic observed of the premiere, 'the Whites slip into Jamaican patois with seemingly greater ease than anyone else' (Myerson, 2001: 17), while another defined Ben's accent as 'ludicrous' (Smith, 2001). Thus, in this post-colonial dramatic world, the 'native' may emerge as more a 'figure of mimicry' than the 'diasporian'. Commensurate with this is the way in which Ben is submitted to Ade's gaze throughout the play, drawing audience attention to the white male body/subject. The manner in which he is attacked for his use of language echoes the surveillance that accompanies the press-ups

he attempts in the first scene. By this token, patois contributes to the play's recalling

the look of [colonial] surveillance [which] returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence.

(Bhabha, 1984: 129)

This, then, looks to situate the drama at odds with nostalgic ideologies of white masculine authenticity in which '[e]ssentialism is the centerpiece' (Ferber, 2000: 37). At a marked distance from the look of 'wholeness' on which such texts rely, subversive strategies which draw attention to the style of speech deployed sees *Clubland* reflect how a mode of 'partial presence, [...] articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial [...] difference' (Bhabha, 1984: 129) that maintain gender 'norms'. However, as I have discussed in relation to the Royal Court and other of its plays, it is feasible that these elements stand to be undermined by the drama's realist aspects.

The ambivalence of Ben's attitude to Ade and Kenny allows for further assessment of the play's impact on white masculinity. It is clear from my discussion thus far that Ade is admired and revered by Ben. White male desire for acceptance and validation can be viewed to figure in concert with 'the [...] fear and fascination underpinning colonial fantasy' (Mercer, 1994: 134), wrought through the figure of the black male body. When, at the start of the drama, Ben is positioned to touch Ade's chest, he is given the line, 'No fat, not an inch. Kenny yu got to touch this come' (Williams, 2004: 64). The risk of fetishisation stands to be furthered by audience attention being steered upon Ade's body. This moment also underpins Ben's 'fascination' or admiration with a figure he fears, and the intersection of this attitude and the friendship drawn between Ben and Kenny. One element is doubtless key to this latter

relationship: the apparent wish for Kenny to be sexually active. During the opening scene, Ben's third attempt to make him join Ade on the dance floor sees him state: 'juss go up and dance near them, show dem yer moves, catch their eyes and that' (*ibid*: 63). Positioned alone together later, in Ben's garden, Ben defines 'the matter in hand' as Kenny 'getting a poke', and, shortly into act two, he has the line, 'Yer sack is bursting, Kenny' (*ibid*: 78 and 101). No duologue between the pair (in isolation) is free of this theme, positing it as Ben's *idée fixe*. As these moments are interspersed with the latter's being onstage with Ade, a reading of this desire is inflected by these other interactions.

Of colonialist tropes, Hall asserts that 'whites have often fantasized about the excessive sexual appetites and prowess of black men [...] *which they both feared and secretly envied*' (Hall, 1997: 262). On the basis of the instances cited thus far, it is clear that Ben perceives Ade within this stereotypical frame and, moreover, that this appears to inform repeated attempts to construct Kenny's sex life. Not only does he contest the latter's claims to want a meaningful relationship over promiscuous encounters ('Don't do a Nathan on me' [Williams, 2008: 78]), but is heard to justify his attempts by saying, 'All I want to do is help yu catch up with Ade' (*ibid*: 42). In these terms, the play might highlight the desire for colonial stereotypes, to transgressive effect. While 'the regulative function' of such categorisation obviously seeks to 'fix [...] the ideological subject-position of the [...] white male' (Mercer, 1994: 199), its inherent fetishisation of the 'othered' subject and body is exposed by the Ben/Ade dynamic to demonstrate the 'fear and idealisation of the Black man' (Segal, 1990: 181), taboo in colonial discourse. Comprising a 'recognition of

the unconscious sex-race fantasies which [...] do not confirm a stable or centred subject position, but [...] trouble the [...] sense of secure identity' (Mercer, 1994: 192), the unveiling of such fascination thus stands to rupture patriarchal (gendered, sexual and racial) identifications. Given this factor, the white character's obsession with Kenny, in sexual terms, can be read to represent a process of disavowing desire of/for the 'other': '[a] strategy by means of which a powerful fascination is both indulged and [...] denied' (Hall, 1997: 267). It thus may figure as an 'eroticized' substitute (*ibid*: 266), marked as such through fervent repetition and the function of Ade. The presence of this paradox is lent weight by the racist comments Ben is heard to air to Kenny, highlighting the need for fixidity for the white male subject. To provide an example in addition to those above: whilst the two men are positioned together in the garden, Ben says of his dog, 'I bin trainin him to attack blacks. Nuff burglaries round here committed by yu lot' (Williams, 2004: 75). Finally, that the desires for Kenny voiced by Ben figure as narcissistic is reflected in the latter's response to his friend being sexually active. At the start of act two, Ben is shown to react to Kenny's revelation of having met someone with the words, 'I bet she's white though, ennit, slapper!', soon after noting, 'Yu'll screw it up. Yu always do', and 'She's laughin at yu, Ken' (*ibid*: 102-03).

If white male identity is exposed as vulnerable through these strategies, the role of Nathan feasibly lessens their effect. In addition to differences between this character and Ben, Nathan also diverges from Ade and Kenny in being emotionally competent and (hetero)sexually successful. The second of these characteristics is not, however, drawn as consistent, recalling the fraught

claims to masculinity of the other characters. In a scene set on Nathan's doorstep, in which Kenny defines his sexual performance with Sandra as 'crap', Nathan reassures him by reference to his own wife: 'Yu think I knew what I was doing when we first did it?' (*ibid*: 114). Conversely, this moment highlights a distinction between Nathan and Ben that points to the former's greater security. In tandem with admitting to sexual failures with a wife he describes to Kenny as 'everything to me' (*ibid*: 115), references to Nathan's baby underpin his reproductive ability and emotionality. An earlier duologue with Kenny sees Nathan tell him, 'no matter [...] how hard yu think yu are, when yu see that little baby for the first time yeah, [...] yer gone' (*ibid*: 90). By contrast, childless Ben recounts his earliest memory of his wife as: 'Nice tits. [...] None of this lovey-lovey crap' (*ibid*: 78). He is seen to brag about his sexual prowess, to Kenny, saying 'I'll get loads, [...] I've had loads', yet it is only moments after this line that Ben, alone on stage, telephones a prostitute and asks 'How much for an hour?' (*ibid*: 104) — the play's sole clue as to his 'actual' sex life. The line in which Nathan speaks of his sexual failures is thereby distanced from those apparent in the other characters, and, in being juxtaposed with Ben, is couched by an emotional/sexual competence. These points are underlined by the fact that Nathan is never seen in the Palais, as a contestory site for (hetero)masculinity. That he is only ever positioned at his front door sees the identity he embodies spared the subversive effects of what I have termed this 'diaspora space', and thereby likely to appear more coherent — notwithstanding the implications of his speaking in patois. Crucially, it is Ben's seeming to become more like Nathan that signals a positive change in this character at the play's close. In a duologue with Kenny in which it is revealed that he has contacted Nathan to resurrect their

