

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA?



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The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?

Edward Albee (1928-)

Premiere: John Golden Theatre,

New York, 2002

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David E. Scharff

The tone of *The Goat* is set by Albee's deft capacity to write a play as immediate as the everyday and as timeless as Greek tragedy. It evokes the Eumenides (the furies who are turned into the mellowing voice of transformation after a tragic act) to the kiss of Judas, inherent in Martin, the protagonist, cursing Ross his alter-ego, thus locating himself as a tragic martyr. It is as modern as the everyday language, the curses and the pottery that are thrown about the stage, as timely as the opening announcement that

Martin has won the Pritzger Prize, and as old as the goat – an allusion to the goat that is half man in the character of Pan and to the animal that Abraham sacrifices in place of his son. The satanic fall at the climax of the play recalls Medea’s violent sacrifice of her children. The title *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* echoing and mocking the love sonnets, announces that this play is a tragic-comedy of Shakespearean proportions.

At the same time, this tragi-comedy is in a modern key, mixed with satire, wit and farce that add to the depth of the play and to our capacity to identify with the characters and the themes they embody. Fresh from the horrible irony of the violent closing scene, it’s impossible to feel unmitigated pleasure in this play that is so much about perversion – the perversion of meaning in its mixture of love, sex and destruction. But if we as an audience can find an enhanced capacity to draw meaning out of our shared experience, then there is pleasure of a transformative order.

The Goat has a fairly simple story. Martin is at the top of his profession on this day, near his 50th birthday, just named the recipient of the Pritzger Prize for architecture, and he is in a supremely happy marriage. While being interviewed for television by his life-long friend Ross, he reveals that he is having a sexual affair with a goat. Ross feels duty bound to tell Martin’s wife, Stevie. In the second scene, Stevie is reading Martin’s letter. Stevie, Martin, and their homosexual son Billy undergo a family meltdown in which the

civilization of their world crashes down, while Billy and Martin call each other unforgivable names about their sexual practices. In the last scene, Billy and Martin have it out, and end up kissing passionately. Shocked when he enters and finds them in an erotic kiss, Ross brands them as perverted. The play closes as Stevie, covered in blood, enters triumphantly dragging Martin's bloodied goat which she has just killed. Martin is devastated. Billy looks at his parents and calls their names as if invoking the gods.

This play works on many levels. First, the social level. The play opens with a man who is afraid he is losing his mind, aging out of his prime at the same moment he is being given outstanding public recognition from his peers in being awarded the highest honor for architectural achievement. Enter Ross wielding a television camera. He comes to celebrate the great man with whom he is on intimate terms, having known him virtually from the cradle, having shared his humorous adolescent sexual peccadilloes. Ross's role is crucial to the play, precisely because Ross represents the media, the public, the citizenry. He is the Greek chorus. In the end, Ross and Martin argue about whether the real crime is about being found out, about being shamed, or being guilty of exposing private family relationships.

When the attack on Martin reveals the private relationship in contrast to the public image, Ross's position is that the crime is that of being found out publicly, never mind the private damage. Ross claims that he can control the

public damage – and here Martin agrees with him. Here Albee raises the value of the lie. If the secret were kept, if a suitable lie had been told, repair might have been possible. The relentless presentation of truth may be more deadly than the lie that seeks to protect the self or prevent injurious harm to the other. We all present a public face that covers our inner conflicts in the name of social harmony. Albee forces us to confront the truth and its terrible consequences.

The goat itself is a symbol on a larger level. Pan, half man, half goat was the Greek symbol for music and passion. The goat is a symbol for lust, and in the end for that which must be sacrificed in penance to the gods. All of this is operating on the level of myth and of social symbolism, but in this play, unlike in classical Greek drama, the sacrifice and the vengeance are deeply personal for both Stevie and for Martin. But the goat is much more. It refers to the perverse sexuality of Martin but it also refers to a part of Stevie, the animal part of her sexuality that Martin adores, and to part of Billy, the adolescent homosexual son who gets his goat. It represents an absurd distillation of all that Martin values in the world of passion, love and sexuality, boiled down and stripped of the dignifying characteristics that make each of the people he loves human. In the end, of course, Martin is the goat of a tragic joke, and in their own ways, so are each of the characters.

This play also draws from zoophilia, the desire to form sexual

relationships with animals, as a signifier of our perverse “anything goes” society. Sex with animals goes one better than the gruesome human affairs and incest aired daily on the television tell-all shows. The group Martin describes for people like him who have had sex with animals is a clever comedic riff on groups for domestic violence or incest perpetrators. At the same time, the metaphor of the goat draws attention to a pattern in our society in which there are people whose love of animals in the abstract means they are almost willing to kill or maim human beings in the service of standing up for animal rights. The commentary is about all such causes gone to extreme.

We see each of the characters as they relate to the protagonist, Martin, at the center of the play. Martin is at the top of his game, a towering figure in his world, a fitting tragic hero. He has always been faithful to Stevie. Her boyish name suggests ambiguous sexuality from the beginning of the play. Yet they have a perfect marriage with perfect sex. They live in an Eden that is equal parts modern American, Christian and classical Greek, with the prints of Greek buildings on their wall and the pottery of modern art on their shelves. They have humor, love, and a treasured child.

