

MASCULINITY IN THE WORKS OF NEIL LABUTE

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines men's masculine performance in LaBute's major works and demonstrates how his men oppress themselves and others by trying to live up to the ideals of traditional masculinity. Using the writings of profeminist sociologist Michael Kimmel and other scholars of masculinities, as well as theoretical considerations of Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, the thesis specifically explores the attempts of LaBute's men to repudiate the femininity within themselves through homophobia and the suppression of emotions. Additionally, it examines the sexism that stems from his men's anti-femininity. Overall, the prevalence of such harmful men in LaBute's works and the mostly negative effects of their masculine performance prove that LaBute is critiquing traditional masculinity in order to promote change.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Among the artwork that adorns the home of Neil LaBute is a color painting of a young boy and girl walking out of a dark forest into an unseen world. Found by the playwright at a flea market in Los Angeles, the piece is a recreation of W. Eugene Smith's 1946 black-and-white photograph, "The Walk to Paradise Garden." In a 2006 *New York Times* article, LaBute praised the canvas for its mixture of hope and foreboding and commented that it was reminiscent of the art of the German Romanticist Caspar David Friedrich due to the presence of figures whom the viewer can only see from behind (Colman). Recognizing how his aesthetic as a creator of art is in line with his aesthetic as an admirer of it, LaBute has spoken about the way in which Friedrich's work is analogous to his own: "there's a certain kind of distance I put between my characters and my audience, the audience and myself. Things are kept at bay" ("This Cultural Life"). What LaBute means is that he writes about his characters' pain in a detached, clinical way and that he makes it difficult for us to feel a deep connection with many of them because of their immorality and amorality. Rather than directing us to see from their point-of-view, LaBute tries to make us question their decisions and recognize the grey areas of morality within ourselves. Gerald C. Wood explains, "Whether writing for theater or film, LaBute upsets his audience by undermining their false sense of their own identity and motives. Identifying with such predatory characters, even in small, indirect ways, invites the audience to see themselves with less innocent eyes" ("Latter Day" 75).

In addition to his works' effects upon audiences, LaBute creates a detached quality in the relationships between his characters. Most of them engage in selfish, lazy,

and/or harmful behavior that LaBute identifies as a product of the disposable culture of America's capitalist society. Instead of treating other people with human kindness, our own needs and wants compel us to view others as objects. As LaBute states, "It's easier to throw things out than to fix them. We even give it a name—we call it recycling. Especially as relationships go, we're too quick to say the easiest way is to end it because we don't want to do the work" (qtd. in Dickson). LaBute's characters end up hurting one another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, because they are so individualistic that they, as John Lahr observes, possess an "inability to imagine the suffering of others" ("Makeover").

On top of the depersonalized aspect of our consumerist society, LaBute examines the artificiality that our culture propagates. As Becky Becker observes in "No Simple Misogyny," the characters in LaBute's plays buy into both the superficiality of beauty and prescribed gender roles. In particular, she focuses on the latter concern and uses three of LaBute's plays—*The Shape of Things*, *This is How it Goes*, and *Fat Pig*—to demonstrate how the playwright reveals the socially constructed gender identities of several of his male and female characters. In her discussion of Tom and Carter in *Fat Pig* she draws on the moment when Carter tells his friend, "You laugh at the same jokes and check out the same asses that I do, you date all these gals and act like you're Mr. Sensitive, but how does it always end up? The exact same way it does for me . . . you get bored or cornered or feel a touch nervous, and you drop them like old produce" (*Fat Pig* 54). As part of her analysis Becker comments, "The social roles Tom and Carter play are so paralyzing—steeped in banal social rituals and out-dated gender expectations—that

both men are unable to recognize their artifice” (120). The line that Becker draws on is significant because it demonstrates the individualistic attitudes of the two men. However, what is more important is that she recognizes Tom & Carter’s behavior as being “outdated.” The harmful actions in LaBute’s plays are performed by both men and women, but it is men in particular, and a certain type of man, who is primarily culpable—those who attempt to adhere to the precepts of traditional masculinity.

Among their other various concerns, then, LaBute’s plays are about masculine gender performance, which is linked with the way in which men are viewed. As sociologist Michael Kimmel comments in “Masculinity as Homophobia,”

the father is the first man who evaluates the boy’s masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life. Other men’s eyes will join them—the eyes of role models such as teachers, coaches, bosses, or media heroes; the eyes of his peers, his friends, his workmates; and the eyes of millions of other men, living and dead, from whose constant scrutiny of his performance he will never be free. (188)

Kimmel then goes on to explain traditional masculinity by drawing on the definition offered by psychologist Robert Brannon. According to this model there are four main ideals to live by. The first, “No Sissy Stuff,” means repudiating anything feminine; it is the most important. The ideal mostly pertains to men’s rejection of any feminine quality about themselves. To be feminine is to appear weak and therefore unmanly or “gay.” Additionally, this ideal has a tendency to induce sexism and homophobia (topics which I

will later discuss), because femininity is considered to be not just the binary opposite of masculinity but its inferior. The second, “Be a Big Wheel,” refers to the attainment of power, success, wealth, and status. The Third, “Be a Sturdy Oak,” means being emotionally unexpressive. And finally, “Give ‘em Hell” refers to being daring, risk-taking and aggressive. Although, Brannon creates a clear list for easy referencing, there can certainly be overlaps between these ideals. For example, because emotionality has been gendered as feminine, being a sturdy oak also plays a major factor in not being a sissy. Similarly, power only appears on the list under “Be a Big Wheel,” but male power actually is encompassed within all of the ideals on the list. And the more of these ideals a man performs the more powerful he views himself and is viewed by others. But as Kimmel reasonably observes, this model is a source of confusion and pain for men because it is so unrealistic (“Masculinity” 125-26).

With the above ideas in mind I will be examining how eye-contact, looks from others, and the ever-present feeling of being watched by male eyes act as a threat to the mostly middle-class, white, heterosexual, male characters in the majority of LaBute’s works. More specifically, this study will demonstrate that a major factor in the inability of LaBute’s men to connect with others and their tendency to cause others pain is due to how they have been socially constructed as men to perform traditional masculinity and value power over intimacy. LaBute’s men are consumed by a fear of being seen (in both the physical and emotional sense) as less than a man, i.e. weak or “gay.” In order to fully explore this topic I will not only be using concepts from gender studies such as those by Kimmel, but also LaBute criticism and interpretation as well as gaze theory. And as I

explain how traditional masculinity leads to negative behavior by LaBute's men, I will be referring back to Brannon's list and periodically using his terms, "Be a Big Wheel," etc. to make clarifications. Also, I will usually condense these terms for easier use. For example, I most often refer to the ideal of "No Sissy Stuff," by mentioning the fear of being perceived as a "Sissy." Slight alterations might also be made as well, such as "Give Him Hell," rather than "Give 'em Hell."

While scholarship on the playwright is relatively straightforward, a discussion of the application of masculinity concepts and gaze theory is definitely necessary in order to grasp the focus of this thesis. Regarding the former aspect, I will be referencing several psychologists and sociologists who study masculinity. Foremost among them is Michael Kimmel, whose work serves as the prime source of inspiration since he studies gender from a social constructionist standpoint and is one of the most accomplished and respected figures in men's studies today. As a profeminist, professor of sociology at SUNY at Stony Brook, and a spokesperson for NOMAS (The National Organization for Men Against Sexism), he educates people on gender topics (particularly masculinities) and he advocates for equality between men and women. As he explains in *The Gendered Society*, he is not calling for a completely degendered society, but rather one in which human characteristics are not denied people based on their sex. He writes,

Why, after all, is love, nurturing and tenderness defined as feminine? Why do I have to be expressing the affect of the other sex in order to have access to what I regard as human emotions? Being a man, everything I do expresses my masculinity. And I'm sure my wife would be no less

insulted if, after editing a particularly difficult article, or writing a long, involved essay, she were told how extraordinary and wonderful it is to see women expressing their masculine sides—as if competence, ambition, and assertiveness were not human properties to which women *and* men could equally have access. (266)

As Kimmel's comments point out, our tendency to classify behavior into binary gendered categories can only be limiting.

In discussing masculinity in another work Kimmel draws on the gender developmental ideas of Sigmund Freud to introduce the topic of the flight from femininity. But he extends Freud's approach to demonstrate that gender is not a fixed characteristic ("Masculinity" 126-28). In *The Gendered Society* he more effectively explains this idea by referencing Candace West and Don Zimmerman, who have argued that gender is not something one possesses but something one does (100). With Kimmel's recognition of this idea he explains the presence of not just one, but multiple masculinities, which vary depending on, among other qualifiers, a man's race, culture, nationality, and the time period in which he lives. Kimmel also explains that in America the dominant form of masculinity exists in opposition to the "Other:"

All masculinities are not created equal; or rather we are all *created* equal, but any hypothetical equality evaporates quickly because our definitions of masculinity are not equally valued in our society. One definition of manhood continues to remain the standard against which other forms of manhood are measured or evaluated. Within the dominant culture, the

masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standard for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting. (“Masculinity” 124-25)

Calling this group’s masculinity “hegemonic,” Kimmel explains that its definition is “a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power” (“Masculinity” 125). His discussion opens up the subject of racism, which he briefly tackles later, but his chief focus is on the way in which women are subjugated by men and positioned as the binary opposite so that men can maintain social power. At the individual level, though, these white, heterosexual men may not feel particularly powerful.

Although the confining notions of traditional masculinity are beginning to wane, Kimmel explains that they still play a major role in the lives of many American men. In *Manhood in America*, he observes the presence of metrosexuals and stay-at-home dads and the escalating acceptance of gay men within our society. But he notes that as women and other minorities have begun to become more and more empowered, many white men feel more and more threatened. He explains that with the continual disappearance of self-made masculinity— which was a capitalist-based sense of manhood that valued the gendered separation of public and private spheres and the male accumulation of wealth, power, and status— many men are often unsure how to prove their manhood. He comments, “Instead of questioning [the ideals of self-made masculinity], they fall back upon those same traditional notions of manhood—physical strength, self-control, power—that defined their fathers’ and grandfathers’ eras, as if the solution to their

problem were simply ‘more’ masculinity” (216-26). As part of our current social atmosphere, the issue of traditional masculinity is therefore still very relevant for artists like LaBute to infuse in his plays for audiences to confront.

As this thesis analyzes masculinity in LaBute’s works, gaze theory will also be helpful in explaining issues regarding male power and dominance. The origin of gaze theory’s connection to gender was feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Using psychoanalysis, particularly the writings of Freud, as a foundation, Mulvey focused on how narrative films were consistently made from the male viewpoint, with the female characters reduced to sexual objects by three “looks”— that of the camera, the audience, and the characters on screen. Much like feminists working in theater, she was rejecting realism in favor of alternative forms of expression. Her Brechtian desire to eliminate the cohesion of these three “looks” can be seen clearly in the following statement:

The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness, and truth. (25)

Additionally, she explained how men used “voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms” to avoid the female threat and their own objectification. In 1981 she then penned an addendum entitled “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by

King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*," in which she addressed her lack of consideration for the female spectator in her first article. Again using Freud, she expanded his ideas on the oscillation of women between "passive femininity and regressive masculinity" by showing how women were usually forced to adopt a temporary persona of masculinity in order to enjoy most films. Although this latter work did help to clarify her perspective and gained her support, she was also met with a storm of controversy primarily due to what others claimed to be essentialist ideas. Much of this reaction against her centered on the fact that Mulvey had not taken into account factors beyond the viewers' gender, such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Mulvey's ideas remained inspirational to many feminists, particularly those engaged in interdisciplinary studies, and were soon utilized by scholars and critics of art, dance, and theatre. In *Feminism and Theatre*, for example, Sue-Ellen Case discusses the representation of women onstage by drawing on the theory of the male gaze as defined by Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan. She does admit that "a different set of dynamics applies in relation to the stage," but that gaze theory is nonetheless applicable (119). The following example that she offers helps to clarify her point:

a play induces the audience to view the female through the eyes of the male characters. When the *ingénue* makes her entrance, the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his desire. In this way, the audience also perceives her as an object of desire, by identifying with his male gaze. (119)

Sarah Bay-Cheng disputes such appropriation of gaze theory for theatre studies, however. In “Following the Gaze: The Influence (and Problems) of Feminist Film Theory in Theatre Criticism” she demonstrates the inability of three of Mulvey’s ideas to be applied to the stage. First she focuses on the ways in which a spectator’s gaze is freer in theatre than in film. While she concedes that technical devices such as the spotlights and proscenium arch are intended to direct the audience’s eyes, she points out that a spectator can still shift his or her head to focus on whatever is intriguing. Onscreen, though, no shift is possible because the camera has already focused on its objects; we cannot control it. Bay-Cheng then discusses two concepts of space. First, she shows how the fragmentation of women’s bodies (the camera’s focus on just their legs, breasts, etc.) is not applicable to the theatre. With an exception like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s futurist play *The Feet*, it is whole beings, not body parts, which are nearly always framed within a stage picture. Bay-Cheng also looks at how women’s features are made larger than life by the close-up in cinema, which is not possible in live performance. In conclusion she states,

Theatre is fundamentally incapable of achieving the verisimilitude of film and mimicking its ability to promote and maintain male pleasure through the manipulations of the female form. Because of these fundamental *visual* differences between theatre and film, it is clear that the gaze aimed at film is necessarily very different from the gaze aimed at live bodies on stage.

(169)

Bay-Cheng's analysis effectively argues against using Mulvey's theories for theatre studies. Moreover, her resistance is understandable, especially since Mulvey believes that her "complex interaction of looks is specific to film," and "is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows, etc." (25).

However, these limitations only pertain to the extra-diegetic gaze, or how the audience views the dramatic action. It is important to remember that Mulvey's innovative exegesis is not just centered on the form and effect of the gaze in film but also on its inclusion as content. The system of power-based gazing that exists in patriarchal society also exists within the fictional world of mainstream cinema. In an empty movie theatre, for instance, the same voyeuristic and fetishistic tendencies of a Hollywood protagonist are still at play. Therefore, Mulvey's article is influential not only for its observations on artistry but also on gender and power relations. It is this latter concern of Mulvey's which provides an entry-point for analyzing LaBute's plays. They will help illuminate another way in which men try to maintain power as part of their masculine identity. Therefore, what will prove valuable is the work of scholars who have specifically applied Mulvey's ideas to issues regarding masculinity. However, gaze theory in this study will not be applied to every play being analyzed. It will only be referenced in regards to the few plays in which particularly valuable insights can be gleaned from its inclusion.

In the remaining sections of this study I will be analyzing LaBute's oeuvre of original, full-length writings for stage and screen between 1997 and 2007. The plays in the study include: *The Shape of Things*, *The Distance from Here*, *The Mercy Seat*, *Fat Pig*, *This is How it Goes*, *Some Girl(s)*, *Wrecks*, *In a Dark Dark House*, and two of the

one-acts, *a gaggle of saints* and *iphigenia in orem in bash: latterday plays*. I also take a brief look at one of his short plays, *all apologies*, in *autobahn*. The films *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors* will also be investigated because they brought LaBute to prominence as an American writer and have theatrical origins. Winner of the Filmmakers Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival in 1997, *In the Company of Men* was originally a play that LaBute staged at the Theatre at Brigham Young University in 1992 while he was pursuing a Ph.D. in theatre theory and criticism. The screenplay for his 1998 film *Your Friends and Neighbors* also derived from an early stage piece entitled *Lepers*. Additionally, both films have a theatrical feeling to them with their character-driven plots and lack of intricate camera movements. As LaBute once commented: “I made my first film for \$25,000 and shot it in 11 days – and the reason it worked? Because I approached it as if it were a play: lots of rehearsal, shot in long takes, very static camera,” (“Heaps of Money?”).