friendship, he comments of him (and his wife), 'He really loves her, ennit?' (*ibid*: 127). A change of tone in the advice he gives his friend ('Juss find a nice girl Kenny, awright') is coupled with Ben breaking down in tears. Hence, the shift from a persona marked by racism and misogyny posits Ben as redemptive and sympathetic. If the realisation of Nathan imagines white masculinity as aspirational, it is through an identity that resonates with a gender model promulgated by conservative ideologies. Ferber observes how the mythopoetic men's movement sought to challenge aspects of hegemonic masculinity 'that says men must be unfeeling, must never show emotion, [and] must be [...] violent' (Ferber, 2000: 38). However, that these ideas are bound up with bids to uncover a 'deep' masculine essence reflects upon a problematic subtext. In concert with the relative cohesion by which Nathan is realised — far from being in 'crisis' — *Clubland*'s final scene risks a celebration of those strategies by which white masculinity is nostalgically rehearsed. Given the realist qualities of the play, the fact that this occurs at its close compounds reactionary potential. As with Ade in the club scenes, what is, perhaps, a positive depiction might fail to be progressive.

Doubtless this drama does evince a 'crisis' in masculinities, reflecting on the way in which fundamental re-conceptions of identity impact upon both the subject and the 'other' of colonial discourse. While the play of 'diaspora aesthetics' looks to mobilise the oppositional force of post-colonial thought, adherence to realism risks the recuperation of raced and gendered 'norms'.

Analysis of *Bondage*

The first issue to be addressed in relation to *Bondage* allows for a point of comparison with *Clubland*. As with the primary setting of the British play, that which hosts all the action here bears traces of a 'diasporic space', according to Brah's definition, both through geo-political resonance and subject representations. That *Bondage* is set in 'San Fernando Valley, California' (Hwang, 2000: 251) is significant, given that this state was a key destination for numerous East Asian immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹² The proliferation of a multiracial society came to be reflected in both the advances of these marginalised groups and reactions against their fight to occupy legitimate positions within the body politic. For instance, while California hosted the first Chinese American theatre (1852), and produced such seminal companies as the East West Players in the 1960s, so too did the influx of immigrants prompt 'the harshest exclusionary laws' (Lee, 2006: 11) of any state in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Later, comparable measures can be read as backlashes that looked to maintain the privilege of white American male subjects. Noting in 1997 that 'people of color will soon outnumber whites' in California, Kondo makes reference to a proposed 'Californian Civil Rights Initiative, designed to protect the "civil rights" of straight white men against [...] affirmative action' (Kondo, 1997a: 3). It is, then, by virtue of this backdrop that the play's setting represents a locale which 'stands at the vanguard of movements both progressive and regressive' (*ibid*); movements that give voice to 'the instability and complexity of American identity' (Saddik, 2007: 151). If California itself can be deemed a 'diaspora space', or 'a body politic that refuses to be representative' (Bhabha,

¹² The people who emigrated to California from the East during this period were predominantly of Chinese or Japanese heritage. In charting these histories, Josephine Lee notes that 'by 1850, about 25,000 [Chinese] were residing in the state' (Lee, 2006: 9).

1984: 128–29), the depiction of it in *Bondage* could allow for subversion. However, California itself is never mentioned in the play, and it would thus rely upon set design to depict this context. Given the opening stage directions, such a move might figure at odds with what reads as a realist configuration of an interior space: 'A room in a bondage parlor. Terri, a dominatrix, paces with her whip in hand in front of Mark, who is chained to the wall' (Hwang, 2000: 253). While the chance of this setting emerging as a 'diaspora space' is credible on the basis of both the shifts in identities and a white male subject drawn in 'crisis', demands made by the play text appear more apt to steer focus towards issues of an individualised and interpersonal nature. The progressive opportunities feasible through illustrating socio-cultural context may thereby look to be thwarted.

In *Clubland*, it is predominantly through language that identity may appear as a 'partial presence', and racialised, onstage bodies that risk repeating colonialist tropes. As stereotypes in *Bondage* seem *largely* contained by dialogue, the play looks to invert these strategies, arguably imbuing it with greater transgressive weight. For although the logocentric practice in which both dramas figure grants indisputable significance to dialogue, it is the body, of course, through which racial and gendered identities find signification, and stand to be contested as and through visual representation. Addressing this notion in respect of 'race', Brah observes that

'looks' mattered a great deal within the colonial regimes of power [...] because of the history of the racialisation of 'looks'; they mattered because discourses about the body were crucial to the constitution of racisms. And *racialised power operated on and through bodies*.
(Brah, 1996: 3, my emphasis)

This 'power' stands to be both recalled and resisted, as the inhabiting of stereotypical roles is wrought through onstage bodies whose 'looks' are

concealed. It is possible, then, that identities surface as 'part-objects of presence' (Bhabha, 1984: 132): the combined evocation of 'race' (through language) and 'racelessness' (through bodies) creating 'a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning' (*ibid*: 130). This notion can be extended by reference to the play's structure. As it largely comprises a series of roleplays that see the onstage figures shift between various subject positions, those visual elements that see identities occupied elusively figure in concert with their temporal transience. Through this dual function, the formal fixedness underpinning the stereotypes enacted appears in tension with their being realised through partiality and flux. Given that racist endeavours to 'reclaim' the coherent image of white masculinity strive to 'demonstrate the immutability of [...racial] natures' (Ferber, 2000: 53 and 40), the changeability of the 'partial' bodies in *Bondage* might contest the privileged subject of this nostalgic trope.

However, there are evident limitations to Mark and Terri's being fashioned to work as 'metonymies of presence'. For, by Bhabha's definition, the 'figure of mimicry' hosts subversive power 'because it hides no essence, no "itself"' (Bhabha, 1984: 131). As has already been addressed in respect of plays comparable to *Bondage*, collapses within the 'games' indicate the presence of psychologically coherent characters. The onstage bodies might 'repeatedly [resist] signification' (*ibid*: 130) when in stereotypical guises, upending an ostensibly secure site of otherness, but a sense of essentialist identities remains through the division between fact and fiction, within the world of the play.