But something is wrong in Eden. We hear much more about the reality of their existence after the fall. Martin wants more although he hasn’t known it until recently. While looking for a house to provide for their “country

pleasures” (surely a reference to Shakespeare’s frequent pun on rural life and sexual pleasure) he is seen by a goat, called Sylvia (Who is she that all her swains attend her?). And he falls helplessly, insanelly in love. He didn’t know he was looking for this kind of love. It is her eyes that he fastens on, the eyes that arouse his longing and his erection.

What powers Martin’s fall? That gaze. In a psychoanalytic view of development, we see the gaze in the mother’s eyes as a major route of expression of her love in the beginning. The mother takes the baby in through her eyes and skin and nipples, and he takes her in through his eyes and mouth and skin. The early bond forms through an unmistakable mutual falling in love, and often enough, there is a byproduct of maternal sexual arousal that is normal, although sometimes alarming to the mother.

It is this sexual arousal that Martin alarmingly reports to Billy after their sexualized, passionate kiss. A passionate connection between them has been there all through Billy’s life. Perhaps it is one of the meanings of Billy’s sexual preference for boys, a search for the erotic meaning of the love of his father that was there all along, a search that, from our study of Martin, we can see in his life-long search for “more”, for whatever is missing deep in his soul. Martin’s wordless search (about which we hear something in his adolescent sexual experiment with prostitutes) comes to the fore now as he is losing his mind in mid-life, unable to find his “razor head” – that condensed sign of

masculinity.

Stevie is the perfect wife, able to charm and comfort Martin, and she only has eyes for him. She is his provider, keeper of his wandering mental faculties, his “only love”. This steadfast love has kept her going, but when it is broken, she wreaks the vengeance of Clytemnestra, Electra, and the Furies. Total love turns to total destructiveness and vengeance. This is not an exaggeration of psychological truth: Stevie shows us that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. And when she has been ultimately humiliated in the process, she has nothing left to lose. She says she will kill Martin, but in the play’s mixture of farce and high tragedy, she kills his love instead, re-enacting the ritual sacrifice of animals. While the symbolism of this play makes her actions partly surreal, they also seem true to the cycles of revenge that murder meaning in real families where parents attack each other and their children – sometimes literally killing the children to take a Medea’s revenge on each other.

Let’s look at the couple’s relationship to their adolescent son Billy. Much more is said about Martin’s relationship to him than about Stevie’s. Among the many symbolic references that stem from Albee’s use of the goat, I believe, is his assigning the name Billy to the son. In this way, the goat (that is the “Billy goat”) is not only the object that comes between Martin and Stevie but is also an intermediate object that links Martin and Billy, the homosexual

son, who it is revealed, as an infant was the object of Martin's sexual arousal. The play's directions make it crystal clear that Martin is referring to himself and Billy in the story of the man aroused by his baby. When Billy asks repeatedly, "Was it me, Dad?" the script reads:

"MARTIN: (So clearly a lie; gently) Of course not, Billy."

So the quality of a man's love for his child with its primitive qualities becomes part of the pre-history of the extension of that love back to its even more primordial origins in the animal feelings that are in each of us. This relates to the "mixed metaphor" Billy uses when he says that Martin has "has pulled the blanket out from under him" rather than the rug. With Martin's crime, including the revelation of his sexual interest in Billy, it is not just the emotional floor that has collapsed, but the father's care for a child who should have been held safely in a blanket.

This play is about the ambiguities in the chain of development from animal to human. We are animals, driven by animal passions, and we are humans, driven by conflict about our animal passions. The resulting irrationality puts us at risk. Men and women are captive to their animal passions, and in this captivity, have the capacity to destroy what they love and those whom they love. Martin, losing his mind not to Alzheimer's Disease, but to the seeds of destruction central to his animal capacity for love and his capacity to love an animal, drives daggers through the heart of the two people

he loves the most. In this destruction he is aided by Ross, representing the social world's good intentions to save them all from themselves. Stevie's passion for revenge makes Martin's destructiveness part of a cycle of love and hate in a story of unending calamity.

Ultimately, this play is about the dangers of our sexual selves. Stevie says "Yes, it is about fucking! It is about you being an animal!" Martin answers, "I thought we *all* were ... animals." In the last scene Stevie hauls in the dead animal, as if that will mark the spot and erase animal lust. The play ends, as Greek tragedies do, with the destruction of the family, with Stevie carrying through in a tragi-comic way her threat to "bring Martin down." But the last line is Billy's. He no longer has a family. He mutely cries, "Dad? Mom?" and gets no reaction from either of them.

So what is the psychological and literary value of such a story? I think it has profound value in reminding us of the primitive forces that course through our veins. In psychoanalysis, linking forgotten and unconscious memories of early experience with the travails of current life does such a "re-
minding" by which I mean, it gives new meaning to current life. It builds a new capacity of mind to understand and to cope. In the cultural sphere, remembering the classical and historical origins of our way of thinking does the same thing - re-minding or giving a new mental capacity for understanding our societal dilemmas. The references to ancient gods and

their temples, the destruction of old civilizations, the invocation of Greek and Christian gods does for our understanding of our society what the invocation of childhood can do for us as individuals – “re-minding” our capacity to learn the meaning and value of our all-too-human and fragile experience.