CHAPTER 8

Who is Sylvia?: Anthropomorphism and Genre Expectations

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Abstract

An intertextual analysis of A.R. Gurney’s Sylvia (1995) and Edward Albee’s The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia? (2002) reveals the fundamental ways in which the use of anthropomorphism is implicated in their generic issues. Gurney’s transformation of the visual representation of the dog Sylvia, from the female body of the actress who portrays her to the photograph of a real dog, is integral to the play’s comedic form. Albee’s intertextual allusions to Gurney’s Sylvia and Shakespeare’s Two Gentlemen of Verona create the foundation for his “Notes toward the definition of tragedy” in The Goat, in which anthropomorphic qualities are projected onto the goat by the protagonist, and the body of the goat itself is an important factor in the play’s tragic ending.

Anthropomorphism may be defined as the “attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena.”1 The use of anthropomorphism is a vexed question for those who work at the intersection of performance studies and animal studies, a field that Una Chaudhuri has named zooësis. As Chaudhuri has pointed out, while decrying the impulse to impose human characteristics on animals, many

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scholars and artists in the field work in the service of humanizing animals, to give them “a soul, a place in our moral universe, and the opportunity to be seen and known as our fellows.” Anthropomorphic animal characters are familiar throughout contemporary culture, from the most widespread popular forms of cartoons, sports mascots, Disney “characters,” puppets and muppets to those occupying the more rarefied air of the legitimate theatre. In the theatre, they are of course most closely associated with children’s theatre, but they have a significant role in adult theatre as well. In some twentieth-century plays, such as Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (1959) and Edward Albee’s *Seascape* (1975), the anthropomorphic characteristics are established by the playwright as part of the play’s ontology and often serve as a metaphor through which to express a thematic statement.

In *Seascape*, Albee makes use of the anthropomorphism of his giant sea lizards to create estrangement, self-consciousness, and discomfort in the audience. Albee has referred to *Seascape* as “a serious play which happens to be very funny,” and in fact it takes on no less important a question than “whether or not evolution has taken place.” In the original production directed by Albee, actors Frank Langella and Maureen Anderman were well covered with reptile suits and make-up, with just their faces exposed by the costumes, and heavily made up. The incongruity of the human movements of the actors, or of actors acting reptile movements, is a source of humor in the play, but perhaps more humor arises from the defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) that is achieved with regard to the human characters. The confrontation between reptile and human calls attention to human characteristics and accouterments, such as arms and legs, breasts, child-bearing, handshaking, and clothing, requiring the characters to explain these things, and in doing so creating a defamiliarization that provokes laughter. This new awareness of difference causes the human characters Nancy and Charlie to contemplate the other characteristics that define them as a species, such as the love they feel for their children, as well as other emotions to which that love gives rise, such as fear, hatred, apprehension, loss, possessiveness, gratitude, and pride, as well as frustration and anger, and tools, art, and the awareness of mortality.

While *Seascape* is a “serious play,” as Albee puts it, generically, it is comedy. The comedic form is embedded in the play’s representation of evolution.

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4 Ibid., 108.