It is especially noteworthy that representations of essentialism can be read to inform the final tableau, given the sense of closure afforded by this ending. As an audience sees two racialised bodies 'gaze at each other's faces as lights fade to black' (Hwang, 2000: 279), lines positioned a moment earlier highlight the fixedness of the identity tropes represented. Shown to reflect upon the former interaction in light of the shift in their relationship, Terri muses: 'I can't help but wonder, was it all so terribly necessary? Did we have to wander so far afield [...]?' (*ibid*: 278). To the response, 'I was afraid. I was an Asian man', she is heard to claim, 'and I was a woman, of any description', a line which appears to prompt Mark into asking, 'Why are we talking as if those facts were behind us?' (*ibid*, my emphasis). Conceivably, the use of the past tense for this exchange looks to place the 'Asian man' and 'woman of any description' as restrictive moulds, and ones the pair have surpassed on revealing their bodies and feelings. The next line, given to Terri, certainly posits these positions as constructions, commensurate with the preceding 'games': 'Well, we have determined to move beyond the world of fantasy... haven't we?' (*ibid*: 279). Although this dialogue might situate the portrayed identities as contingent, the visual dimension looks to compound the suggestion voiced through Mark: that these positions are, rather, enduring 'facts' (at least if these characters are performed by an Asian male and Caucasian female).¹³ This factor may then prove somewhat problematic.

¹³ That the process by which these subjects stand to be naturalised may have little impact upon white masculinity can also be claimed on the basis of the way in which Terri features to self-define. Whereas Mark's 'race' is explicated in his line, the whiteness which an audience can see embodied in her is not. On the one hand, this seems logical, insofar as it is otherness that appears to be being underlined through this dialogue. Indeed, the generality of her comment may look to emphasise patriarchal subjugation of women at large, inviting a spectator to consider alternative subject positions within this broad category. On the other hand, the fact that the racial position represented is not foregrounded here risks the perpetuation of whiteness in its 'invisible' state; for 'as long as white people are not racially [...] named, they [...] function as a human norm' (Dyer, 1997: 1, my emphasis). Whilst masculinist hegemonies may doubtless maintain dominance over women 'of any

Outlining the ideology underpinning the mythopoetic men's movement, Ferber draws attention to the construction of heteronormative gender relations:

[i]nequality and power are erased, and instead, both men and women are said to be 'wounded'. According to this logic, [...they] must explore their wounds and 'reconcile' with each other. [...] There is no patriarchy, [...] no power, only differences that must be reconciled.
(Ferber, 2000: 43)

It is significant that these beliefs function in tandem with an essentialist view of gendered identity. 'Masculinity is characterized as unchanging and universal, merely needing to be recovered', and '[n]ot only do men and women possess essential natures, [...] but these natures are dichotomous and timeless' (*ibid*: 39). The removal of the costumes in *Bondage* might be read as a symbolic laying down of arms, following the power play outlined earlier in relation to the 'games' and breaks therein. Prior to Mark's unmasking her whilst he is fully dressed, Terri is heard to assert: 'The moment you remove this hood, I'll be completely exposed [...]. And you'll have your victory by the rules of our engagement' (Hwang, 2000: 278). The subsequent action shifts the act of exposure from being the final, strategic move imagined by this line, to one of 'reconciliation'. Commensurately, both the male and female character look to represent 'wounded' subjects. Earlier in the play, during a break in the 'games', Mark is heard to note that

The rules out there are set up so we're all bound to lose. [...] The rules in here... protect me from harm. Out there — I walk around with my face exposed. In here, when I'm rejected, beaten down humiliated — it's not me.
(*ibid*: 271)

description', these are, of course, hugely variable, and contingent on other identity axis not evoked by the line. As Elizabeth Spelman observes, for instance, black women's experiences of patriarchal sexism are mutually inseparable from those of a racist bent (Spelman, 2001: 79–80). Hence, through the occlusion of 'race', what may constitute a critique of gendered hierarchies also risks perpetuating the binary's look of coherence. This concept tallies with my earlier discussion of the way in which it is the male racial other that comprises the play's focus.

Although Terri does not figure so explicitly in this sense, dialogue which occurs after the last of the role-plays is of interest. 'Maybe you were harassed at work — maybe raped' (*ibid*: 275) is a line given to Mark as one of several in which he appears in attempts to construct the 'real' Terri. The ambiguous response of the latter suggests that she has, indeed, been made a victim in the past: 'It doesn't matter. The specifics never matter' (*ibid*).

In tandem with the sight of the bodies at the end of the play, these factors enable *Bondage* to be mapped onto discourses that nostalgically (re)construct the binary in an enduring guise. Despite the fact it is not 'race' that *appears* to be the object of the mythopoetic's concern, the assumption that corporeal characteristics denote an 'essential nature' exposes both the inextricability of identity axes, and an implicit perpetuation of white privilege. Indeed, '[w]hile race is not an overt feature of their ideology' it is perhaps unsurprising that 'they [...] appeal primarily to white men' (Ferber, 2000: 35). With this in mind, the 'fact' of the identity represented by Mark may also be subversive, as earlier considered in terms of the 'threat' of 'interracial' sexuality. For the image with which a spectator is left looks to be 'almost the same' as that idealised by discourses concerned to safeguard hegemony, and yet it is displaced in being 'not quite/not white' (Bhabha, 1984: 132). This notwithstanding, the sentimentality evident at the end of the play may invite uncritical, emotional engagement on the part of an audience.

Despite these feasible constraints on deconstructing masculinity, illustrations of gender and 'race' that occur through the 'games' enable a critical spotlight on 'the points at which these [...] categories intersect' (Young, 1996: 176). In

each of the roleplays in which Mark and Terri appear, the former's eligibility to desire and be desired is revealed to depend upon his persona, thereby placing emphasis on the constitutive axis of 'race'. When both figure as Asian Americans, for instance, one of the reasons given for Terri's rejection of Mark is that he is not 'macho' like the 'Italian' and 'Latino' men she is heard to deem 'attractive' (Hwang, 2000: 268). Situating whiteness as both a racialised position, and 'a location of structural advantage' (Frankenberg, 1993: 1), the previous exchange sees the female character, as an African American, scorn the advances of 'white' Mark in making reference to 'all you white liberals who do your hunting a little off the beaten track' (Hwang, 2000: 262). Responding to the question, 'Would be so... derisive if I was a black man?', Terri is given the line, 'Who the fuck do you think you are? [...] Trying to drive a wedge through our community?' (*ibid.*: 262–63). While such interaction works to highlight how 'race' imbricates with gender, sexuality, and notions of belonging, special attention is given to masculinity in this matrix. For, through the consistency of the dominatrix/submissive dynamic (at least when Mark and Terri are shown to remain 'in role'), it is through attempts to occupy a space of heteronormative virility that the male character figures in every guise. As he is only shown to be able to 'beat' Terri through breaking the frame, the 'failures' of his racialised personae stand to recall the way in which *Clubland* imagines 'crises' in various masculine scripts, and not merely that of white male hegemony. As delineations of masculinity at the crossroads of other axis is an element that might prove usefully unsettling, it is feasible that the presence of nostalgia, as argued for above, extends specific focus to positions of abjection. This notion tallies with the implications of mimicry being *demande*d of the colonial text's 'other', raising what David Huddart calls

'the vexed question of just how conscious mimicry might be' (Huddart, 2006: 68). While the 'ironic compromise' between 'stasis' and 'change' (Bhabha, 1984: 126) disturbs masculinist constructs of nation and identity, so too might they unconsciously compel othered subjects into a state of undesirable flux. Mark is, of course, concealed when he is heard to refer to the advantages of the 'rules in here', as cited above. However, the fact that he is 'out of character' at this point enables an audience to imagine that it is a man of any 'race' lamenting that 'the rules out there are set up so we're all bound to lose' (Hwang, 2000: 271). While the end of the play feasibly undercuts this nostalgia, traces of it intersect with ruptured male identities to configure the masculinity 'crisis' as a transracial condition.