As I trace the men in LaBute’s works from *In the Company of Men* to *In a Dark Dark House*, I will be structuring my chapters on a conceptual basis rather than a chronological model. “Chapter 2: Storytelling” will focus on monologues and plays which are told from a first-person perspective and/or center on protagonists who are fiction writers. It will demonstrate how LaBute’s male characters use the storytelling element as less of an uncontrolled emotional purge and more of a structured tale, a manipulation of “truth,” that simultaneously lets them speak of unconventional and weighty topics while maintaining a sense of power. The placement of this analysis as the first topic is important because men’s personal restriction of emotions is a problem for

almost all of LaBute's men. The explanation of the topic upfront will therefore be helpful when I explore other aspects of masculinity in the plays. "Chapter 3: Homosocial Relations and Homophobia" will look at male-male relationships as well as moments which convey a sense of the homoerotic. "Chapter 4: Woman as Threat" examines works which predominantly revolve around male-female relationships. It will look at the ways in which women, whether purposely or inadvertently, endanger masculine power. Finally, in "Chapter 5: Conclusion," I will sum up my findings and make suggestions about LaBute's stance on traditional masculinity.

## CHAPTER 2: STORYTELLING AND THE EMOTIONAL THREAT

In the monologue *all apologies in autobahn*, Man sits in a parked car on the side of a road trying to ease tensions with his wife after calling her a “cunt” in a supermarket. As he rambles on with his vulgar language and distracted thinking it becomes clear that he simply lacks the ability to communicate with her. He tries to blame his deficiency on the shortage of words with which he has to work. According to him the necessary ones have not been invented yet. But the truth is a brief statement he makes but quickly discards: “See, I always figured I’m not romantic, I can’t get in touch with my emotions, all that TV talk-show junk” (37). Because he has such difficulty getting in touch with his emotions, Man is unable to express genuine regret. He is unable to say “I’m sorry” and really mean it. He just continues to make things worse because he cannot—or will not—humble himself or articulate his love.

But the character Man is not alone in the LaBute canon. He is just one incarnation of a dominant male in American society who is dealing with masculinity’s constriction on emotional expression. During childhood, a part of the flight from femininity that some men learn is the need to restrict sentimentality in the name of control. Despite the human need for closeness, these men have been instructed to value and emulate the emotional detachment of strong, stoic figures like John Wayne and the Marlboro Man. Thus, in traditional masculinity, intimacy is usually at odds with power (Hart 4-9). As Michael Kaufman explains in *Cracking the Armour: Power, Pain, and the Lives of Men*,

most men grow up suspicious of emotions. We learn to suppress feelings, needs and desires that aren’t considered manly. We bury them for fear that

they limit our masculine control and our ability to act with so-called rationality. With practice, we lose the vocabulary of human emotions, so that sometimes we're actually surprised to find out we're feeling hurt, or terrified, or scared, or sad. (50-51)

Kaufman's statement dramatically reinforces the issue that Kimmel addressed about a man's loss of humanity in the performance of traditional masculinity. The more power that these men develop by suppressing their emotions, the more out of touch they ultimately become with them and the further they distance themselves from honest communication with other people.

This tyrannical constraint of emotions can also be a source of great anguish and lead to an outward explosion of anger, aggression, or mental/emotional cruelty or be turned inward as "self-hate, self-deprecation, physical illness, insecurity or addiction" (52). In addition, there can also be an escalation of anxiety and a need for independence or alienation from others (53, 57). In LaBute's work, this male dilemma is usually complicated even further by moral issues. His men are not just "Sturdy Oaks" who are unable to express themselves emotionally for fear of losing power; they are often also burdened by the fear of societal judgment due to their subversive behavior. Cyclically, these characters engage in misconduct due to the lack of emotional release, but will also deny their wrongdoing because they must retain a semblance of power.

With a guilty conscience and a need to cope with the events of their lives, several of LaBute's men turn to storytelling. As Margaret Read MacDonald tells us, one of storytelling's important functions is to "make sense of existence. Retelling one's life

story is a way of framing it and organizing events to make them “read” the way one wants. Storytelling is one way of making sense of our lives” (414). MacDonald’s definition is significant in that it highlights both the need to deal with inner issues through story and the ability to manipulate the story’s details. The story is a form of confession, but paradoxically, authorizes avoidance in confronting matters truthfully. Moreover, the story is usually based on a logical framework of cause and effect that allow LaBute’s men to attempt to communicate their feelings while still staying in control. While this element is clearly visible in most of LaBute’s plays, the most literal and vibrant narrative capabilities of his men are displayed in four works: *This is How it Goes*, *Some Girl(s)*, *Wrecks*, and the one-act *iphigenia in orem in bash*. With these plays, the male efforts at self-therapy through storytelling are manifested by characters who either write fictions or speak fictionally.

#### Fictional Speakers

In the monologue dramas *iphigenia in orem* and *Wrecks*, the two speakers (Young Man and Ed Carr, respectively) reflect on the principal transgressions of their pasts. For Young Man it is the hasty murder of his infant daughter Emma and for Ed Carr it is the secret of marrying the mother who abandoned him as a young child. But neither character indulges us with a prompt confession and a copious outpouring of sorrow or regret. Instead, these men utilize narrative in order to build up enough courage to finally admit what they have done and to provide justification for their actions. This method, therefore, allows them to gain the confidence of the listeners without making themselves

completely vulnerable. This is a conscience attempt to construct events so that judgment of them becomes nebulous.

The critical need to sustain power can be seen in the opening moments of *iphigenia in orem*. In the privacy of his hotel room, Young Man speaks to an offstage stranger that he met in the lobby. He begins, “i’ll tell it once. one time because it deserves to be told, and then never again, fair enough? well, doesn’t really matter what you think, i mean, i care, i do, i want you to listen to this, hear me out, but it’s not really important how you feel about it all in the end” (13). Having asked the listener to agree with him, Young Man immediately tries to play down his need for affirmation. He then tries to assert the value of the listener’s presence but again quickly rejects the outlook the listener might have. This oscillation demonstrates Young Man’s need to get the story off his chest without permitting a verdict against him. In fact, Young Man encourages the listener to drink from the bar in his room and states, “if I’m lucky, by tomorrow, you won’t even remember [this]” (14). Furthermore, we soon discover that the listener is quite intoxicated already and was chosen by Young Man for this very reason. Young Man also makes it clear that he is only drinking water, which reconfirms his need to stay in careful control over what he says.

Despite his nervousness, Young Man begins his tale, being sure to detail the competitive nature of his office job. In particular, he enhances the impression of the business environment by referring to it in terms of combat:

          faxes coming in, people zipping around, emergency strategy sessions, all  
          that. it’s like being a kid again, playing at “war” or that type of thing, i

don't mean exactly like that, but you know what i'm saying, it's a whole different thing out there, i have to tell you. the world of business, it is. all that "dog eat dog," "jungle out there" stuff has become pretty cliché now, but it's true [. . .] the pressure's a real . . . well just hot. day in and out. seriously, it is. we may play it like a game sometimes, but believe me, a day doesn't go by in business that you're not out for somebody's blood"

(15)

Although the relevance of this information is obscure to the listener and to the audience or reader, it is given preeminence in Young Man's narrative because it will provide a key role in his decision to commit infanticide. He even admits that he "just wanted to . . . lead in the right way on this" (15). In addition to the war zone imagery that Young Man's words conjure up, there is also a comment dropped about how he believes the term "guys" includes both men and women. This latter detail is important because it foreshadows his animosity for a female coworker. However, Young Man does not introduce this antagonism yet because he needs to acquire sympathy first.

In the next portion of his story, Young Man talks about the loss of Emma. However, he is sure to frame it as a mishap: "we lost a child, newborn, well five months old . . . just like that. just happened" (15). Apparently, Emma had been put down to rest on the bed in her parent's room before Young Man's wife, Deborah, and his mother-in-law went to the supermarket. According to Young Man, he then accidentally fell asleep on the loveseat in the living room instead of watching the baby. During that time Emma suffocated herself in the bed sheets and was later found by her grandmother.

Because Young Man is not yet ready to admit his guilt to the listener, he structures his story into one in which he is the hero and there is a happy ending. In this story, Young Man paints himself as a victim of both this chance occurrence as well as of police suspicion. His house becomes a tense environment for him as the detective plays the role of the antagonist by trying to piece together the events and trying to trick him. He tells his listener, “this man is pacing around, sucking on the chewed cap of a ballpoint pen and . . . asking me quietly, ‘did you check on her?’ what’s he getting at, anyway? i mean, that’s a no-win, isn’t it?” (17). Young Man also speaks about how sick he felt as the police examined the scene. At this point he makes it sound like it was due to the lack of privacy that he and his wife were given at that atrocious moment. But it becomes clear later that it was also a sense of guilt and a fear of being caught. At the climax of the tale, Young Man is acquitted from police doubt when the detective calls to tell him that the tests indicate that Emma died of natural causes. The villainy of the detective is furthered emphasized here when Young Man says, “i hung up without him finishing, he’d put us through enough that day, a day no parent should ever have to face” (20). Then, Young Man provides a nice conclusion with his wife giving birth to another child, Joseph, and their efforts to go on with life.

However, the confliction within Young Man is still apparent after this revelation of events. It seems that he needs to go on, but there is a palpable reluctance. He first tries to get his listener to drink more wine. Then he mentions how late it is getting, asking “you’re sure you’ve got time for this?” (21). Nevertheless, he finds the resolve to continue and introduces a complication and new conflict to the overall story. The

significance of the office information at the beginning of his account is now disclosed. Prior to the death of Emma, a new corporate takeover threatened his job. It seemed highly certain that it would be either him or the female coworker that he had offended at a “board meeting where [he’d] grouped her in with a ‘you guys oughta . . .’” (23). Then, on the day of his daughter’s death, Young Man received a call from a friend in Chicago who mentioned rumors that Young Man would be terminated. As he finally explains in the real climax of his tale, it was the fear of losing his job and the coincidence of his daughter’s sudden jeopardy that led him to commit murder. He had not been asleep and had heard his daughter crying. So when he went into the bedroom and saw her struggling, he pushed her down farther into the sheets instead of helping her. But even when relating this portion of the story Young Man tries to manipulate the details to reduce his culpability in both his listener’s eyes and his own. Not only does he try to blame the death on fate, he also uses wording to make it seem like a positive occurrence: “remember when I said I hated to waste things? well when i looked at it, i mean, rationally, for even half-a-second there in the hallway, i realized that’s what this was. an opportunity, and i wasn’t going to waste it” (26-27). Interestingly, he is unable to recognize, or perhaps to admit, the irony in the fact that he has been wasteful with Emma’s life.

What also becomes clear by this point in the monologue is that Young Man has not only tried to maintain power in the telling of his story, but that power is an essential element in the story itself. His motivation for killing Emma was based on both his competitive nature at work and the negative effect that it would have on his role as the

provider of the family. Mary English mentions in “A Modern Euripides,” that “Young Man struggles to regain his hold on the materialistic rewards of his corporate scrambling” (27). But what is at stake for Young Man is not just the American, middle-class lifestyle that money has provided, but his very sense of manhood. In fact, when he first hears the news about his layoff from his friend, he cannot even look at his wife as she is leaving the house. At this moment, their standards of living are only a surface detail. Underneath this concern, he is too afraid that he will be seen as a failure. In conjunction with this fear, traditional masculinity has taught him that men have a greater claim than women in the workplace. His definition of gender roles is evident when he first discusses the layoffs. He says,

somebody else takes over, you lose a few of the stragglers, guys who couldn't keep up . . . and i do mean “guys” as in everybody, all people here, because it was usually women at that point, not always, but a lot of the time . . . takeovers were an excellent way to get things back in order, and that's not just me talking, you know . . . there's definitely an order to things in business, and the old boys at the top, the guys you never even see, just their pictures in the hallway . . . they like things the way they've always been. so that's when a bunch of these women with their m.b.a.s and affirmative action nonsense get the boot. nothing personal about it, at least i never felt there was . . . just getting everything spinning back the way it was supposed to be. (22)

As this excerpt shows us, Young Man's sexism is very much a part of his masculine identity. His job is part of what makes him feel like a man and it is therefore both his need to be "Be a Big Wheel" by keeping it and to not be a "Sissy" by losing out to a woman that lead him to kill his daughter. These aspects of traditional masculinity play such a disastrous role in the lives of his family.

Ultimately, Young Man retains his male ego and the semblance of power since he retains his position. However, the threat to his livelihood is revealed to have been illusory when his colleague from Chicago tells him that the call he had made was just a joke. Furthermore, Young Man has lost all sense of intimacy in his quest to hold onto this masculine definition of self. Obviously he cannot divulge his crime to anyone, including his wife. The only reason he can tell his listener is because he or she seems too intoxicated to even remember. And while he informs the listener that he and his spouse are fine, he also talks about his new desire to travel for work. It appears that he would rather be on the road than at home or in the office. And as his control of emotion and manipulation of details in his story indicate, Young Man cannot even be completely honest, and therefore intimate, with his listener. He hurts himself by trying to "Be a Sturdy Oak." When he ushers his listener out the door, Young Man is left, literally and figuratively, alone in the dark.

Like Young Man, the narrator of *Wrecks*, Ed Carr, exists in a world of isolation. LaBute takes seclusion even farther with Carr, though, giving us a drama in which the speaker is actually the manifestation of an inner self. LaBute makes this theatrical device clear by having Carr occasionally glimpse into another room and comment on his own

behavior at the viewing of his dead wife, Mary Jo, or as he more affectionately calls her, Jo-Jo. But instead of an offstage listener like Young Man had, Carr directly addresses the audience. Despite his recognition of our presence, though, the monodrama is essentially a soliloquy. We are somewhere within the self-made fantasy world that Carr is using to try to convince himself that his feelings for Mary Jo were genuine, he was not wrong for marrying her, and that he is a good person. The Carr onstage is the inner thoughts of the real man, or more specifically, the inner battle between the id and superego as mediated by the ego. As John Lahr says, the play showcases a “psychic division” and “shed[s] light on the ways in which we manufacture our own darkness” (“Blowing Smoke”).

The storytelling that Carr engages in is his conscience leading him to confess his sin. But because he cannot completely accept it as sinful, he keeps manipulating the truth in order to perpetuate his self-deception. His lack of honesty can be seen at one point when he says, “that’s me . . . An orphan. I grew up that way, in the foster care system, I sure did. Just outside of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, and never knew my *parents*” (8-9). As we find out later Carr has definitely met his mother, but because he has never met his father, his use of the plural “parents” instead of the singular “parent” is technically a true statement. Therefore, while he is not outright lying, he is intentionally misleading. Since Carr is in charge of his tale, he also constructs himself as the hero who rescued Mary Jo from the criminal and unloving Swede Ulrich. But because of the strong conflict within Carr, he is not in complete control of his narrative. His limitations are evidenced when Carr tries to convince himself and the audience that he is a strong person. After pulling out a cigarette, Carr puts it away, saying, “I can wait. Show a little willpower. Believe

me, that is one thing I got plenty of. Loads of that stuff” (19). But in only a matter of minutes he is smoking again, dismissing his previous comment with “fuck it. Habit’s a habit, right? That’s why they call it that” (21). Furthermore, his chain-smoking reveals a deeper truth that he wishes to remain hidden. His cigarettes are symbolic for his feelings for Mary Jo. He is addicted to both of them because they are immensely pleasurable, but at the same time they are highly destructive elements to his physical and mental health.