To conclude with subversive possibilities, it is worth highlighting the presence of racial fetishism as a dramatic theme. While the roleplays allow for intersections of identity to be rendered visible, the context for, and nature of the 'games', bespeaks the illegitimate eroticisation that haunts 'the other's' construction. As Bhabha notes, 'contradictory articulations of reality and desire [...] seen in racist stereotypes' indicate 'the effects of a disavowal [...] that alienate the assumption of "civil" discourse' (Bhabha, 1984: 132). Through positioning characters to indulge in stereotypes as vehicles of sexual fantasy, the play might thereby expose the abject subtext of white colonial power. It is the female character who functions to interpellate roles of a masculinist imperialism, yet these are in the service of facilitating a paying customer's request. The rupture that follows the opening exchange sees Mark complain, 'A man comes in, he plops down good money... [...] goddamn it, start fantasizing!'; Terri is later placed to question him, during another break

in play: 'why all these fantasies about race?' (Hwang, 2000: 257 and 272). Hall observes that 'Freud's tracing of the origin of fetishism back to [...] castration anxiety [...] gives this trope the indelible stamp of a male-centred fantasy' (Hall, 1997: 268). As the characters' positions as dominatrix/client allow this 'fantasy' to be recalled, symbolic castration can be traced through the impossible demand that Mark's personae be credibly hetero-masculine. If the depiction of racial fetish provides a point of comparison with *Clubland*, contrasts between the plays are also enabled here. For whilst the deployment of bodies in the British drama may see critique slide into reification, the 'raceless' pair of *Bondage* disallows the fetish of the theme to spill into fetish for an audience. Through the unveiling of a colonialist, 'interdictory desire' (Bhabha, 1984: 130), racial fetishism may then figure

not as a repetition of racist fantasies but as a deconstructive strategy which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations of race and sexuality.
(Mercer, 1994: 199)

This notwithstanding, fetishism of a specifically sexual kind could emerge in performance, given the tight black leather in which Terri appears. For the premiere, this costume catered to emphasising the female performer's body through circular metal detail around and on the breasts. If an exposure of the psychic workings of racial fetishism might work transgressively, this factor could figure in concert with the focus on the male racial other to reify the masculinist binary.

Bondage's oppositional power clearly stems from dislocating stereotypes from a normative position, and reconfiguring them in fluid, performative terms. While this has the capacity to upend racial hierarchies, the emphasis here, as in *Clubland*, on male experience, echoes traditional identity constructs and

modes of cultural representation. As Elizabeth Spelman argues, 'any truly anti-racist vision would have to be anti-sexist, for it requires the elimination of *all* forms of [racist] oppression' (Spelman, 2001: 77, my emphasis). Hence, while the axis of 'race' sees masculinity as a changeable construct, aspects of sex and gender construction risk perpetuating a white male hegemony in the case of both dramas. This, then, comprises a key link between two plays that differ, primarily, in terms of the narratives of nation and tropes of 'other' masculinities. Several additional factors that have emerged also traverse these divides. Onstage women are not only largely removed from the experiential position of racial otherness, but function as a means to secure or undercut the black or Asian male figure's ability to blur the line between privileged and subjugated masculinities, within the UK/US body politic evoked. This is an element that underlines the implicit tension of such diasporic categories as black British and Asian American, and the fact that hegemonic masculinity is reproduced, in part, through the formal, naturalised scripts of British and North American nationhood. Finally, whilst these 'other' male identities are constructed as catalysts for 'crisis' in white masculinity, they also convey a sense of rupture that surpasses the boundaries of the hegemonic gender mould. In both *Clubland* and *Bondage*, it is masculinities, then, that are imagined to be in 'crisis'.

Conclusion

On the basis of my analyses of the six British and North American dramas at the centre of this enquiry, responses to, and cultural constructions of the 'crisis' in masculinity occupy a significant position in male-authored playwriting practice from the 1990s, and into the 2000s. Beyond tracing the presence of the 'crisis' phenomenon, the readings I have offered shed light on at least *some* of the variant ways in which it has informed, or been represented in, recent mainstream theatre. That some of the plays have been deemed, ultimately, symbolic bids to recoup hegemonic masculinity, whilst others as more likely to trouble it, is a key example of this disparity, and one that reflects upon the diverse means by which masculinities have been staged by contemporaneous male playwrights of differing national, sexual and racial identities. This point notwithstanding, having looked to allow for both progressive and reactionary potential in each of the plays, it is not my wish, here, to gloss over their sometimes contradictory nuances, and definitively split them across a radical/conservative divide. What has emerged that might be usefully summarised in *general* terms is, rather, the formal and aesthetic strategies that I have read as representing (male) identity as 'authentic' and unchanging, and those that look to portray it subversively, as constructed. In this context, social and psychological realism has repeatedly surfaced as a form which rehearses patriarchal, binaristic hierarchies: through a combination of linear temporality; prosaic settings and language; traditional casting strategies, and sympathetic, consistent characters that repeat normative, naturalised stereotypes along the axes of 'race', class, sexuality and gender. By contrast, masculinity has looked to be imagined in a

perpetually unsettled state, from postmodern, deconstructive and meta-theatrical techniques that undercut realist adherence to time, space, setting and language; from evocations of particular, socio-political contexts of which it is drawn as a product; and from performative modes of characterisation and casting that unhinge its look of coherence.

While further reflections on the six main plays will, of course, feature throughout this conclusion, this brief summary aims to highlight some recurrent connections between aesthetic approaches and masculinity's subsequent stance as a subject of representation. Despite the distance between strategies that represent this position as enduring, and those that depict it as contingent, both evoke formulations of the 'crisis': either through recalling the sentiments of the 'backlash' discourse, or in imagining ways for effecting subversion in staging an ostensibly 'natural' identity. Some of the dramas clearly stand to have greater radical clout than others, yet their all being resonant with the 'crisis' thesis owes to both of these approaches, often within the plays as well as across them.

My claims that the 'crisis' can be perceived within this cultural trope has relied, in part, upon reference to comparable plays of both the 1990s and earlier. It is in considering this diverse range of dramatic texts that I look, now, to consider what has emerged about hegemonic masculinity, and the discourse claiming its decline from the 1990s. On the basis of these findings, various, recent plays can doubtless be taken as part of the 'crisis' construction, mirroring the masculinities imagined in the cultural mainstream at large. As I outlined in the Introduction, representations of disaffected white men in the

'boys' plays' (Sierz, 2001: 153) of the Royal Court have been noted to bear strong similarities to films featuring violent, homosocial gangs and fraught male protagonists. To this trope, one might add other dramas written and set in the 1990s that explicitly posit (white, heterosexual) male identity in a perilous state: not only *Closer*, *Shape* and *Clubland*, but other dramatic literature that has been referenced in this study: Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992), LaBute's *In the Company of Men* (1993), *Imagine Drowning* (1991), by Johnson, and Storey's *Stages* (1992). What is noteworthy here is the way in which plays about straight white men drawn as experiencing identity crises in the context of late capitalism — either as part of a group of men, or in (often sexual) relationships with women — recall such of those of the 1970s and 1980s as Chin's *The Year of The Dragon* (1974), *Melon* (1987), by Gray, and Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1976), and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984). Here, perhaps, are cultural articulations of a 'crisis' or 'backlash' that pre-figured, or emerged in concert with, masculinity theories of the 1980s with which I opened the Introduction.

I would suggest that the ways in which these dramas bespeak a ruptured male identity do not constitute a 'crisis' wholly distinct from that of the 1990s and after. On the contrary, what surfaces here are some of the same catalysts and modes of expressing a sense of identity rupture. To take an example of the latter: given that violence has been claimed as a symptom of the *fin-de-siècle* 'crisis' in such landmark studies as Horrocks's *Masculinity in Crisis*, it is noteworthy that depictions of all-male, competitive or violent gangs provide a bridge between the Tarantino-inspired worlds of recent cultural texts, and such earlier plays as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The 'othered'

subjects deemed key prompts for masculinity's unravelling have repeatedly surfaced as such in the dramas on which I have focused, highlighting further convergence between them and those produced from the 1970s. For instance, as in *Shape* and *Closer* particularly, it is women who constitute the problem in *Melon* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. The expressions of misogyny contained in the latter not only reifies the link to the two plays of Chapter One, but forms a further one, to those of the white male characters in *Clubland* and Eldridge's *Serving It Up* (1996). Women are likewise mentioned alongside sexually and racially 'other' men in *The Year of The Dragon*, through the monologue given to the character of Ross, who laments being 'hated' by them as a white, straight, middle-class man (Chin, 1981: 129). As I have discussed in Chapter Three, these sentiments bear similarities to those attributed to the white male subject represented in *Bondage*, a little less than twenty years later.

Despite these points of convergence, a key factor prevents me from suggesting, outright, that the 'crisis' of this study began two or three decades earlier than is normally assumed. Representations of white masculinity in the older plays I have mentioned here doubtless bear the decentring influence of second-wave feminism, civil rights and gay activism, as I have argued of the six central dramatic texts. However, these later dramas reflect a sense not only of shifts activated by oppositional thought and movements, that went some way to enact a first stage of deconstruction, but rather a condition of third-stage identity flux that extended *beyond* the subject of hegemonic masculinity to impact upon 'other' identities. As discussed in relation to *The History Boys* and, to a lesser degree, *Bondage*, what surfaces alongside the 'legitimate' subject's 'crisis' are those that see a lament for the 'end' of subjecthood, in

postmodernity, from sites of otherness. The findings of Chapters Two and Three, in particular, highlight a post-1960s move from positive self-representations of emergent subjects, in plays like Sherman's *Bent* (1979) and those of black British and Asian American writers, to ones of the 1990s in which historically marginalised men *may* appear as much 'in crisis' as their white, straight counterparts.

Conversely, post-structuralist notions of identity as citational and contingent, such as those put forward in the theories of Butler and Bhabha, stand to have informed or complemented radical representations, as through the queer and diaspora aesthetics of *Angels* and *Bondage* respectively. These factors underscore the notion that, while the 'death of the subject' might have an adverse effect on identity positions traditionally deemed illegitimate, it also opened the door for subversive alternatives to the masculinist matrix. The plays in which I have traced an embrace of these alternatives, or nostalgia for abjection, thus underpin social and philosophical development from the 1960s to the 1990s, and, in particular, the rise of post-structuralist projects of gender, sexuality, class, and 'race', in respect of the perceived demise of the subject. It would be problematic to discount the degree to which this might be detrimental for identity positions that fall outside the confines of hegemonic masculinity; an issue I have addressed in relation to gay male subjects in Chapter Two. However, as a state of flux has repeatedly appeared, in this thesis, to enable progressive portrayals of otherness, the 'crisis' that may encompass various masculinities affects no position more acutely than that at the centre of traditional modernist discourse. Hence, if a 'crisis' can be traced in the plays of the two decades before the 1990s, it is one drawn to be a result

of claims to subjecthood of those formerly denied it, as opposed to the theoretical dissolution of subjecthood itself. That plays by and about straight white men, like *Closer* and *Shape*, have been read to tally with nostalgic, postmodern laments for the 'loss' of 'the real' underlines this point (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981]; Jameson, 1991).

Without wishing to contradict my assertion of the disparities between earlier and later plays written after the 1960s, another point of convergence between them enables assessment of the 'crisis' in specific relation to capitalism. In my readings of *The History Boys*, and, in particular, *Angels*, the plays' dramatic worlds have been perceived to reflect the demands of a capitalist culture on masculinity. Although less emphasis has been placed on this theme in Chapter One, the intersection between a valid, middle-class masculine script and socio-economic standing or success informed the analyses of *Closer* (particularly in respect of the means by which struggling writer Dan figures as emasculated, in contrast with Larry, as a doctor who owns a private clinic). Thus, in the case of several of the dramas I have taken as case studies, the way in which capitalism inflects and shapes a particular male identity underlines a means of its construction and, to varying degrees, marks both its contingency, and tendencies towards 'crisis'. That all six of the plays are, of course, set in cultures of late capitalism, highlights their shared relevance to this concept. In this context, earlier work by Mamet is, again, recalled. If, as I noted in the first chapter, *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* comprise critiques of capitalism, they function as such in no small part through depicting a troubled (white, heterosexual) masculinity. For instance, in the second of these dramas, male self-esteem and confidence is shown to be implicitly

dependent upon the ability to outwit and outsell other men in a corporate, homosocial environment. What is of importance here is the fact of my having made several references to mainstream, pre-1960s plays — *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955) — in which, again, the (hetero-)masculine ‘ideal’ is both dependent upon, and seemingly obtainable through, capitalist achievements.