What finally becomes clear by the end is that the very neurosis that Carr displays is the product of his inability to ever completely resolve the Oedipus complex. He is perpetually trapped by his obsession over his wife and mother Mary Jo, but he has also had to live in the world of men and be a “Sturdy Oak.” The Freudian battle between infatuation with the feminine and the requirements of masculinity is evident when Carr comments, “Just trying to be honest here, get some of my feelings across, and there’s not a thing wrong with that. Is there? To be open. Vulnerable. In touch with your emotions and, you know . . . all that other crap. I think it’s a very good thing” (6). But as Lahr has suggested, Carr “renders himself psychologically blind by cutting himself off from his feelings” (“Blowing Smoke”). Underneath his love for Mary Jo, he hides an animosity against her for making him a “perpetual outsider” by choosing to orphan him: “The foster kid [is] always last in line for whatever’s being handed out. Yeah, I figured that one out pretty damn quick—the new boy don’t count for shit, so be thankful for what you get. (Beat.) Sorry, must be the day or whatever, ‘cause my head is spinning here—I was telling you about how Mary Jo and I met” (20). Throughout the drama Carr often avers that letting out emotions is a positive thing, but with the proviso that it is done it private:

“I’m an emotional guy [ . . . ] But always in an understated way, not blubbing in the grocery store so everyone can pat me on the back and make me feel better” (10). His hostility towards public exposure is also plain in the fact that all of this action occurs within Carr’s own mind. Unlike Young Man in *iphigenia in orem*, Carr cannot even tell his troubles to a stranger. He can only reach for a sense of intimacy with the figments of his imagination—us. This is false intimacy, though, because his complete lack of honesty with himself means that he cannot be honest with others.

However, Carr has crafted such a compelling characterization of himself as the grief-stricken husband that it is difficult to see beyond his illusions until he shatters them with his defiance of conventional mores. It is only when he reveals his incestuous relationship with Mary Jo that his pain takes on a new significance. Having been unloved as a child, he actively sought out his birth mother to experience some sort of affection. As he tells us, “I figured if she didn’t want me in one way, in that way . . . as her kid . . . then maybe it’d be able to work out for us in some different life. A life like we’ve had together” (33). Carr’s comment suggests that not only has he been a storyteller for us, but that he has been a storyteller in his own life by recasting his own role in order to rewrite his relationship with his mother into a positive one. These factors combined with the unreality of Carr’s onstage presence finally show that fiction is the very fabric of his existence. He only ends up wounding himself because he keeps trying to cover his real feelings in order to perform the ideal of traditional masculinity, “Be a Sturdy Oak.”

### Fiction Writers

While *iphigenia in orem* and *Wrecks* demonstrate the role that fiction plays in the lives of men, *This is How it Goes* and *Some Girl(s)* look at how men use their lives to compose fictions. In *This is How it Goes*, the anti-hero Man narrates and acts in a play that he has written about the highly unconventional way in which he came to marry the love of his life. In *Some Girl(s)*, Guy covertly tapes his conversations with four ex-girlfriends as the basis for an article he is writing for *Esquire* magazine. With duplicity at the center of their plots, both works show how the line between truth and fiction can become blurred.

In the preface to *Fat Pig*, Labute exalts the craft of storytelling:

what interests me so much about writing [. . .] [is] This notion of creation and how easy it is to make everything work on out on paper [. . .] I find things so much easier on the page than in real life. Want to visit the beach and not actually sweat or get sand in your hair? Start writing. Want to conjure up an unlikely but delightful romance without having to deal with the ramifications and fallout? Pick up your pen [. . .] more and more I find myself going to the computer to live out life rather than dealing with it.

Writers, for better or worse, are gods of their own universe: “It is so because I say it’s so.” [. . .] Life should be so easy. (xi)

The narrator of *This is How it Goes* would agree with LaBute wholeheartedly. Like his counterparts in *iphigenia in orem* and *Wrecks*, the character of Man relates a story about prior incidents in his life. As a playwright, however, Man’s tale is much more clouded in

fiction. Rather than simply manipulating the events, he crafts a story in which it is impossible to determine what is true and false. He plays out the situations, but what we see and hear are not the exact facts of his life; we experience a story that is only based on it. Near the end of the play he tells us “whether any of that stuff you saw is real, the end result is this: I’ve started work on a play—it’s *this* story, *technically*, but I’ve changed some of the situations around so that it’s not . . . well, I don’t think anybody’s gonna notice. And especially not if it sells!” (87).

The story that is dramatized for the audience involves a love triangle in which Man ends up with Belinda, the wife of a rich, black man named Cody Phipps. The three had gone to high school together twelve years earlier and meet up again after Man returns to his hometown. Having given up his career as a lawyer in order to pursue writing, Man moves into the apartment above the Phipps’ garage and begins a flirtation with Belinda. Despite the obvious tension between Cody and Man, the two men have actually conspired together for mutual gain. In a trade, Man will get the woman he has always loved, Belinda, while Cody will get a Jackie Robinson baseball card and will be able to use Belinda’s “illicit” affair as an excuse to divorce her without losing his fortune or his status in the community. The unsuspecting Belinda falls for the scheme and enters into a much more loving marriage, albeit one based on a lie.

How much of this plot is real is left quite uncertain, however. Although he tries to hide it, Man’s motive for telling the story appears to be a pang of guilt: “Years of hatred and lies and betrayal that it took for Belinda and me to be together. For her to be happy. S’ worth it though, right? Sure, I mean, anything’s worth it, as long as you mean well”

(95). He even implies that Cody may not have been as complicit as he has shown in the story. “I’m not saying the other stuff was at all true, that crazy shit about us trading or whatever,” he says (94). Furthermore, it remains unclear whether Cody recognized Man’s interest in Belinda and let the affair occur or whether Man is just trying to rationalize his behavior. In fact, Man opens up the interpretive possibilities so wide that none of the events we have seen might have occurred at all: “Hell . . . this *might* just all be going through my head when I’m standing there at Sears, staring at Belinda again for the first time” (86-87). In this case, Man has been daydreaming as he tries to make a decision as to whether or not he should approach Belinda. Thus, Man makes it difficult for us to reach any conclusions about his plot. In fact, there is no clear definition for any of the characters either. As Dean Mendell has observed, the characters in the play change from scene to scene not because of any psychological development but because “LaBute’s playwright has not yet decided who they are. They are works in progress, not because they are human beings and human beings are works in progress, but because they are characters in a play and because every play is a work of fiction” (97).

Whatever the truth behind the story, though, Man’s desire for intimacy is conquered by his greater yearning to maintain power. For him, the play seems to be about more than just his relationship with Belinda; it is also about hatred that has been brewing since his childhood. As an overweight kid, Man had been picked on by Cody. Additionally, Cody was wealthy, an athlete, and had many dates while Man was poor and awkward. Cody also played the race card or what Man calls the “Ace a’ Spades” to get what he wanted. Also, Cody was and still is much more traditionally masculine than

Man, which has only driven Man's competitive streak. So, like Young Man and Ed Carr, Man needs to tell this story to deal with the issues of his life. By directly addressing the audience Man attempts to forge a relationship with us like Neil Simon's protagonist Eugene in *The Brighton Beach Trilogy*. But unlike Eugene we cannot trust anything that Man tells us or shows us. Moreover, there can be no doubt that Man is a racist. It is the only definitive characteristic of him that we can latch onto (Mendell 95). Throughout the play he has made jokes at the expense of African-Americans, but later tells Cody, "I'm not a *racist*, would you stop! I did it for the effect" (81). In other words, he has been trying to sell Belinda on a genuine conflict between Cody and himself. Despite his efforts to mask his prejudices, though, Man's hatred betrays him. If there was any sympathy that we might have felt for him due to his outsider status as an adolescent, he undoes it with his extremely vicious attitude. In a moment to the audience he proclaims,

Cody Phipps was born a nigger. He still is, to this day. And I do know the difference, believe me between regular black people and what Cody is. Oh yeah, absolutely. I never really liked the guy—yes, back in school, I'd hang with him, do some stuff, but basically just so he wouldn't make fun of me or knock me around. But Cody was always a nigger, even back then. This lazy, mean-spirited coon who acted like everybody owed him something. All that sort of post-Civil War, Malcolm X, heavy-lidded bullshit that guys like him've been trading on for years. Forty acres and a mule and always ready to lay down the ol' Ace 'a Spades. Well, hey, man,

forgive us for dragging your sorry asses over here, 'cause-it-wasn't-fuckin'-worth-it!! (93)

This aggression is a product of his inner emotions, but in his efforts to “Be a Sturdy Oak” he never makes himself vulnerable. In fact, the only vulnerable moment in the play belongs to Belinda when she talks about being attracted to Cody because he is “different” and because he makes her stand out, which she was not able to do as a child (Becker 118).

Overall, it is more important for Man to be in control. This need is so imperative that he becomes the omnipotent creator that LaBute mentioned in the *Fat Pig* preface. In fact, he takes it to the next level, monopolizing both the stage and the text. In the entire play, there is only one scene in which Man does not appear; yet he still presides over it. The moment is a private conflict between Cody and Belinda. First, Man shows us a fight between them, in which Cody is so angered by her laziness and disrespect that he punches her in the stomach and gives her a black eye. But Man comes back to tell us that what we just witnessed is only how he imagined the episode played out. Additionally, it is his most conscious attempt to vilify Cody. “Anyway, all stories need some sort of antagonist, don't they?” he says, “well, I figure I'm gonna have to play the ol' Ace a' Spades on that one! Yep. Only choice I've got . . . I mean, it can't be me” (42). Then Man shows us what Belinda told him happened. In this instance she has already injured her eye by hitting it on a cupboard door and the two then tiff over Belinda's belief that he is cheating on her. Man lets us choose which version to believe, but he makes sure to provide his comment on the invalidity of the second: “she swears it was this way, she

does, but something seems a little off about it, and so that's why I made up the other story" (43). His commentary is also extended externally to the stage directions, which he has also presumably written. In the first scene, for example, we read, "*This time it's the MAN who laughs first. Quite happily. I'm starting to have high hopes for these two*" (16). He even takes on a God-like status at the beginning when he relinquishes the darkness Man is in with "*Let's give him a little light. There, that's better*" (5). When he is onstage, Man also takes a break in the middle of the action to let his thoughts be known. Before Belinda's vulnerable monologue, Belinda says to Man that she is drawn to Cody because she likes a "nice, thick black cock" (56). Man then steps out to explain that she didn't actually say this. It is just what he thinks is her reason for being fascinated with Cody.

In this multiplicity of ways, then, Man makes sure to dominate the story. His constant adjustment of the details of the play and his abjurations of truth confuses the audience or reader. But this power is more important to him than becoming close to us. Instead of trying to frame the story so that his conduct seems justified, he tries to erase any wrongdoing by making truth and fiction indistinguishable from one another. Man can therefore prevent the risk of any exposure of his inner weaknesses by hiding in his play. But he, like the other men previously discussed only hurts himself by trying to "Be a Sturdy Oak" rather than truthfully communicating his anguish and thereby establishing intimacy.

Although *Some Girl(s)* is not told from a first person perspective like the other plays in this section, it does center on a writer whose past is an important element in his storytelling. Although the reader or audience never hears the actual stories, it is clear that

they contain many aspects about Guy's "romantic foibles" (66). In the play, Guy has ostensibly returned to the cities of his former flings in order to visit these women and make amends for his past offenses. The crime of which he is most guilty is his decision to run away when he wanted to end a relationship instead of engaging in confrontations. When he dated Sam in high school, for example, he simply stopped calling her or going over to her home. When his affair with a married teaching associate, Lindsay, became public, he left Boston for another job, leaving her there to deal with the fallout alone. But his recent success with writing is also a point of contention for some of these women, seeing as how he is writing about his experiences with them and, therefore, profiting from the hurt that he has inflicted. Sam's disdain for Guy's story "The Calculus of Desire" seeps through even as she tries to laugh it off: "It was pretty good . . . clever. Mmm-hmm [. . .] funny how you know so much about women. *Now*" (7). Lindsay's comments are much more biting. Reflecting on the motel room in which they had their affair, she remarks, "I do have a number of memories about the room, this place . . . I do. And some of them didn't even end up in your article" (36). Although they have not seen Guy for years, the pain inside these women is palpable.

Guy, in contrast, is a rather unemotional person in spite of his claims to the contrary. When he talks to Tyler about feeling a "burst of hurt" over being aloof and obsessed with another girl while he was with her, he is vague and uncommitted to his emotions: "I maybe felt so shitty about what I did to her by leaving that I just plunged in with you, did whatever [. . .] Gave myself to you physically, but all that time I was really feeling . . . I don't know. Something. *Bad*, I guess" (32). Even when talking about Alex,

the woman he is going to marry, he remains ambivalent, referring to her as just “some girl.” Furthermore, he has been unsuccessful at conveying his thoughts in a note he sent to Bobbi: “I’m not great with letters and stuff” he says. “No, not for a *writer*,” she responds (54). It seems that Guy may not just be unwilling to express his emotions, but that he may have become so used to being a “Sturdy Oak” that is now completely confused about what he feels.

It is only near the end of the play that Guy finally seems able to discover and submit himself to his feelings in his revelation of his life-long love for the fourth woman he visits, Bobbi.

I’m a guy, I’m bad at this, Bobbi; I found the single greatest person I could ever imagine being near, I mean *standing* near, even, and she liked me. Me! And that just didn’t compute, it did not make sense, no matter what she said to me . . . so I made myself believe it wasn’t true and I ran off. Like some three-year old. (68-69)

While his outburst seems genuine and uninhibited, LaBute’s text suggests that Guy is conscious about himself in an authorial sense. The stage directions are: “*The man stops, tries to figure out exactly where he’s going with this—he’s doing well now, but he needs an ending*” (67). And when Guy finally tells Bobbi that he loves her, he comments, “ohh, boy. No way I’m gonna top that, so I’ll just leave off right there” (69). Although the question of Guy’s truthfulness remains for the audience to decide, it is apparent that even at this pivotal moment Guy does not give his emotions free rein. Instead, in order to “Be

a Sturdy Oak,” he finds a logical framework to contain them. His need for intimacy is not so great that he cannot find a way to keep control.