The fact of this theme being present in these older dramas signals the way in which capitalism can be read as an implicit source of ‘crisis’ in that very subject ostensibly privileged by its workings in patriarchy, rather than as something exclusive to the second half of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first. Along with the span of plays to which I have made reference in this section, this historical perspective emphasises how a masculinity born of such a Western culture stands to be *always already ruptured*, in line with those sceptical theorisations of the ‘crisis’ discourse, introduced at the start of this study (Connell, 1987; Edwards, 2006; MacInnes, 1998). Considered in these terms, philosophical and political tenets of the late capitalist state — marked by a discredited socialism, and nominal ‘end’ of history — only look to compound the inevitability of ‘crisis’ in recent postmodernity, a notion which might provide one explanation as to the rise of the phenomenon in the 1990s. If this is, in fact, a state in which alternatives to liberal capitalism have lost credibility, opportunities for a different sort of (hetero)masculine script stand to be illegitimate.

My summaries, thus far, have looked to account for the historical specificity of the ‘crisis’, while not complying with those (generally conservative) texts

that deem it a unique or isolated case. Although the above reading aims to show that the masculine script and 'crisis' in question is a product of Western capitalism (and one concomitant with Kimmel's figure of nineteenth-century 'Marketplace Man', outlined in the Introduction), theatrical representations of masculinity that pre-date this period are also worth considering. For instance, depictions of white, heterosexual men undergoing identity crises can be found in a range of canonical or classical plays, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (430 BCE) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601). Notwithstanding the fact that these plays were produced out of contexts that differ in numerous ways — both from one another and those of the 1900s and 2000s — here, again, are reflections of patriarchal cultures in which the subject of privilege is the same as that conjectured by the Enlightenment. In spanning centuries of Western representation, recurrent depictions of white men 'in crisis' go some way to validate, or at least concur with, the argument that hegemonic masculinity is always already a site of (potential) crisis.

This idea is lent weight by parallels between the classics mentioned here and the recent plays I have analysed, in terms of consistency in the masculine mould depicted. Given that this identity is contingent upon defining itself against a haunting realm of otherness, it is noteworthy that constructions of the female subject appear as potential threats or encumbrances to a viable manhood in *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, as they do, according to my readings, in *Closer*, *Shape*, *Clubland* and *Bondage*. Of the various positions from which masculinity must appear distinct, Kimmel notes that it is 'above all, women' that must be interpellated as 'other' (Kimmel, 1994: 120). Whilst the masculine script of capitalism hosts historically distinct traits, the persistence of this

element, as reflected in male playwriting, underpins the entrenched quality of aspects key to contemporary hegemonic masculinity — and the way that, in being defined not through ‘direct affirmation’ but the ‘renunciation of the feminine’, it exists in a ‘tenuous and fragile’ state (*ibid.*: 127).

A suggestion cited elsewhere in this study — that ‘a “coherent” masculine identity has never been sustainable’ (MacInnes, 1998: 46) — raises further questions as to why it was not before the end of the 1900s that a substantial ‘crisis’ discourse arose in the British and US mainstream, notwithstanding those factors already outlined. Before drawing together the conclusions made thus far so as to offer a final response, the issue of the ‘crisis’ in terms of the female subject warrants further discussion. I have already noted the ways in which some of the plays that have been examined have the capacity to evoke a sense of ‘crisis’ and flux, felt both in privileged and marginalised male identities. In the two key dramas of both the second and third chapters, sexual and racial otherness has been considered in terms of resonance with the feminine, whether in a reactionary or oppositional guise. Despite the risk that dramas like *The History Boys* might reify such connections to problematic effect, of pertinence to this trope of contemporary playwriting as a whole is the way in which the representative, ‘other’ male subject is, in some cases, set apart from the feminine as a space of subjugation, whilst straight men drawn to be associated with it appear in a unenviable guise. I do not intend to critique the plays simply on the basis of their positing the feminine in these terms: it is, of course, always already the site of the ‘other’, and that which necessarily threatens masculine coherence. What may be taken as problematic, however, is the way in which the plays’ female characters are,

overwhelmingly, restricted to this space: whether through being heterosexual; functioning to reify stereotypes of intersecting gendered and racial tropes, or in being positioned as a catalyst for feminisation. If a progressive aspect of the plays owes to a stress on change (or the possibility of change) within various masculinities, that women are generally represented thus signals a perpetuation of the patriarchal binary, and echoes many of the 'crisis' theories in merging the female, femininity and/or feminisation. Even in what I have considered the more progressive of the six dramas, the marginal position of the on- or off-stage female subject (as discussed in Chapter Three) looks to compound this process of 'othering', as one that does not necessarily extend to queer, black or Asian male characters. The progressive possibilities of a nominal state of 'crisis' might thus be limited by this aspect in the work of diverse male playwrights.

To offer a response to the question of why the 'crisis' discourse proliferated in the 1990s, it is doubtless that the rise and material impact of counter-cultural identity politics, postmodern and post-structuralist (including queer and post-colonial) theories, and the conditions of late capitalism, all played pivotal roles. Sociological studies that grew out of subversive analyses of identity, from the late 1960s, doubtless took a key role in deconstructing hegemonic masculinity; especially, of course, such texts as those cited in the Introduction, that turned to focus on male identities exclusively. Thus, it was in the wake of theories that announced identity's constructedness, and activism that evinced its changeability, that a *language became available* by which straight white middle-class manhood stood open to analysis. If such theory both pre-figured and enabled a sociological trend, this trend itself played (and continues to

play) a significant role in *naming* an identity that depends upon being unmarked: a position that, historically, reflected upon and perpetuated its conflation with universalist notions of ‘human’ or ‘mankind’. The specific ways in which white masculinity has been named, in recent years, underpins its vulnerability as a subject of analysis. This point is doubtless reflected by masculinity’s insecure stance in various plays of this study.

In terms of the more conservative writers, including Robert Bly and other ‘crisis’ advocates, a paradox emerges through the necessity of writing men as gendered beings, and bids to reify normative relations that rely on obscuring their inherently tentative position as such. While the ‘crisis’ stands to be the result of the ability to speak of the historically invisible subject, both in the act of claiming a ‘crisis’, and in those of radical deconstruction, I would argue that its position as an alarmist ‘backlash’ only serves to highlight the perpetually ruptured state of masculinity. This tallies with my earlier claim that the threats to the masculine — as imagined by male playwrights across the centuries — share much in common, whether in respect of the female subject, or other, heteronormative demands of white patriarchal and capitalist structures. In this regard, the ‘authenticity’ sought by Bly *et al.*, emerges as a nostalgic construction. By extension, many of the critical and journalistic responses I have cited in each chapter underscore the persistence of patriarchy in the British and American contexts in which they were staged. These findings thus oppose ‘backlash’ arguments that claim patriarchy as a lost (and lamentable) thing, just as the workings of some of the plays look to imagine the ‘crisis’ as resultant of its persistence, rather than its decline. Insofar as this reflects upon a Britain and North America in which ‘[t]he

material and ideological legacy of millennia of patriarchy [remain] in the dramatic material inequality between men and women' (MacInnes, 1998: 48), as well as those 'othered' on the grounds of sexuality, class and 'race', I concur with Edwards' view that 'there is no crisis [...] as is commonly portrayed' (Edwards, 2006: 24). Rather, a privileged text of identity, in which the capacity for crisis is always already implicit, looks to unravel at a moment in which this tendency can be identified.

Prior to a critical reflection on certain aspects of this thesis, a mention of elements that may have proved either valid additions, or potential areas for further study in this field, will be briefly sketched out. On the basis of the survey contained in the Introduction, it is doubtless that an analysis of plays by women, on this topic, could prove to shed new light on cultural responses to the 'crisis', and on the phenomenon itself. Likewise, with the advantage of more space and time, and on the basis of my findings in Chapter Three especially, a fourth chapter specifically focused on national identity may have proved an apt inclusion, not least in allowing one to trace points of contrast between British and US constructions of masculinity.

In turning, now, to assess several of the decisions made in formulating this study, I will reflect upon three central concerns: the approach to, and choice of dramatic literature; the role of post-structuralist theory, and the significance of this theory to my readings of the plays' aesthetic and formal components. This final point of focus will take account of the ways in which I have understood certain dramaturgical devices as symbolically repeating, or challenging, masculinist 'norms'.

At the start of this thesis, I established that the key plays under discussion would be approached as cultural texts: instances of representation that might, like contemporaneous films, novels and television programmes from Britain and the United States, appear to evoke or construct the 'crisis' phenomenon. In selecting works, in isolation, from six different playwrights, I am conscious that a degree of disparity might be in evidence here, not least because of the differing identity positions from which these dramas have been written. Moreover, despite sharing in a privileged degree of cultural capital, there are points of divergence between these male writers that exceed the explicated axes of sexuality, nationality and 'race', in terms, for example, of the generational divides that separate those paired together within the second and third chapters.¹ This particular, disparate element is one that could, certainly, have been overcome by focusing on more than one play by a single writer, or, similarly, a study geared towards evaluating reverberations of the 'crisis' in a selection of works by a lesser number of dramatists. Prior to reflecting upon the decision not to construct a study of this kind, an inexhaustive account of other, later plays by LaBute, Marber and Williams, looks to illustrate its feasibility.

Aside from *In the Company of Men*, discussed in the Introduction, *Shape* is one of several, psychologically realist dramas of LaBute's that might be read to evoke the 'sex wars' encountered in Chapter One. A 2005 play, *Some Girl(s)*, depicts a young, white, North American man's turbulent encounters with a series of his ex-partners, in meetings he is shown to have initiated prior to his

¹ At the May premiere of *The History Boys* in 2004, Alan Bennett was seventy; Tony Kushner was yet to turn forty when he completed *Angels* a decade earlier. David Henry Hwang is more than ten years older than Roy Williams.

imminent wedding. While this play recalls the perpetual displacement of phallic validation argued of *Closer* especially, *The Mercy Seat* (2002), by comparison, sees a power struggle unfold between two straight, white, heterosexual lovers. Echoing a dramatic device used in Mamet's *Oleanna* and Block's *Not A Game For Boys*, further pressures upon the male protagonist in this play come in the form of telephone calls from an off-stage wife. The negotiation of (hetero)sexual politics within the domestic sphere also feature in *After Miss Julie*, Marber's 2003 play. Just as *Some Girl(s)* and *The Mercy Seat* might be usefully approached through Lacanian theory, this 'reworking' of Strindberg's 1888 drama tally with the postmodern notions of citation and intertextuality, explored in Chapter One. Alternative, later plays by certain of these writers also seem commensurate with theories that have shaped this study. For instance, the white supremacist politics and racial tensions depicted in Roy Williams's *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* (2002) suggest that this play, too, could be read through Ferber's 'Weekend Warriors and Racial Warriors', deployed in Chapter Three.

The later works of at least three of the six key playwrights thus highlights how this project might have proceeded as a survey across each of their work. Additionally, given the ways in which *M. Butterfly* has been discussed in the third chapter — as a play that stands to queerly deconstruct the masculine — David Henry Hwang might comprise an apt addition to the list (allowing for the fact that this particular play predates 1990 by two years). However, if the wider output of Alan Bennett or Tony Kushner positions them as dramatists who are less *obviously* associable with the 'crisis', a noteworthy point can be made here. Irrespective of whether a seemingly ruptured masculinity

provides a recurrent concern within the work of any one of these six playwrights, or merely reverberates in one of their plays, the socio-cultural centrality of the 'crisis' phenomenon is reflected in being traceable across this eclectic and diverse pool of mainstream, male-authored practice. Hence, while the six central plays of this thesis may appear somewhat isolated in being cast as independent texts, they function to reflect how several, constituent strands of one broad area of cultural representation, have all responded to, or coloured, the 'crisis' zeitgeist.

Moreover, while I have attempted to underline how specific points of resonance between the two key plays of each chapter informed the decision to position them as such, the playwriting trajectories in which they have been read highlights another concept for consideration. For, just as other of these writers' plays might, aptly, have featured at the centre of this study, so too could many of the secondary, contemporaneous dramas to which I have made reference. In contextualising the primary material of each chapter with that to which it is comparable, each 'key' play emerges, then, as an *example* of a drama written from a particular identity position of significance to the 'crisis', rather than an anomalous or definitive response to it by a specific playwright. Again, the potential for an interchangeable focus highlights the far-reaching resonance of the 'crisis' phenomenon within this cultural context.

A return to masculinities scholars MacInnes and Edwards provides a useful starting point for a reflection upon my choice of theory. MacInnes makes the claim that '[i]t is a bad time to be a man, compared to the supremacy men have enjoyed in the past', which, for him, 'is a thoroughly good thing'