### Summary

As the four plays analyzed in this section demonstrate, storytelling in LaBute’s work is often more than merely the relating of personal events of a character’s past to a listener. Whether the stories are structured non-linearly or amalgamated with fiction, there is a need for the male storytellers to protect themselves from the condemnation of others and of themselves. This defense system is certainly based on the amorality or immorality of these characters’ past actions, but it is also a form of masculine gender performance. Because the men feel the pressure to maintain an emotional detachment in order to prevent themselves from being perceived as weak, they cannot truly come to terms with their own moral weaknesses. Unlike the tragic heroes of the Greek plays of which LaBute is so fond (and which provide the groundwork for both *iphigenia in orem* and *Wrecks*), the men of LaBute’s dramas are incapable of facing themselves, which means that there is no catharsis for them or for the audience. Instead, the burden of their manhood forces them to continue to carry around their pain in order to “Be Sturdy Oak(s)” and therefore, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, not be “Sissies.” Thus, the search for intimacy is crushed and the semblance of their power sustained. This power is contradictory though. Even though it allows them to appear strong and masculine, it also prevents them from developing true human bonds. These men, therefore, ultimately hurt themselves by performing traditional masculinity’s ideal of emotional suppression. But

with Young Man in *iphigenia in orem*, we also see the damage he inflicts on others with his sexism and his need to be successful in order to define himself as a man. As a result of the pressures of traditional masculinity, a young baby girl is killed and both his wife and he must cope with the loss. With Young Man's case, then, we can begin to see beyond the internal pain of one of LaBute's men and observe the ramifications of his masculine performance on the lives of other people. It is this latter effect of traditional masculinity that becomes the chief concern of the following two chapters.

### CHAPTER 3: HOMOSOCIAL RELATIONS AND HOMOPHOBIA

The last chapter looked at how LaBute's men oppress themselves by repressing their emotions. This chapter will extend that idea of oppression to also consider its more active role in human interactions in LaBute's plays; chiefly, those among men. Returning again to Michael Kimmel, we see that masculinity is primarily performed for the benefit of male peers (*Manhood* 5). He notes that because men measure their masculinity against other members of their sex, a strong sense of competition develops and thus men "parade the markers of manhood—wealth, power, status, sexy women—in front of other men, desperate for their approval" ("Masculinity" 128-29). Victor J. Seidler takes up the same issues, explaining that one of the difficulties that a man has in maintaining friendships is that the greater successes of his friends seems to induce envy and inadequacy. "It is as if we want to secure our friendships as a space within which competition does not operate," he writes, "though in the public world of work we recognize how significant competitive relationships are within a capitalist economy" (18-19). It is therefore not always easy for the men who compete in the world of work to shut off their competitive drive in their private affairs. In both spaces they may feel that they need to be "Big Wheels."

With this competitive concept of homosocial relationships, men experience anxiety about the shortcomings in their masculine performance. Kimmel defines this as "homophobia," explaining:

This, then, is the great secret of American manhood: *We are afraid of other men*. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear we might be perceived as gay . . . Homophobia is the fear

that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we don't measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see this fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend [ . . . ] ("Masculinity" 131)

Kimmel's explanation does not mean that men are incapable of fellowship, camaraderie, or other such homosocial relationships (*Manhood* 5). But it does mean that men can have a difficult time becoming emotionally close with one another. And although it is not confined to it, his definition also includes the avoidance of physical behaviors or other activity that is associated with homosexuals or femininity. Furthermore, it is about denying any inner homoerotic desire ("Masculinity" 133). Though heterosexual men, of course, can care for one another, according to traditional masculinity they have to be careful about expressing that affection. This desire for male intimacy is rarely lustful but according to the "No Sissy Stuff!" ideal must be suppressed out of fear of being considered feminine or gay, and therefore "Other."

The violence that can result due to this constricted male-male intimacy has been best described by Michael Kaufman in "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence:"

A key expression of homophobia is the obsessive denial of homosexual attraction; this denial is expressed as violence against other men. Or to put it differently, men's violence against other men is one of the chief means

through which patriarchal society simultaneously expresses and discharges the attraction of men to other men. (43)

While Kaufman notes the form of this violence may vary depending on the society and the individual man, he suggests that the most direct expression of such violence can include activities such as sports or more destructive, antisocial behavior such as fighting or attacks on gay people. Furthermore, Kaufman explains that the aggression and hostility that men experience as competitors is also intertwined in violent conduct (“Construction” 40-43). In addition to its most physicalized expression, he also states that violence sometimes takes more subtle forms like the “the verbal put-down or the killer-instinct one is expected to cultivate in the business, political or academic worlds” (*Cracking* 199). These physical and non-physical expressions of violence are enactments of the ideals of “Give ‘em Hell.” Furthermore, the more effectively a man performs them the more he will feel like a “Big Wheel.”

While men perform masculinity for the eyes of the general community of men, they also do so in more voyeuristic looking relations. Laura Mulvey had originally declared gaze theory to be based on an active male/passive female model. But subsequent theorists have expanded the idea so that dominance no longer depends on gender. Jonathan Schroeder put it most clearly when he wrote, “to gaze implies more than to look at—it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (5). And as Richard Dyer points out in “Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-up,” the heterosexual male must resist such passivity to retain his own sense of manhood. In photographs, men usually disavow their supposedly weak position by

performing some sort of physical activity or by showing their muscles. Thus, it seems that men feel they can be looked at but must constantly demonstrate power in order to not be objectified (265-76). And as Steve Neale explains in “Masculinity as Spectacle,” when the male gaze is directed at other men in cinema, the object must be “disqualified, so to speak, as an object of erotic contemplation and desire” (281). Usually this disqualification for the viewer occurs through watching a character deal with physical pain such as bruises, wounds, or torture.

In the following analyses of the homosocial relationships in LaBute’s plays, I will be demonstrating how the subjects of male competition, homophobia, and/or violence play an important role in the actions of his men as they attempt to “Be Big Wheels,” “Give ‘em Hell,” “Be Sturdy Oaks” and avoid being viewed as “Sissies” For some of the plays, gaze theory will help to illuminate the topics. And though none of the central characters in LaBute’s plays are homosexual per se, those analyzed in this chapter all have homoerotic encounters. The focus here is not solely on these particular moments, however, but also on the general gender performance within male friendships and blood relations.

### *In the Company of Men*

LaBute’s first film is the story of two men, Chad and Howard, who date and dump a deaf woman named Christine during a business trip in a supposed attempt to bring integrity back to their lives. Both men appear to have been left by their women recently and are disgusted by the corporate world that toys with their lives. In the end,

however, it is revealed that Chad has been lying to Howard as well. Chad is still dating his girlfriend Suzanne, and his real motive for his actions has simply been a misanthropic desire to hurt somebody. While Chad's immorality is not necessarily indicative of men in a general sense, his interactions with Howard and his other co-workers throughout the film demonstrate the sort of power that is ideal within traditional masculinity. But Chad takes his sense of power to an extreme.

In the first scene, Chad's superiority is apparent. Within the hierarchy of masculinity, he is the alpha male and Howard is the nerdish type who acts as the boss of Chad at work but is actually rather weak. As the two of them sit in an airport smoking lounge Howard swabs at his ear, having just been assaulted by a woman.

CHAD. . . . So. How's it feel?

HOWARD. 'S okay.

CHAD. Yeah?

HOWARD. 'S alright. Hurts a little . . .

CHAD. Where'd she get you?

HOWARD. Right here . . .

CHAD. 'S no blood. Not a mark, anything . . .

HOWARD. Still feel it.

CHAD. Sure. (3)

In this exchange, Howard initially tries to cover up the fact that he is hurting but then does admit it. But seeing no major wound, Chad scoffs at his friend with the implication that Howard is a wimp. A few minutes later, Chad reveals his sadistic side when he

reaches over to touch Howard's ear. He can comfortably make this move because it is not a term of endearment; it will cause Howard pain. Already we begin to see that Howard is a comparative "Sissy" to Chad.

On the surface of Howard and Chad's relationship is the appearance of male camaraderie. But for Chad this friendship is false. He is a competitive, manipulative shark that cares about no one. It is no coincidence that Howard refers to Chad as his "friend" and that Chad never uses the term. Chad only maintains the façade because he is the dominant figure and he can use Howard. Both within their private game with Christine and at work, Chad proves that he is far more of the competent, assertive male who can "Give 'em Hell" and "Be a Big Wheel" while Howard is never able to live up to such standards. For example, when Howard oversees a company meeting he tries to make a joke about the building's poor facilities by calling the space their "Jonestown office." When there is no response from the crowd we learn that this is actually Chad's joke but that Howard has told it incorrectly.

HOWARD. . . . well it was funny when he said it.

CHAD. That's because I said Jamestown. (*laughter*) See? (31-32)

Then Howard tries to recover and begin the official business by having the men break into two teams. Chad corrects him once again, mentioning that Howard had said he wanted to "do the projection thing" (32). In both moments in this scene Chad proves himself to be the capable figure while Howard just flounders.

Howard also shows his comparative weakness in the fact that he has feelings for Christine. The dating game that he and Chad play with her is their shared activity, but it

takes on a more personal aspect for Howard when he falls in love with her. In fact, his affection is so deep that she becomes his main priority, ironically shattering his own declaration that “work comes first” (55). In fact he becomes so neglectful of his duties that he ends up being demoted and Chad becomes his superior at work. Chad thus becomes even more masculine and more of a “Big Wheel.” Meanwhile, Howard displays his ineffectiveness as a “real man” within the workings of the business environment and also breaks from traditional masculinity, which is also known as the masculine code, by letting his grief over his behavior with Christine get to him. Near the end of the film he stands in Chad’s apartment trying to express his feelings to Chad and crying in the process. Chad, who has remained the objective unemotional figure or “Sturdy Oak” throughout, is most clearly juxtaposed with Howard here as he is completely calm and shows only signs of happiness for their actions, not remorse. Instead of trying to console Howard, Chad never weakens. He is actually quite impatient with Howard’s unmasculine behavior, commenting, “You’re getting all weepy on me here and I gotta get some sleep ‘cause [Suzanne and I are] going to the beach in the morning” (85). When Howard leaves, he throws up on the stairway. Chad, meanwhile, continues to exhibit a position of power as Suzanne kisses him and moves her mouth down his body to give him oral sex.

But the greatest evidence of Chad’s desire for control is the scene between an anonymous black intern and himself in Howard’s office. Chad chastises the young man for goofing off instead of placing value in the working world and learning how to take charge. Thus, Chad compels the intern to prove his manhood by dropping his pants to literally show him that he has the balls to compete in the office world. For Chad power is

equivalent to masculine virility. As he tells the intern, “Listen, you got a pair, the kind that men are carrying around, practically wear ‘em on your sleeve! S’ what business is all about . . . who’s sporting the nastiest sack of venom. And who is willing to use it” (64). Before Chad makes this demand, however, he makes sure to close the blinds in the office. This decision is made not only because he could lose his job if he is discovered humiliating a coworker, but also because Chad is acutely aware of how men judge one another. To the outside observer, one without the proper context to understand the situation, Chad and the intern may be involved in a gay encounter. But Chad is not a homosexual and cannot risk the moment being misconstrued. He must prevent the possibility of being gazed at while he gazes at the black man’s body. For similar reasons the intern feels uncomfortable as well. On one level, he is shocked and must question Chad’s motives. But if we recall Dyer’s article, men also try to protect themselves from being objectified. By being put in this position, the black intern loses any individual sense of power. Oddly, he must diminish his masculinity in order to prove it. By consenting, the intern puts himself in a weak position with Chad clearly in charge. But even Chad is uneasy once he has seen the intern’s scrotum. Without the “disqualification” that Steve Neale spoke about in male-male looking relations the intern’s presence becomes homoerotic. This fact makes Chad turn away and then quickly tell the intern to get him a cup of coffee. Chad is just as anxious as the young man for them to part ways. While this scene is arguably Chad’s greatest display of masculine power it also proves to be the only one that temporarily threatens his masculinity.

*The Distance from Here*

In LaBute's works, men are often equated with beasts. In the film *In the Company of Men*, for example, the music that is used to mark weeklong transitions in time has a tribal quality to emphasize man's animalistic nature in the corporate jungle. In *The Distance from Here*, LaBute creates an even more noticeable parallel by setting his opening scene near a monkey cage in a zoo to symbolically represent the caged life of the play's blue-collar teenagers. In this world, the homosocial relations of the main characters take on a much more primitive quality. Rather than being based on cutthroat office politics and manipulation, the homosocial relations in this play are rather violent and quite often involve strong denigrations of another man's lack of masculinity. For Chad, authority was maintained through implications of weakness in questions like, "you're not pussing out on this, are you, Howie?" For *Distance's* anti-heroes, displays of masculine power devolve into vulgar name-calling and physical confrontations.

The plot of *The Distance from Here* revolves around the social and familial life of a high school boy named Darrell. Both he and his best friend Tim are similar in that their birth fathers are barely present in their lives and their social status and lack of academic abilities has relegated them to a life with little prospects. They spend most of their time socializing in whatever places are most convenient and will cost them little. At home, Darrell deals with an unloving, unsupportive family. He essentially lives in a void. Throughout the play he tries to find some way of gaining power over his life but seems incapable of truly attaining it. When he discovers that his girlfriend had once had an abortion and his friend Tim helped her arrange it, he commits a horrible but memorable

act of infanticide by tossing his sister's infant into a penguin pool at the zoo. Then he immediately leaves town to find a new life.

In his empty existence, the one place that Darrell does find supremacy is in his relationship with Tim. Although they are friends, the two of them have an ongoing rivalry in which Darrell usually comes out on top. As Tim says in a moment of defiance late in the play, "I been taking your shit, playground a' elementary school since" (114). In the opening, this underlying antagonism begins to develop for us in the pleasure that Darrell gets in teasing his friend. As Tim scratches his body to get ants off of him, Darrell compounds Tim's frustration by telling him that the ants have the ability to crawl into his penis and make him go insane. Darrell then validates his claim by saying that he read about it in a *National Geographic* article. Being frightened at this prospect, Tim frantically begins to put his hands down his pants. For Darrell, Tim's gullibility and self-humiliation is a source of great amusement and allows him to feel superior. In fact, during the course of the play he continues to exploit the angst that Tim feels regarding his deficient brainpower by calling him "stupid." But Tim rarely retaliates. He is clearly the more sensitive of the two and therefore less overtly masculine. Tim displays his relative weakness when he tries to avoid seeing Darrell's girlfriend Jenn.

TIM. —I don't like her so much.

DARRELL. Up yours!

TIM. I don't though. Not anymore. (BEAT) She fucking called me  
"stupid" once.

DARRELL. Oh yeah, she was really outta line on that one—

TIM. That's not so funny, you know? Hurt my feelings, maybe, give a shit about me you might care.

DARRELL. Just shut up and finish the smoke. (31-32)

While Darrell is the more dominant male, he is not quite as impassive as he lets on. As Christopher Bigsby notes, "His streetwise language, his pose of indifference, conceals a vulnerability he can never express. He needs the friends he abuses" (124). Darrell has to be a "Sturdy Oak" and mask any connection he feels with Tim because it is male affection and he could therefore be construed as a "Sissy." So Darrell constantly deflects this need for closeness by imposing homosexual desire onto Tim and making use of violent forms of touch. Tim, of course, behaves in the same way but is less often the initiator. When Tim has his pants down to get rid of the ants, Darrell deals with the homoerotic site in front of him by telling Tim, "pull on your pants [. . .] Look like a fucking *homo*—" (16). Darrell also makes homosexual allegations when Tim displays annoyance that Jenn might be joining them at the mall: "Jesus, Tim, you got a *woodie* for me or something, gay shit like that?" (31). Darrell finds himself in a similar situation later in the play, but this time, ironically, it is he that is putting pressure on Tim to spend time with him. However, Darrell cannot let himself seem too needy so he says, "Hey, not your fucking *spouse*, okay, don't gotta make up stories to cover your ass. Just say 'no'" (89). As for non-verbal expression, Darrell and Tim also punch each other on the arm in order to make up after having an argument. A short time later the boys get into a homoerotic wrestling match which Jenn teases them about when she comes across them. "Figured

you guys'd be here," she says, "didn't know you'd be *making* out" (65). This aggressive expression of affection is pain-inducing but is sanctioned by the ideal of "Give 'em Hell."