(MacInnes, 1998: 55). Edwards notes that 'would, perhaps, there were' (Edwards, 2006: 24) manifestations of the 'crisis' as its purveyors claim. In line with feminist sentiments that have governed this thesis, I share in the point at which these different opinions converge: that an ontological state of 'crisis' would be welcomed. The progressive changes of the last few decades may have seen 'masculinity [...] permitted the scope of negotiation and reconstruction' (Hunt, 2008: 465) in a *discursive* register, but, as noted above, the ongoing conditions of patriarchy continue to reproduce hierarchical identity 'norms'. The psychoanalytic theory used in my analyses sought to highlight the plays' representative means of countering this hegemony. Its function thus underlines the way in which psychoanalysis been seen to '[enrich] almost every current of radical thought in the 20th century, from Marxism [...] to anticolonialism, feminism, and gay liberation' (Connell, 1994: 11). Yet, in considering the disjunction between post-structuralist notions of performativity and identity subversion, and the possibilities for instigating change at a material/ontological level, I am conscious that the theories in question — and those of Butler and Bhabha especially — evince an optimistic tone that may overlook the deep-rooted and naturalised condition of masculinist identity paradigms. As Huddart observes in a critique of Bhabha, 'identities can be lightly borne, worn, or torn asunder, only if we have legal, material and other securities' (Huddart, 2006: 70). I would not question that theoretical deconstructions of hegemonic masculinity, and its attendant modes of power, are not of great importance to imagining modes of identity or being that are less oppressive, not least in informing politicised aesthetic strategies that can operate transgressively within a conservative cultural mainstream. However, certain problems with the claims of psychoanalysis are

underpinned by the fact of my having deployed this theoretical trope alongside sociological texts that paint a somewhat bleaker picture of lived experience. As I have discussed during the course of this analysis, these have been theorised in respect of various concepts that bespeak the difficulty of moving beyond, or undermining, binaristic positioning. For example, in terms of the risks of abandoning subjecthood as marginalised subjects (Duggan, 1996; Roof, 1997); the perceived stability of corporeal signs of 'authenticity' or 'otherness' (Ferber, 2000; Grosz, 1990; Hall, 1997; Maynard, 1994; Segal, 1990) and in the tendency for subversive moves to be co-opted or diffused by a hetero-masculinist mainstream (Ahmed, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Osborne, 2005).

This final concern is one which raises questions as to the potential limits of subversiveness within '[those] aesthetics that have emerged from post-structuralism, postmodernism, and [...] "postmodern" feminism, anti-racism, post-colonialism and queer theory' (Harris, 2006: 2). Hence, it is one that extends a critical view of my methodology to consider how the theoretical tropes privileged in this study have determined my reading of certain aesthetic styles and approaches to form. As a starting point here, it is valid to note that, according to Young, 'it is by no means the case that all realisms are reactionary, or that rejection of such forms results in politically progressive [...texts]' (Young, 1996: 156). In light of the ways in which, for instance, queer and diaspora aesthetics might possess the capacity to enact modes of deconstruction in the sphere of theatre and performance, I have highlighted how '[they] can be seen to undermine, resist or subvert enlightenment subjectivity, or rather its naturalisation within realism' (Harris, 2006: 15).

Within these terms, techniques which stand as a cultural articulation of post-structuralist conjecture have been positioned in opposition to those of social and psychological realism, as products of a modernist aesthetic and sensibility. In a comment which echoes my earlier concerns about the philosophical texts *per se*, Geraldine Harris claims of these 'oppositional [...] strategies' that

in the abstract, divorced from situated social and historical contexts and embodied practices, they can easily become confused with one another and cohere into a single generalised postmodern aesthetic, understood as expressive of a single postmodern subjectivity.
(*ibid*: 15–16)

Just as the 'expression' of a 'single subjectivity' stands to repeat, in a different guise, the Enlightenment tenets of monolithic identity structures (see *ibid*: 15), so too does it recall Mirza's concern that: '[i]n this so-called fragmented, dislocated, experiential reality [...] the [...] voicing of our otherness has been appropriated by the masculinist postmodern discourse' (Mirza, 1997: 20). Despite the notion that the aesthetics under discussion 'often retain an aura of political progressiveness by dint of their earlier associations with subaltern modes of identity' (Harris, 2006: 16), cultural and material conditions obviously inflect upon, and potentially limit, their subversive scope.

In light of the fact that all of the six plays I have discussed are products of the *mainstream*, for instance, it is feasible that an audience member would not necessarily engage with those 'oppositional' components, insofar as they can be evinced through an awareness of post-structuralist theory. Although, in terms of *Angels* and *Clubland*, I have noted how the mainstream may have the facility to dilute a subversive impact in various ways, for the most part, the theories I have mobilised have led to emphasis on the transgressive possibilities of postmodern aesthetics, with perhaps too little concern for the

restrictions of material circumstance. It is also in this context that realism has been deemed a means of 'reproducing accounts and definitions which strive to sustain beliefs in particular [hegemonic] ideas and institutions' (Young, 1996: 35): a mode that reifies concepts of 'truth' and 'reality', destabilised by post-structuralism in the discursive register. I do not refute the affective reactionary *potential* of the realisms surveyed; yet here, my philosophical framework might have risked shutting down opportunities to evince their capacity for subversiveness. Young's discussion of this topic highlights how such factors as the agency and diversity of an audience problematise '[m]onolithic views on realist aesthetics' (*ibid*: 34). For her,

such positions deny the spectator autonomy, rendering her or him dependent on what is always an unstable and negotiable set of meanings. [...] There is tendency towards closure in realist narratives, an attempt to tell the 'truth' [...], but this can never be consistently achieved, and is always contested by [...] the process of [...] analysis and interpretation. (*ibid*: 34–35)

Although this is but a single example of a reading that counteracts claims for realism's inherent conservatism, it is one that also places stress on ontological variables that largely exceed the confines of this thesis. In line with the tenets of the post-structuralist texts deployed in the chapters, my positioning of forms and aesthetics has generally conformed to a potentially reductionist model in which realism emerges as conservative, in opposition to 'subversive' postmodern alternatives.

Two other points are relevant to these reflections on my choice of primary theory. First, I have aimed to retain a consideration of identity axes other than those explicitly privileged by the focus of each chapter (such as, for example, discussing portrayals of 'race' in *The History Boys* and *Angels*), and, simultaneously, attempted to avoid 'unworkable' or 'grand theories' that seek

to combine 'race', class and gender' (*ibid*: 75). This notwithstanding, use of the Lacan, Butler and Bhabha texts stands to have risked perpetuating 'separate narrative constructions', such as that of 'a gendered discourse, where the subject is white' (Mirza, 1997: 4). Just as the absence of racial considerations in Lacan might see Chapter One repeat this discourse, so an absence of concern with racial hierarchies in Butler might have affected the scope of my reading in Chapter Two. My second point reflects on how the use of these theories has determined my attitude to the six plays herein. By adopting an approach that falls in line with those of Butler and Bhabha in posting deconstructions of the subject as progressive, and utilising Lacanian discourse through a feminist filter, I have been critical of representations that reify normative identity paradigms. This angle has allowed me to assess symbolic recuperations of white masculinity, but so too has it steered me towards constructing readings that are somewhat less sympathetic than I might, at first, have either hoped or predicted. Whilst my take on the material of this study was determined, then, by a pro-feminist politics of deconstruction, the decision to analyse these particular dramas was prompted by my finding each of them engaging, touching and thought-provoking. If staging masculinity repeats a normative tenet of Western representation, the act of so doing contemporaneously might certainly figure as a recuperative move. However, the fact that masculinity's invisibility enables modes of oppression that affect both its 'legitimate' subject, and its variant 'others', possibilities for thinking identity progressively — at a moment in which the masculine is open to critical scrutiny — stand to be informed by its being in the spotlight.

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