Whether either boy actually has homosexual feelings for the other is never answered. But LaBute's scene plays on the homoerotic paradox that Brian Pronger writes about in *The Arena of Masculinity*. Using the male wrestling scene between Birkin and Gerald from D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* as a foundation for his argument, Pronger expounds:

Ironically, men meeting men in sport, while pursuing an orthodox expression of their masculinity, also explore the paradoxical possibilities of their masculinity. Some are more aware of this than others. The paradox of homoerotic stimulation, the ecstasy of man-to-man struggle, disguised by the orthodox violence of sport, may be a deep secret whispered incomprehensibly in the grunts, groans, and moans of athletes straining their bodies against each other. (181-82)

Although neither Darrell nor Tim are athletes (and are actually quite far from it being that they are slacker types), their aggressive fighting allows their bodies to rub against one another in such close proximity that it resembles sexual activity. They unconsciously reveal the need for male affection that they try to repress.

Darrell's relationship with his mother's new boyfriend, Rich, is also built on such displays of male affection. Rich tries to bond with Darrell by taking him to a stock car event, but he also displays great mistrust and a lack of caring by hiding money from Darrell and not telling him when his birth father has called (Biggsby 122). The only way in

which they really connect is when they hit each other and wrestle. As John Lahr has implied (“Whatever”), Darrell seems to be looking for someone that likes him when he cries out to Rich, “You fucking want me!! You like me don’t ya,” (*Distance* 44) during a wrestling match. Such moments are the closest he can get to obtaining fatherly love. With a mother who remembers little about his youth and a birth father who is never there, Darrell feels that he has been tossed away. His act of infanticide at the end of the play is thus a form of revenge as well as a symbolic act of self-destruction.

*a gaggle of saints*

Because *a gaggle of saints* is told in a first-person format, the audience does not actually see John’s homosocial interactions. Nevertheless, the story that he tells is so richly conveyed that we get a vivid sense of the important role they play in his life. Told as a duologue, *a gaggle of saints* is about two Boston College juniors, John and Sue, who return to their home city of Manhattan with a group of friends to attend a Mormon Church party at the Plaza. For each narrator, the story has a different focus. Sue recalls the festive evening in mostly romantic terms since she danced with John and then went to her hotel room to fall asleep. John’s tale begins in a similar vein but eventually takes a turn into a brutal gay-bashing in a men’s room in Central Park.

In his reflection on events prior to the beating, John reveals the value of masculine power to his identity. Similar to Young Man in *iphigenia in orem* and Ed Carr in *Wrecks*, John tries to make a violent moment seem heroic. He is oblivious, however, to its true brutality. The tale concerns the first time that he met Sue and how he defeated the

bullying antagonist that was her ex-boyfriend. Sue tells us that she had broken up with this former lover two weeks prior but that he was simply going to give her a ride home after school one day. Nevertheless, her “ex” seems to feel differently. When he sees Sue running on a track with John, he pulls his car onto it and grabs John confrontationally, giving him a bloody nose. But John “Gives Him Hell” by flipping him over and pounding his head until he can barely move. John then ends up walking Sue home and kisses her on her front porch. His personal conception of the story as an example of masculine prowess is reinforced in his ultimate idea of winning a girl’s affections to be a “Big Wheel:” “the best would be, like a major football moment, touchdown to take the state championship, something majestic like that” (47). Sue’s attraction to him at this particular moment further validates his demonstration of male power. In fact, the reader or audience learns that violence is a sexual turn-on for her. When John goes to pin a corsage on Sue’s dress, he pricks his finger and gets a drop of blood on his shirt. “In a weird way,” Sue says, “it excited me” (44). Additionally, Sue’s femininity bolsters John’s macho definition of himself. Throughout his commentary he speaks of her beauty. But the moment when they leave their hotel for the party is particularly telling in how he revels in the glory that he attains with her as a status symbol: “and we walk downstairs, arm in arm. man, feels so nice to stroll past all these people, i mean rich guys, girl like that on my arm! made me feel strong, you know? powerful...the crowd almost glides apart as we approach” (54). John once again reveals the increased masculinity he feels by being a “Big Wheel.”

John’s rampant masculinity is challenged, though, when he and his companions, Tim and David, see two gay men kissing in the park. Like Chad in *In the Company of*

*Men*, John and his friends become involved in a situation in which their male gaze becomes homoerotic. As Philip Culbertson writes, “To gaze at another man re-positions a straight man as a gay man, thereby shattering his fragile masculinity” (“Designing”). Therefore, although the boys are in the active looking position, they feel their masculinity challenged. They are afraid of the “Sissy” within themselves. While part of their motivation for the cruel assault on the gay man, Chet, is their belief that homosexuality goes against Biblical teachings, there is also a deep need to regain their masculine power. As Karen Franklin explains, the victim of group antigay violence is

nothing more than a dramatic prop through which the assailants simultaneously prove their heterosexuality and bond with each other through the sharing of fear and danger [. . .] During the assault, there is a drug-like high produced by the excitement of danger. Afterwards, there is a feeling of closeness and camaraderie, a sense of bonding produced by communal transgression. But there may also be an enormous, collective sigh of relief that they have survived this public test with their masculinity intact. (29, 31)

Thus, the act of hurting others allows these men to redirect their homophobia and their competitive inner hostilities against each other into a common goal, creating group solidarity. In *The Distance from Here* this principle is apparent in that Darrell and Tim are only aligned when they mock others. When they are sitting outside the mall, for example, they break from their usual bickering by laughing at and flipping off a Vietnam veteran. In *a gaggle of saints*, John and Tim are able to become closer with David, who is

a bit of an outsider; he is presumed to be less masculine since “he does gymnastics” (38). In fact, he has only been invited on the trip because he is dating a girl with whom Sue is a lifelong friend and he has a vehicle that will hold them all. But during the attack David proves his masculinity and his trustworthiness by not just participating in the major assault but also taking an individual turn. When David seems to sense that Tim and John have their doubts about him, he “grabs up the nearest trash can, big wire mesh thing, [and] raises it above his head as he whispers, ‘fag,’ [. . .] and brings that can down on the spine of the guy” (63-64). After this attack, the boys immediately become closer, behaving in a similar fashion to Franklin’s description. Tim conducts a eulogy as the three of them laugh in wild euphoria, “whooping it up like Indians” (64).

Although the beating is about reclaiming masculinity for the group, John’s story also hints at an even deeper, and perhaps subconscious, personal motive. Every once in awhile in the course of his narrative, John brings up his father, for whom he seems to be hiding enmity. Early on he mentions that his father used to haul him into the kitchen every two weeks to give him a haircut. While the memory is plainly troubling for him, it does not seem to mean much until we discover later that his father still tries to cut John’s hair when he comes to visit. Sue also mentions John and his father arguing. Furthermore, John divulges that he did not mind the period in his teens when his “dad was away on sabbatical [sic] in London or some type of thing” (46). While these details are all rather minor, their combined weight makes John’s two later references to his father stand out. When he first notices the gay men in the park he says, “one dude looks like my father, a little, it’s dark, but he had that look, right, that settled, satisfied sort of . . .” (55). John

breaks his thought because it seems to be painful. His later reference is a bit more subtle: “men old enough to be our fathers—i mean, middle-aged, and clutching one another like romeo and juliet!” (60). These statements certainly hint that John’s crime was a form of revenge against his father. It is never fully explained what the exact tension between them was based on, but an incident on John and Sue’s return home offers the suggestion that either John or his mother, or both of them, were abused. On a train back to Boston a man backhands his girlfriend. Sue tells us, “everybody got quiet, I could feel john tense up, getting all tense [. . .] i asked john, whispered to him, to ‘let it go.’ (BEAT) and you know what? he didn’t even bat an eyelash” (68). The sequence would suggest that even though the battering brings back old memories, John is able to put them behind him because of his symbolic triumph over his father. The revenge motive also provides the answer to Tim’s question about John’s unusual conduct in the restroom. Prior to bashing Chet, John had gone into the restroom alone and, unaware that Tim was watching, allowed himself to be licked and kissed by the gay man before calling in his friends. Perhaps John needed the more direct affront in order to build his courage for the attack. However, Chet also may have provided John with a male intimacy that he never received from his own father. When we deconstruct the play to this extent and recall that this is the LaBute universe, this latter explanation seems just as likely, if not more probable, especially when we recall the extent to which Ed Carr goes to connect with his mother in *Wrecks*.

*In a Dark Dark House*

Of all of LaBute's works, *In a Dark Dark House* deals most straightforwardly with the need for male intimacy. The play concerns two estranged brothers, Terry and Drew, who are brought together when Drew ends up in a rehab clinic for driving under the influence. In the opening, Terry has been summoned by the staff of the clinic in order to corroborate Drew's story about a case of childhood molestation by an older man named Todd Astin. Todd had been traveling across the country and ended up working on their parents' farm while the brothers were young. While Terry is surprised to hear of the sexual encounter, he nevertheless decides to testify on his brother's behalf. Only near the end of the play is it revealed that Drew has made up the story to gain court sympathy and that Terry had actually been the one who engaged in intimate relations with Todd.

From the outset of the play, the distance between the brothers is obvious. Terry is a single, unadventurous middle-class man who umpires little league baseball games while Drew is a married, rich, ex-lawyer with a wild lifestyle that includes drugs, adultery, and rowdy behavior. The dialogue further contributes to their contradictory characters in that Drew utilizes adolescent terminology like "dude," "bro," and "whatever" while Terry speaks a more adult language, albeit one littered with considerably more profanities. In the spatial aspects of their woods environment, the men are widely separated as well. Drew attempts to approach Terry but stops after only a step because his hard-nosed brother refuses to budge. While they are slightly more matched in masculine attributes than some of LaBute's other male duos, Terry's violent past and harsh attitude to his brother reveal him to be the stronger one. As brothers, they can afford to display more

affection to one another than they can in other homosocial relationships. Nevertheless, when Drew hugs his brother, Terry does not reciprocate. Terry's abstinence goes beyond masculinity issues, though, since he holds a grudge against Drew for a betrayal in childhood. When he was fourteen, Terry had been shipped to Scout camp for the summer. In fear that Todd would become intimate with Drew, Terry ran away and stole a car to get back home. But Drew had turned him in to his parents and Terry was shipped off to juvenile hall.

Despite their differences, the men are able to behave sociably by engaging in masculine activities similar to those of Darrell and Tim in *The Distance from Here*. At a couple of points in the play, for example, the two of them are able to smile and chuckle when they joke about women. Being "Sturdy Oaks," they also mock the emotional nature of therapy, make jokes about homosexuals, and "Give Each Other Hell" by wrestling. As they roll around on the ground near the beginning of the play, Terry calls Drew gay and Drew plays along by using a self-embodying method of homosexual teasing, or what C.J. Pascoe describes as "imitative performance" among high school students. According to Pascoe, this is a standard form of masculine reaffirmation in the denial of being a "Sissy." However, the performance must conclude a particular way. Pascoe states, "After imitating a fag, boys [must] assure others that they are not a fag by instantly becoming masculine again after the performance" (61). Such behavior is clearly visible in *In a Dark Dark House*.

TERRY. [. . .] you've got this, like, fucking *gaydar* inside you.

DREW. Oh yeah, I'm the king of that kind of stuff. The gay-osity of

things!

TERRY. I figured.

DREW. I'm *super-gay* when it comes to all that crap!! / Curtains and *cologne* and shit . . . I'm a Pottery Barn fag.

TERRY. Exactly! / Ha-ha! When you gonna do the ol' "out of the closet" deal? I still got that part to look forward to, don't I?

.....

*The two men slowly stop, letting the moment pass—trying to keep it light.*

*The silence gets uncomfortable.*

TERRY. Here. (Helps DREW up.) Anyways.

DREW. Yeah. Anyway, Nothing like a couple fag jokes to help break the ice, right? I mean . . . for two *manly* men like us. / (Smiles.) Yep.

(12-13)

The irony, of course, is that it is Terry who has to "come out" about his homosexual experiences. And what makes this play particularly interesting is that Terry handles this final revelation with much more emotional honesty than is typical of LaBute's men. He drops the façade of being a "Sturdy Oak" and uses the word "love" to describe his affections for Todd and confesses that he enjoyed having intercourse with him. He also admits that his choice to run away from Scout camp was an act of jealousy, not an effort to protect his brother. Furthermore, he speaks directly about the panic he feels about his own identity.

All I *do* know is that I'm frightened a lot; how about that? Doesn't sound like me, does it? Uh-uh, but I am. Yep. Scared of . . . shit, *everything*.

Who I am now, what I want or might be capable of . . . all that. So I keep myself to myself, alone, and work hard at not going where I don't belong.

I'm afraid of, like, relationships and women and stuff, scared maybe I'm a *fag* because of what happened and not hating it (75)

Terry's monologue is the one time in LaBute's canon in which we see a male character who considers the possibility that he may exist outside the masculine heteronormative world. By verbalizing the fear that he may be gay, he breaks the most significant masculine ideal of "No Sissy Stuff!" Because the comment is made in a moment of such honest emotional outpouring it too must be taken as genuine. Terry is not a feminine person, and certainly not all gay men are feminine, but he allows himself to be feminized in the eyes of a masculine figure—his brother Drew. But Terry's admission should not be interpreted as an acceptance of gay sexual orientation, though. His use of the word "fag" indicates that it is still an outsider status to masculinity and one that he has good reason not to assume. As Drew attests, their father was an uncaring man who used to sadistically beat Terry. Todd served as a sort of surrogate father and provided Terry with the male affection he needed. Terry even recognizes this need: "So I don't care what I hear from doctors or, or from some asshole who has a TV show, most afternoons—this guy came to me and made me feel important" (75-76). Feelings of adequacy, thus, became intertwined with gay sexual experiences. As a result, Terry is still trying to figure out his sexual identity.

Also unique in LaBute's work is the moment in which Terry experiences a heartfelt moment with his brother. After Terry has forced Drew to come clean about his deceit, the two of them share a hug during which they both cry instead of trying to be "Sturdy Oaks." The conversation surrounding it is still laced with references to homosexuality but it seems to be self-parodic. When Terry accuses the Hardy Boys of being gay, Drew responds, "Dude, you're crazy! It's a sibling relationship" (87). But the moment is also sad because it is the one time that they might ever be able to get along. Neil LaBute summarizes the moment as one in which "two people who are so closely related realise [sic] that they don't really like each other, that their only connection is that they are not tied together by anything but this strange connection that we have to our siblings" (qtd. in Bigsby 259). Nevertheless, their ability to be vulnerable with one another is a major accomplishment for LaBute's men.

#### *Your Friends and Neighbors*

The episodic plot of LaBute's second film involves the various sexual liaisons and betrayals of the six major characters—Cary, Barry, Jerry, Teri, Mary, and Cheri. Of the three men, Cary is the most masculine and the most morally reprehensible. His extreme display of masculinity and misanthropy puts him in the same league as Chad from *In the Company of Men*. However, Cary differs from Chad in that Cary tells the truth about the events of his life whereas Chad often lies. Cary lives his life by a code that is a mixture of masculine principles and his own obscured sense of justice. When he tells Barry about a "revenge fuck" against a woman who questioned him at work he says, "I slip my cock

out, right, I mean, completely jerk it right out. And I turn her back over – kinda rough, by her hair – and I tell her to get the fuck out of my place. And if she ever does that to a guy again – you know, crosses one of us in public like that – I’ll fuckin’ kill her. And I think she believed me” (31). His overblown sense of masculine pride is completely normal to him, though. The stories that he tells are different from those mentioned in Chapter 2 in that they are straightforward and he is not trying to cope with any emotional anguish. Cary is too narcissistic to feel guilt. Both here and at other points in the film he remains blissfully unaware of the excessiveness of his actions as he comments, “You’d have taken the same steps. Common decency dictated the whole thing” (32).

What is also significant about Cary’s sexual escapades is that he likes to brag about them with his friends because they are always based on Cary’s virility and his ability to subjugate others. In this way he is a powerful “Big Wheel.” These stories also demonstrate his misogyny. In one instance, he screams at a woman who suddenly got her period and bled on his linen sheets. In his mind, her act was deliberate so he becomes incredibly vicious, slamming on the locked bathroom door as she huddles up and cries. Cary does not let others have power over him, especially women. By contrast, Barry and Jerry are quite ineffectual. Barry is unable to perform sexually with his wife, Mary, and therefore has to masturbate. In Jerry’s secret tryst with Mary he too cannot get an erection. Furthermore, neither man can display Cary’s dismissive attitude with their women because they are much more average guys. Cary sneers at this female control and sometimes stands up for his pals’ rights. Throughout the film Terri gives Jerry guff about talking during sex and she begins a lesbian relationship. When Cary encounters her in a

bookstore he intimidates her, threatening, “you keep dicking people I know . . . one of these days, I’m gonna find you and I’m gonna knock you on your ass!!” (77). A less extreme instance occurs at a dinner between Cary and Barry.

CARY. (*studying Barry’s shirt*) What is that, pink?

BARRY. This? No, it’s salmon . . .

CARY. You might think about puttin’ that jacket back on.

BARRY. Why?

CARY. Where’d you get it?

BARRY. My wife gave it to me.

CARY. Hm. Enough said . . . (29-30)

Cary’s comment also subtly reflects his homophobia. Since pink is associated with women instead of men it is uncomfortable for him to sit with a man wearing a feminine color. But he is able to use the moment to reassert his own masculinity by putting down Barry’s. Essentially, he is calling Barry a wimp or a “Sissy” for both wearing a feminine-looking shirt and being controlled by his wife.

With Cary’s sexist and homophobia attitudes it is ironic that he is one of the only characters to use the term “makin’ love,” and that he employs it to describe a gang rape of a boy named Timmy Carter back in high school. His description of the events occurs when he and his pals are in a steam room and Barry asks him about the best sex he ever had. In his recollection he says, “Fuck . . . it was amazing. I could feel him taking my rhythm. He was clinching me off when I’d get too deep. Shit, he did everything right! And I know he came when I did” (58). In a way, Cary’s memory of Timmy is similar to

Terry's remembrance of Todd Astin in *In a Dark Dark House*. Neither of them has ever been able to relive the same pleasure that they felt in those moments. The key difference between them, of course, is that Cary was the dominant figure in his experience.

Emmanuel Reynaud explains that such "active" homosexual experience is not nearly as problematic for straight men because it involves the penetrating of another. It is the "passive" form, being penetrated, that causes anxiety and humiliation (54-55). Whatever an audience's personal feelings about Cary's morality or sexual orientation, Cary does not display any sense of shame or worry about a blemish on his masculine status. The incident is the most connected he has ever felt to anyone. It is an odd blend of power and what he considers to be intimacy.

### Summary

In *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, the characters Chad and Cary represent the dangers of excessive displays of masculine power. Chad is important to recognize because he is one of the most effective performers of the ideals of traditional masculinity: "No Sissy Stuff!" "Be a Big Wheel," "Be a Sturdy Oak," and "Give Em' Hell." The final ideal, "Give 'em Hell" might not be as apparent at first but it is certainly part of Chad's masculinity. His aggression is just very different from the other men in this chapter in that it is more strategic than confrontational. In particular in my analysis, we can see how Chad's ability to be more of a "Big Wheel" than those around him makes him dangerous and leads him to humiliate both Howard and the black intern. Chad derives pleasure out of holding power over others and watching as they

squirm or crumble. Cary also performs traditional masculinity very well. We do not see him being a “Big Wheel” as far as his job goes because LaBute does not reveal much about that part of his life. However, he does have more masculine status than his two friends. With Cary we especially see the personal power that he possesses and the sexism that derives from repudiating femininity. It is his sense of being superiority to women and more powerful and masculine than other men that contribute to the brutal punishments he gives those who he believes have wronged him, such as the rape of another man. Cary is therefore a “Big Wheel” in his private affairs. Both he and Chad demonstrate significant male power with their easy performance of traditional masculinity, but at no point do either of them suggest to us that they possess a desire to become honestly close with someone, whether that person is male or female. The need for control is significant for them but there are no detectable signs of internal pain over the pressures of masculine performance. It is perhaps this absence that helps to make them seem so monstrous.

These qualities make them very different from the characters in *The Distance from Here*, *a gaggle of saints*, and *In a Dark Dark House*, who are struggling with the limitations that masculinity has put on their relationships with other men. It is interesting to note that neither Chad nor Cary employ the overt homophobic put-downs like “fag” or “gay” that Darrell, John, and Terry use in their homosocial relationships. While these latter three men are not necessarily homosexuals, they are clearly insecure in their masculinity and therefore are afraid of being discovered to be weak or unmanly by their male peers. John displays one of the most atrocious physical expressions of “Give ‘em Hell” with his aggressive beating of a gay man. And much of the hatred that is expressed

so viciously stems from John's disdain of the "femininity" that he perceives in the gay men and which he fears because he desires male affection and yet cannot express it because he must avoid being viewed as a "Sissy." Likewise, we see Darrell and Terry struggling with their desire to be close with one men, which would make them appear to be "Sissies." The aggressive and homoerotic wrestling that men both engage in is fueled in part by male competition to be more of a "Big Wheel" than other men, but more so by their need for male intimacy. As both of them try to perform traditional masculinity they end up physically hurting other men. The other problem is the hurt they feel within them because they must not express themselves emotionally. Terry, however, is eventually able to express his true feelings and therefore begin to free himself of the pain that the ideals of traditional masculinity have imposed on him. However, Darrell and John imprison themselves by performing masculinity and so they never achieve the true intimacy that they desire.

#### CHAPTER 4: WOMAN AS THREAT

As the preceding chapter has demonstrated, many harmful interactions in LaBute's plays are influenced by traditional masculine ideology. Its influence on male behavior, though, is certainly not isolated within the homosocial sphere. As Michael Kimmel has pointed out, in addition to the perpetuation of homophobia, heterosexual masculine identities are based on maintaining men's supposedly superior status to women. In fact, there is a definitive link between the male fear of being perceived as gay and sexism. In order to prevent the wrong idea about their sexuality, straight men must not only police their own behavior but also make sure that they are distinguished in clear opposition to females. In the flight from femininity, men often engage in exaggerated masculinity, which as Kimmel has explained includes

putting down women, both by excluding them from the public sphere and by the quotidian put-downs in speech and behaviors that organize the daily life of the American man. Women and gay men become the 'other' against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the deck so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood ("Masculinity" 133-34)

Under this system, then, masculinity is clearly identified with superiority and femininity with inferiority.

While Kimmel's ideas suggest interconnectivity between the demands of male-male interactions and men's relationships with women, Joseph H. Pleck deals with the

issue much more explicitly in “Men’s Power with Women, Other Men, and Society: A Men’s Movement Analysis.” In his consideration of the power dynamics among the sexes, Pleck introduces three significant ideas that help to provide the foundation for the analyses of this chapter. First, he mentions women as status symbols in male competition and the self-validating power of women (60-63). Essentially, these two ideas can work together so that women help prove masculinity to both a man himself and to others. Gary R. Brooks makes similar assertions in *The Centerfold Syndrome*. The more attractive and feminine a woman is the more masculine the man appears. She also represents men’s societal accomplishments such as the attainment of wealth and professional power (6-8). Pleck also posits a third concept which regards women’s functionality as an underclass in men’s competition. To develop the theory, Pleck draws on Elizabeth Janeway’s *Between Myth and Morning*. According to Janeway, women are positioned at the lowest level in patriarchy, making it nearly impossible for men to sink below them (Pleck 64). But as Pleck and Janeway both demonstrate, the empowerment of the women’s movement has made it more difficult for men to consistently retain a superior position. The result of women’s advancing equality is an increased male anxiety. As Pleck explains: “Men will not risk falling lower than ever before into a new underclass composed of the weak of both sexes. Thus, women’s liberation means that the stakes of patriarchal failure for men are higher than they have been before and that it is even more important for men not to lose” (64). Overall, he concludes that “Patriarchy is a *dual* system, a system in which men oppress women, and in which men oppress themselves and each other” (65).

This overlap in oppression is something which becomes highly significant in many of LaBute's works. As previous chapters have already shown, it has sometimes been necessary to expound on one component of masculinity in order to fully analyze another. In Chapter 2, for example, addressing Young Man's emotional withdrawal in *iphigenia in orem* also required mentioning his hostility toward a female coworker. Similarly, Cary's homosocial relationships in *Your Friends and Neighbors* can really only be illuminated when considering his heterosexual encounters. In this chapter, the relationship between masculinity and male-female interactions will be more fully explored. Here, emotional withdrawal and/or homosocial relations play a role in the discussions. Moreover, because all of LaBute's plays are set in the contemporary world the men within them face the emasculating effects of female empowerment. Neil LaBute addressed this subject in relation to *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors* in an interview in 1999: "First I would place men at the bottom of the food chain. On a grander scale, I would say they're reacting to change. Feminism has got to be part of that. What's absolutely frightening to men like Chad and Cary is loss of control" (qtd. in Rosenfeld). The anxiety men have about their loss of masculine status applies to several of LaBute's works but the most dynamic ones will be examined here. Although the women in *The Mercy Seat* and *The Shape of Things* are not feminists per se, they are strong females who threaten masculinity because of the power that they possess. In *Fat Pig* the lovable obese Helen poses a less direct, but nonetheless disempowering, danger to her paramour. The situations within each of the plays are quite different but each of the women make their lovers feel like less of a man.

*The Mercy Seat*

LaBute's tale of opportunism in the moment of tragedy also involves one of his strongest portrayals of competition among men and women. Set in a New York City loft apartment on September 12, 2001, the play is about the adulterous affair between Ben Harcourt and Abby Prescott. Having decided to visit Abby instead of going to work at the World Trade Center in the hours before it was attacked, Ben now finds himself in a unique situation. He can simply run away with Abby and begin life anew without having to propose a divorce to a wife he no longer seems to love. Although his cell phone rings almost continuously, he chooses to avoid answering it in order to let his spouse, children, and the rest of the world believe that he has perished in the mass destruction. As he hides away from the world, he and Abby argue over a number of topics that reveal that there is actually a great distance between them. The over-arching conflict concerns their future, but that issue is intertwined and surrounded by even deeper, more personal problems. The result is a confrontation that Ben Brantley has called "a vicious sexual combat, as in Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" His description is quite apt.

At the heart of many of their troubles is the wound that Abby's dominance has inflicted on Ben's masculinity. Not only is Abby a strong, independent career woman, but she was chosen for advancement over him three years earlier and is now his boss. Therefore, both his professional status and his income are much lower than hers. He is certainly bothered by the fact that she is more of a "Big Wheel" than he is. His inferior position is something that he has a great difficulty dealing with and causes him to get

upset over little things. Near the opening of the play, for example, Abby responds to a point that Ben makes by saying “duly noted” (19). To him, her comment is derisive and carries the connotation that he is a lower being. His protest of “just don’t” (19) to Abby is problematic for her because he is attempting to subordinate her. The humorous battle that ensues is just one of their power struggles in the course of the play and sets up Ben’s insecure masculine identity. While the two of them are vastly different people, this moment in itself demonstrates how Abby’s lifestyle as a competitor makes it difficult for Ben to define himself against her. Rather than validating his masculinity by being the feminine “Other,” she embraces masculine ideals. Like it is for Young Man in *iphigenia in orem*, the concept of losing to a woman is exasperating for Ben; it makes him feel like a “Sissy.” The difference here, though, is that the power dynamics from work carry over into a personal romance. At one moment of particular frustration Ben calls Abby a “dominating cunt” and exclaims, “you’re the fucking ‘guy’ in this relationship, let’s not kid ourselves” (37). However, Ben’s need to at least maintain equality with Abby causes him to redefine his position to her in their working relationship.

BEN. I don’t work under you.

ABBY. No?

BEN. No, I do not. I hold a position that supports *yours*.

ABBY. Yes, you do.

BEN. . . . is subordinate to yours, maybe.

ABBY. True.

.....

BEN. But I'm not "under" you. You do not tower over me in some literal or figurative way.

ABBY. This may be drifting towards semantics . . .

BEN. No, it's not. I have a point and it's not. (Beat.) I am your colleague. Your co-worker. Your partner. (20-21)

Shortly later, however, his hostility over the matter becomes more evident when his self-delusion morphs into an accusation against Abby: "And if I am 'under' you, I mean, if people would say that about me, behind my back, some Old World phrase like that . . . it's because you have never, in your infinite wisdom, seen fit to *promote* me" (22). Ben's comment implies that Abby wants to keep him down, but he does not make the leap to sexual harassment because the relationship is consensual. Abby does bring up the subject at a later point, though, revealing that she feels guilty over any professional actions or inactions regarding Ben because of the complication of their secret affair and her fear that, if discovered, she may lose a job that she has worked so hard to get. In this moment, and in several others in the play, Abby becomes vulnerable by opening her heart up to Ben.

Ben, on the other hand, is a "Sturdy Oak;" he is emotionally closed off and evasive. When compelled to articulate his feelings, he mostly uses equivocations such as "not good," "I don't know," "maybe" and "whatever." He hardly seems to know what he really feels and he guards himself from letting Abby or anyone else have much information about him. While Abby has at least told her parents about her affair with Ben, he has told no one. And to her displeasure, Ben has never let Abby overhear any of

his cell phone calls. Such secrecy has prevented her from becoming as intimate with him as she had once hoped. In reference to Ben's wife, she utters, "I've said this a thousand times, almost literally a thousand. No secrets. / You can keep 'em from her but not from me, otherwise I might as well *be* her! Don't you get that?" (54). Without trust and honesty no real closeness can exist between them.

Ben's idea of intimacy is far different from Abby's. For him, it is all about sex. As Gordon M. Hart has observed, "many men equate sexual intimacy with emotional intimacy. Because they feel highly aroused during a sexual experience, they conclude they have experienced intimacy. They think that the physical act of revealing themselves is the same as the psychological act of revealing themselves" (9). Ben exhibits just such a skewed mentality when he comments, "By the way, I enjoy having sex from behind. It feels nice and, like, intimate. I love being with you like that. I do" (44). For Abby, though, their intercourse is the very opposite of intimate; it is incredibly impersonal. Doggie-style is the only position of which they ever make use and Abby feels that it is Ben's way of gaining power over her. In fact, she believes that it may be a way for Ben to get revenge and feel better about himself because of Abby's professional advancement. By always having sex with Abby from behind, Ben is not just using her so that he can get even with her like Cary does with some of his women in *Your Friends and Neighbors*. Ben is utilizing his dominant body position so that he can feel physically and psychologically superior. Connected with this is also the fact that the position allows Ben to avoid eye-contact with her. This detail is highly significant because it is an example of a concept in gaze theory that Nancy M. Henley has advanced. In *Body Politics* Henley

explains that in public male dominance is created when a man looks at a woman, but in one-on-one interactions men may assert authority by purposely not looking at a woman (166). As we can see in the play, much of the reason that Ben likes having sex from behind is because he can look away from Abby and prevent her from being able to look at him. Therefore he can remove any opportunity for her to become his equal in the bedroom. But because the sex is a power game for Ben instead of an expression of love, it becomes incredibly impersonal for Abby. She is in love with Ben and at one point Abby verbalizes the wound Ben has given her by denying his look:

Maybe that's what Hell is, in the end. All of your wrongful shit played out there in front of you while you're being pumped from behind by someone [. . .] some person who doesn't really love you anymore. No one to ever look at again, make contact with. Just you being fucked as your life splashes out across this big headboard in the Devil's bedroom. Maybe. Even is that's not it, even if Hell is all fire and sulfur and that sort of thing, it couldn't be much worse than that. (45)

As is clearly evident from this passage, Abby's pain over Ben's action is quite intense. It is, in fact, the worst torment she can imagine. She certainly recognizes that Ben's refusal to make eye-contact is a tactic for him to feel powerful, but she has not brought it up until now. It seems that the sexual act has become a masochistic experience for her, allowing her to be punished for dating a married man and committing other sins. Abby is a conflicted individual because she feels bad about being the other woman, but she is also selfish and wants Ben for herself. Thus, the sex they have, including the blowjob that she

was giving him when the planes hit the World Trade Center, is also an incentive for him to leave his wife. It seems that for Ben, the relationship is really only based on the sex they have and the power he feels at those moments.

In what seems to be a mostly unhappy and powerless life for Ben, the 9/11 tragedy offers him a rare chance for control. Although he is not a writer like Guy in *Some Girl(s)* or Man in *This is How it Goes*, he does see the event as a way to rewrite his life. It is a fantasy in which, as Abby continuously points out, Ben will not just leave his past behind but also be remembered as a hero. Although Ben downplays the significance of this fact, it is certainly a benefit to his masculine ego. He also tries to put a positive, and even noble, spin on his decision to leave by telling Abby how much better off his kids will be without having to deal with their parents going through a divorce. And, of course, the fact that Abby will have to quit her job in order to run off with him seems to be an added benefit for Ben because it means that she will no longer have the same supremacy she now has over him. But Abby is not able to give up her life so easily and is also bothered by Ben's cowardice. When she finally coerces him into giving up his dream and calling his wife, his control as a storyteller of his own fate vanishes.

BEN. You know I can't! I cannot do that!! / No, no, NO!!

ABBY: Why?! / WHY NOT?!!

BEN. Because it ruins it. It ruins the ending.

*Abby takes this in, processing. BEN fiddles with the door.*

ABBY. This is not a movie, Ben.

BEN. I'm not saying that.

ABBY. You can't dictate how life is supposed to . . .

BEN. Yeah, I could . . . In this *one* instance, I could've! (65)

Their future as a couple also dies with Ben's scheme. He reveals to Abby that his true intention in coming over to her house the previous day was to end his relationship with her. Obviously, though, the break-up was not important enough for him to do before receiving oral sex at Abby's offer. When they part ways, Abby heads off to their wrecked office while Ben sits alone trying to decide whether to answer his phone or pursue his new fantasy life on his own.

### *Fat Pig*

Whereas Ben deals with the problem of being with a woman who is above his station in *The Mercy Seat*, Tom suffers with the difficulties of dating a social outcast in *Fat Pig*. The story concerns the relationship that a successful, young businessman has with an incredibly overweight librarian named Helen. When the two of them first meet in a random encounter at a restaurant, the sparks begin to unexpectedly fly for Tom. They seem fairly natural together and Helen is clearly attracted to him. But when they begin seeing one other, Tom's embarrassment over her obesity causes him to hide his romance from his friends and fellow employees. Nevertheless, Tom is eventually exposed and must begin to face the reality of the hardships that he will endure if he decides to build a life with Helen. In the end he rejects her, but not without feeling a great deal of pain for his selfishness.

While *Fat Pig* deals with society's overall prejudice against and marginalization of obese women, much of the play is couched within the male world. Several of the pressures that Tom faces in regards to his relationship with Helen are based on the fact that he works in a testosterone-fueled office environment and that he has been conditioned to enact a masculine code. Such factors make the play a bit reminiscent of *In the Company of Men*. In fact, LaBute uses the names "Chad" and "Howard" for offstage friends of Tom's to play off of *In the Company of Men* and thereby enhance the atmosphere of masculinity in the business world of *Fat Pig*. In *In the Company of Men*, the callousness of the men is not just exemplified in the game that Chad and Howard play with Christine but also the laughs that are generated at the expense of women and the disabled. Near the beginning of the film we hear the punch line of a joke that Chad is telling: "I don't trust anything that bleeds for a week and doesn't die" (13). Later, he and an associate, John, cackle over Christine's dolphin-like voice. In *Fat Pig*, Tom's coworker/buddy Carter displays bigoted attitudes as well, although they are usually far less crude. Carter is incredibly judgmental of people and calls his therapist a "cunt" and a "bitch" and snickers "I think it's *twins*" when he first meets Helen (22, 34). Tom does not usually speak this way but he also does not actively challenge it in Carter. As for Tom himself, he is flustered by the effects of feminism and the demand for political correctness that has come with it. At one point he says to Helen, "I can't even call 'em 'girls' without getting hit by a *lawsuit*" (9). He likes to believe that he is much more evolved than Carter, but as Carter says to him "Bullshit! You laugh at the same jokes and check out the same asses that I do, you date all these gals and act like you're Mr.

Sensitive, but how does it always end up? The *exact* same way it does for me . . . you get bored or cornered or feel a touch nervous, and you drop ‘em like they were *old produce*. Every time” (52). Carter’s dialogue indicates that Tom’s commitment fears with Helen are not exclusively based on the weight issue but are a part of his very nature. His past relationship with Jeannie, one of the accountants at his company, also reveals his character. She is confused and hurt by the fact that he is dating someone else because he had told her he wanted to try to work things out. When she confronts him about the matter, he explains that he just said that “To keep you from nagging at me!! Just to stop you from calling and going on and on and on about this all the time!!” (47). Furthermore, in his relationship with Helen he tries to be a “Sturdy Oak” by hiding his feelings or covering them up with jokes or film references. He is definitely a less ferocious male character than many of LaBute’s others, but he is hardly innocent of all of their harmful habits.

What seems to differentiate Tom’s relationship with Helen from those of his past is that he finally seems to have found love. Unfortunately, though, the superficiality of American culture is in his way. Tom’s inner conflict is not based on problems with how he or Helen views her obesity but on how he can cope with the perceptions that other people have of him for being with her. The evidence of such fear can be seen in how he loves being with her in private but tries to hide her away in the back of cafés and movie theatres when they go out. Although LaBute draws on both men and women’s obsession with appearances to build the tension, the greater influence on Tom’s final decision to leave Helen comes from the male sphere. Jeannie’s insults about Helen are complicated

by her jealousy and her suspicion that Tom must be trying to destroy her self image. She is rather thin and attractive but she is insecure about her looks. Even before she is privy to Helen's physicality she snaps at Tom, "I'm not saying that I'm some, you know *glamour queen*, but guys do like me. They do" (23). There is nothing more than discord between she and Tom and so it seems that Tom can dismiss her slurs against Helen more easily. Carter, meanwhile, remains a close friend despite the fact that he actually does more to increase Tom's misery around the office. He is the one who steals a photo of Helen and sends it to all of the company's employees via email. But this sort of behavior is a regular feature of their homosocial relationship. Moreover, the fact that Carter is a fellow man with similar experiences makes his opinions much more valuable to Tom. Carter is much more shallow than Tom, however. He does not really conceive of women beyond anything more than their looks and the sex they can offer. He is a type of man for whom even a few extra pounds on a woman makes her undesirable. She must look like a model to be appealing. Early on he complains that Jeannie's rear-end looks flabby and her arms chunky. It is only when he finds out that she has begun going to the gym that he begins to develop an interest in her. Despite his negative qualities, though, Carter is able to tap into the truth about human beings:

People are not comfortable with difference. You know? Fags, retards, cripples. Fat people. Old folks even. They scare us or something . . . The thing they represent that's so scary is what we *could* be, how vulnerable we are. I mean, *any* of us. Some wrong gene splice, a bad backflip off the trampoline . . . too many cartons of *Oreos*! We're all just one step away

from being what frightens us. What we despise. So . . . we despise it when we see it in anybody else. (72)

Carter's insight addresses a general disdain for "Otherness." In conjunction with this idea he mentions that people should be with their own kind. For Helen that means someone bald or fat or ugly in some way. For Tom that means someone conventionally attractive. The fact that Helen makes Tom happy isn't enough because she is not good enough for him and will bring him down in status. He tells Tom, "she's gonna be a weight around your neck" (70). Helen cannot be a trophy or validate his masculinity with her beauty. Additionally, Jeannie has already conjectured that Tom might be a chubby chaser. And when Carter first discovered the unusual relationship, he exclaimed, "Tommy Joins the Circus!" (46). Both reactions are negative judgments on him; he is either perverted or freakish. Either way he exists outside societal norms and is therefore positioned into an "Other" status. Carter's comment, "don't be surprised when you turn a few heads down at the mall," (71) also reminds us that Tom becomes an object for people to stare at because he is with Helen. He is put in the passive position of their gaze. Furthermore, Carter implies that Tom is risking the future of his career: "You're successful, bit of a player in the industry . . . I don't understand you taking God's good gifts and pissing on 'em (70). Ultimately, Tom is putting his power as a man in jeopardy. His relationship with Helen threatens his opportunities to be a "Big Wheel."

The risk to Tom's masculinity becomes even clearer when we observe a parallel in another of LaBute's works. For the playwright, Tom's situation seems to be a sort of prolonged and deeper exploration of a scene from in *In the Company of Men*. In that film,

Howard develops affections for the deaf woman Christine. But as he stands in line to use the copy machine, his conversation with a co-worker reveals the taboo of a relationship with such a woman.

HOWARD. She's a nice girl.

COWORKER 1. Hey, my hat's off to you. Bigger man than I am.

HOWARD. You don't think she's cute?

COWORKER 1. Yeah.

HOWARD. Serious. Got a nice figure . . . ?

COWORKER 1. Absolutely.

.....

HOWARD. But . . . you wouldn't be caught dead with her. Right?

COWORKER 1. In a company like this? With these guys around? . . . (beat) . . .

no fucking way. (34)

Even though Christine is attractive, her impairment means that she is unacceptable as a mate to the men of LaBute's business world. A working man like Howard must curb his passion or else face ridicule and rejection by his male colleagues. The coworker's comment that Howard is a "bigger man" for breaking the masculine code shows the irony of the male experience. Howard will be strong for facing peer rejection, but at the same time he will be considered less of a man or a "Sissy" and will lose respect. Tom finds himself in just such a predicament, with Carter making remarks along the same lines. In one instance he calls Tom a "pussy" for not coming clean about his relationship. Carter then clarifies, "No, I say that in the best way. We all are—guys, I mean—if it comes right

down to it. Very rare is the dude who stands up for the shit he believes in . . .” (49). Carter does not endorse such nonconformity, however, and Tom is not strong enough to make the sacrifice. What makes him very different from many of LaBute’s men is that he feels genuine sorrow and guilt for his own personal failing and allows himself to be vulnerable in the final moments of the play: “I’m not brave. I’m not. I know you want be to me . . . always believed that I can be, but I’m a weak and fearful person, Helen, and I’m not gonna get any better. Not any time soon, at least . . .” (83-84). While his adherence to ideals of traditional masculinity is at fault for the situation, LaBute slightly mitigates Tom’s case in the audience’s eyes by allowing him to break away from being a “Sturdy Oak” in order to admit his pain and cry.

### *The Shape of Things*

In *The Shape of Things*, the self-esteem of a nerdy English major named Adam is built-up by his girlfriend Evelyn before being crushed by her in the name of art. Set on the campus of a liberal arts college in a conservative Midwestern town, the two young students initially meet in a “seemingly random” encounter (119) at a museum where Adam works as a security guard. As he goes about his daily duties, Adam notices that Evelyn has crossed a safety rope and so he wanders over to let her know that she needs to step back over. Unbeknownst to Adam, however, Evelyn has set a trap to test the malleability of Adam’s will. Unfortunately for him, he becomes the perfect prey. Rather than acting as an authority figure, Adam proves that he has too little conviction to make Evelyn comply. Instead, she actually coerces him into joining her as she examines a nude

sculpture of God. Furthermore, her beauty and her flirtation with him allows Adam to excuse the fact that she brandishes a can of spray paint with which she intends to deface the statue. In a brief time span Evelyn is even able to put Adam at enough ease to ask her out. But Evelyn does not share the same attraction to Adam that he feels towards her. This scene is only the beginning of her subterfuge. As an artist, Evelyn will be covertly transforming Adam's appearance for her master's thesis project.

In a scene later in the play, LaBute uses an allusion to the 1971 film *Play Misty for Me* starring Clint Eastwood and Jessica Walter. The movie is about the stalking of a radio d.j. by a demented fan, who is, strangely enough, also named Evelyn. The placing of the reference in LaBute's text is meant for comedic effect following a frightening outburst that Evelyn makes about her desire to slit the throat of Adam's friend Phil. LaBute certainly does not mean for the comparison between the two Evelyns to be taken too literally in the grand scheme of things, though. His Evelyn is certainly cruel but she is in no way the psychopath of Eastwood's film. But the allusion is also significant in that it is made to a story in which there is a power reversal between genders. With Evelyn's more aggressive actions in *Play Misty for Me* she becomes the dominant and more masculine figure in comparison to the subdued personality of Eastwood's character, David. The same basic principle holds true for LaBute's play. Adam is fairly weak and Evelyn is in control; she has the masculine position.

Adam never truly holds dominance over Evelyn, but as the play moves on his transformation does help him to rise in the masculine hierarchy. At the beginning of the play Adam is a shy, overweight geek who obviously pales in the shadow of Phil, an alpha

male and his ex-roommate. Adam does exhibit some qualities of the masculine code, though. He is, for example, disturbed when he is called “lovely” by Phil’s fiancée Jenny: “‘lovely?’ jesus, why don’t you just call me ‘gay’ and get it over with?” (51).

Additionally, he has told Phil that he does not plan on ever getting married. However, the fear of commitment seems to be at least partly based on the fact that his timidity has restrained him to having only a couple of brief relationships and sexual experiences.

Thus, he probably does not see many opportunities for romance in the future. Finally, he, like Ben in *The Mercy Seat* and Tom in *Fat Pig*, tries to keep his private business out of the public arena. Specifically, Adam is afraid of public displays of affection. It also does not help that Phil and Jenny tease him about it. Catching him kissing Evelyn in a restaurant, we hear:

JENNY. ah, ah, ah . . . p.d.a.

PHILLIP. I don’t think anybody wants to watch you kiss, adam . . . we’ll be eating soon. (25)

But outside this area Adam is a truthful and open person with those who are close to him. His emotional honesty is quite evident in a moment when he is lying in bed with Evelyn after having intercourse:

i can’t stop thinking about you. i can’t. i mean, it’s not like a stalker situation . . . yet . . . but i’m finding myself hanging out by your classes. following you . . . and taking my jacket off, like, thirty times a day and looking at your number, staring at it. wondering if you’re looking at my

number. and writing your name on anything! all over my books. in my *food*. seriously, tracing your name in whatever i'm eating. i'm so whipped . . . you are dangerously close to owning me. (40)

Adam is clearly in love and dependent on Evelyn. There is no doubt that he enjoys having sex with her, but he is also motivated by a desire for intimacy. He hates the various exercise regimes, dieting, and other physical transformations that Evelyn asks him to undergo, but he does it all out of his adoration for Evelyn. Nevertheless, with these changes Adam begins to become more masculine. He is healthier, stronger, and much more attractive. Impressed by the new Adam, Jenny declares, “you’re, like, this totally hot guy now” (52). New sexual attraction leads to increased opportunities with the female sex. Adam had once been too afraid to ask Jenny out but now his confidence has grown and he ends up kissing her and possibly doing more. His stronger masculine persona also results in greater tension with Phil. Adam has now become competition for him and so there is resentment within Phil. He is bothered by both Adam’s looks and the more personal betrayal that Adam committed by fooling around with Jenny. In the film version of the play, the hostility between them results in a wrestling scene. Adam loses, of course. He has changed in some respects but he is still not the stronger and tougher jerk that Phil is. Even though Adam had begun to become more deceitful he is still likable. Overall, Adam is one of the sweetest and most vulnerable of LaBute’s male characters.

Evelyn, meanwhile, is a “Sturdy Oak,” resisting any emotional closeness. She only pretends that she is in love with Adam and plays the feminine gender role in order to

make Adam feel more masculine and motivate him to continue to change. Furthermore, she does not tell Adam much about her private life or past and it is debatable whether what she does reveal is truthful. When Adam learns of her ruse at the end of the play, he asks, “was any of it true? [. . .] not the things we did, or the kind words or whatever . . . but any of it?” “I made it all up,” she responds (134-35). The scars that Evelyn has on her arm and her zealous abhorrence of Phil suggest that she may have been wronged by some male figure. Nevertheless, she obscures the truth so that neither Adam nor we will ever know anything about her for certain. She holds power by being manipulative and clouding fiction with reality like Man in *This is How it Goes*. As Becky Becker comments in “No Simple Misogyny,” “She is author of her art, author of the audience’s perception, author of Adam” (115). Evelyn hides herself but puts Adam on display.

The exposure that Adam had unknowingly opened himself up for is finally revealed to him and to the audience at Evelyn’s thesis presentation. It is there that Evelyn makes a heartless speech about the way she has used Adam and his value to her as nothing more than the piece of artwork she has created. Earlier in the play we have seen her videotape one of their sexual encounters together. It is only one of several other records—both visual and nonvisual—that has been used to document his transformation. But Evelyn is careful to explain that all of this was done with Adam’s consent, not by force. She has manipulated his will as part of her project but he was the one who ultimately made the decisions to change. As she has helped to construct his appearance and his self-esteem, she has also tried to open him up to being comfortable with his sexual presence in public locations. Taken together with the videotaping, Evelyn’s

purpose has been to help break down Adam's inhibitions and to make him comfortable with himself as a sexual object. Earlier, as the camcorder sits in place in the bedroom scene, we see Evelyn attempting to persuade Adam to be more open-minded:

EVELYN. were you nervous tonight? i mean, about us with the . . .

ADAM. nah. not really. a bit.

EVELYN. sure?

ADAM. yeah, it's just . . . let's not watch it, okay? do we have to do that?

EVELYN. not if you don't want to . . .

ADAM. good. i don't think I could get into that, actually . . .

EVELYN. why not? it'd be fun . . .

ADAM. I don't really need to see myself doing that, doing . . . stuff.

EVELYN. see, i'm totally different. I think everyone should see themselves doing it, and their friends should see it, too.

ADAM. and that's why the tape's gonna stay at my place . . . (41-42)

In this scene Evelyn's ideas clearly push normative boundaries. Extremism is part of her character, though; nothing is sacred in her quest as an artist. It is in this way that we see a similar, covert "Give 'em Hell" aggression as Chad in *In the Company of Men*. Evelyn has no qualms in completing exposing Adam's mind and body to the public with his private journal entries, photographs, and other artifacts of his life. Although Adam does open himself up to being more willing and adventurous with public displays of affection, he never becomes an exhibitionist. When Evelyn reveals her trickery, Adam is both betrayed and objectified. Evelyn has invited him to her thesis to both end their

relationship and to display him in person since he sits in the audience. Legally she cannot say his name to the crowd at her thesis but his presence there allows her to look at him so that others can see the living embodiment of her art. Because Evelyn breaks the fourth wall in the play and directly addresses the audience, we become that crowd who actively objectifies Adam. He is, of course, profoundly humiliated. Adam is simultaneously wounded on a human and a masculine level since, as has already been mentioned, heterosexual men characteristically disavow objectification in order to protect their masculine identities. Evelyn has made Adam into more of a ladies' man but this masculine self is revealed to be a construct, leaving Adam unsure of his true identity altogether. Furthermore, he is emasculated since he has been taken advantage of by a woman. In a prior scene, Phil recognizes the threat Evelyn poses due to her aggressiveness. His contempt for feminism shines through when he snidely remarks, "which 'take back the night' rally did you find her at, adam?" (34). Later he chastises Adam about his dependency on Evelyn: "where in hell did you meet that bitch?! / what'd she do, give you a haircut and a blow job and now you're her puppy?!!" (37). By letting a woman have control over him Adam becomes incredibly weak. He is, therefore, a walking contradiction in his relationship with Evelyn. He loses masculine status at the same time that he begins to gain more of it.

In the end, his shattered identity leaves his future uncertain. When he confronts Evelyn after her speech, he notices a plate of cookies and rapaciously consumes them. While the action suggests that he might end up returning to his original weight, Adam can never be the same person again. If he is able to maintain his attractive appearance he will

at least be able to continue attracting women. Nonetheless, he will never be able to be as emotionally trusting and truthful as he once was (Mendell 89). Instead, he will become the same sort of closed off and perhaps even misogynistic man that Phil is. He will, unfortunately, probably turn into one of LaBute's prototypical male creeps.

### Summary

In the two chapters preceding this one I examined how men hide their feelings and desires. Sometimes it is through storytelling and other times it is through violent expression. In this chapter much of the hiding is literalized as all of the male characters feel far more comfortable with their women behind closed doors. Ben is distressed with Abby's authority in general, but at work he is always her "underling." At least in the bedroom he is able to take charge and feel powerful again. Tom is so mortified of how other people judge him when he is in public with Helen that he does whatever he can to keep the two of them concealed. In the privacy of the home environment, though, he is hardly ashamed of her. He can barely keep his hands off of her. When he breaks up with her at the end of the play he says, "If we were in some other time or a land that nobody else was around on . . . like that island from the movie, the Sinatra film—*None but the Brave*—then everything might be okay" (82). Adam has no problem with the appearance of his girlfriend Evelyn but he does not like being watched when he is making out with her. As an inexperienced lover he already feels inadequate enough without being turned into a sexual object. Nevertheless, Adam's fears are more easily assuaged because he is not nearly as masculine to begin with; he does not value power over intimacy.

For Tom and Ben, emotional honesty is difficult because they must be “Sturdy Oaks.” However, women are a different, and perhaps more complex, problem because they are autonomous. The women can be physically removed from the public space for men’s comfort, but in the inevitable circumstances when they do appear in public, they become a visible threat to the men’s success. This is, of course, is the central problem for Tom in *Fat Pig* and what leads him to emotionally hurt Helen and himself. Tom needs to know that he has the respect of other people (particularly the men) in his company so that he can continue to be a “Big Wheel” and have the opportunity to further build his masculine status and power with advancement in his career. Tied into this factor is also his concern that he would appear to be weak or a bit of a “Sissy” to other men he works with if he does not have a pretty, feminine woman to define himself against and make him appear more masculine. It is obvious throughout the play that Tom wants to reject the traditional masculinity that he is supposed to perform, but he finds it beyond his capabilities to do so. He has been constructed to be the man that he is and seems incapable of change. But he is at least able to let his guard down enough from being a “Sturdy Oak” to reveal his true feelings to Helen and cry over his loss. Her tears show that she is clearly hurt as well. Traditional masculinity is thus damaging to both Tom and Helen’s potential for a happy love life.

*The Mercy Seat*’s Ben also causes pain in his romantic affair because of the masculine ideals of being a “Big Wheel” and not being a “Sissy.” These two ideals overlap in his situation because he struggles with the blow that working for a female boss delivers to his masculine identity. In his need to hold power over Abby in order to feel

like a man he takes on the domineering role in their sexual encounters. Rather than an experience of mutual lovemaking, it is a one-sided affair with Ben clearly in charge and Abby submitting to him. She is certainly hurt emotionally by the lack of love that Ben shows in the bedroom. Furthermore, she is frustrated at being unable to connect with him on a truly intimate level because he is too much of a “Sturdy Oak.” Thus, Abby is left feeling alone and unloved by Ben because of his masculine identity.

In *The Shape of Things*, Adam hardly conforms to the ideals of traditional masculinity. Instead, he ends up being submissive to his girlfriend Evelyn. She uses her femininity to manipulate Adam, but her dominant power is also due to her ability to execute some of the ideals on Brannon’s list. She does, for example, exhibit an aggressive and risk-taking “Give Em’ Hell” attitude with her experiment. Furthermore, by the end we see that she has only manufactured her emotions. Like the men in Chapter 2 she shows us that she is a “Sturdy Oak” as she hides or obscures her feelings. And Evelyn is certainly not the only woman who displays “masculine” qualities in LaBute’s plays. Abby, for instance, is a “Big Wheel” with her profession in *The Mercy Seat*. With these examples, and particularly with Evelyn’s power in *The Shape of Things*, LaBute reminds us that the ideals that are used to define traditional masculinity are really only about having superiority or advantage over others. Women in our society have certainly become empowered to possess such control, but they usually do not experience the same internal pressure that some men feel about dominating themselves and others in order to maintain gender identity. Nevertheless, they are still capable of negatively using power to inflict harm; Evelyn serves as an effective, albeit extreme, example. But in his

works LaBute focuses more often on men who perform traditional masculinity than their gender construction restricts their humanity and therefore prompts significant social and/or personal problems. With Adam's situation in *The Shape of Things*, though, he also explores how the failure to conform so rigidly to the strictures of masculinity can also be damaging because it opens up a person's vulnerability. With this play, then, LaBute shows us that there are no easy answers when it comes to questions of gender performance.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The struggle that men face in LaBute's plays and in contemporary society bears a resemblance to the distress of Shakespeare's Henry IV, who exclaims, "Uneasy is the head that wears a crown" (2H4 3.1.31). The comparison cannot be taken too literally, however, because modern man is rarely in a position with absolute power. Kimmel has pointed out that American men do not feel powerful in their individual lives. He suggests that the reason why is because it is nearly impossible for anyone to live up to the four major ideals of traditional masculinity: "we've constructed the rules of manhood so that only the tiniest fraction of men come to believe that they are the biggest of wheels, the sturdiest of oaks, the most virulent repudiators of femininity, the most daring and aggressive" (138). But on a societal level, men, and in particular heterosexual white men like LaBute's characters, are still in charge. Even lower-class men like Darrell and Tim in *The Distance from Here* or a black man like Cody in *This is How it Goes* hold more power than most women. The drive for LaBute's men is to keep what little power they do have in their lives. Doing so means performing masculinity even at the major cost of personal happiness. LaBute's men are individually selfish but in general, are conformists when it comes to the ideals of traditional masculinity.

As this thesis has demonstrated, LaBute uses the characters of his plays and films to highlight the idea that slavish devotion to the pressures of traditional masculinity can, unfortunately, serve as a catalyst for the emotional and/or physical pain that some men inflict on themselves and on others. The over-arching ideal that LaBute's men attempt to live up to is the repudiation of the feminine, which includes guarding against any personal

effeminacy as well as the perceived threat that women and homosexuals pose to their heterosexual male dominance. With emotional expression also being tied to femininity, LaBute's men are unable to find a healthy outlet to communicate and create honest intimacy with other men and women. Instead, to their own detriment, the majority of the playwright's male characters repress their feelings. The analyses of Chapter 2 focused on the men in the plays *iphigenia in orem*, *Wrecks*, *This is How it Goes*, and *Some Girl(s)* to show that there is a dull ache that exists at the heart of the male characters who make up fictions or mislead listeners in order to cover their real emotions. Because traditional masculinity's ideal of non-emotionality prevents these men from being able to release their feelings candidly, they suffer internally for the sake of their own gender performance. So do several of the men who I examined in Chapter 3. In that section, my primary focus was to further the issue of emotional suppression and include two other ideals of traditional masculinity—aggressiveness and the competition for success—to display the physical and verbal violence that LaBute's men use against other men. With the positive emphasis that traditional masculinity places on these two latter ideals and the negativity it places on emotional expression and other activity that might be perceived as feminine, the central men in the plays *The Distance from Here*, *In a Dark Dark House*, and *a gaggle of saints* attempt to cope with inner tensions regarding displays of affection between men. In all three plays, men also physically hurt other men due to their repressed desires for male love. In *a gaggle of saints*, the physical violence takes on the especially damaging form of a gay-bashing. In *The Distance from Here* and *In a Dark Dark House* the violence is the tamer form of wrestling. In *a Dark Dark House*, though, Terry and his

brother Drew are eventually able to cut through their macho posturing to be real with one another. In the same chapter, I also analyzed the films *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, in which the ideals of traditional masculinity do not cause any major observable inner grief for the characters, Chad and Cary, respectively.

Nevertheless, these two men possess masculine power that allows them both to emotionally harm a number of people; and in Cary's case, led him to rape a weaker boy back in high school. My discussions about the harm caused by masculine gender conformity were then extended to male-female relationships in Chapter 4. In this section I examined the men in *Fat Pig* and *The Mercy Seat* to demonstrate the emotional pain that LaBute's men cause women when the ideals of repudiating the feminine and being powerful and successful take priority over love. And finally, I showed that in *The Shape of Things* LaBute provides a sort of counterpoint by considering a dominate woman and a more submissive man. Adam's rejection of traditional masculinity makes him more human but also opens him up for the pain that Evelyn inflicts. The play is therefore less concerned with the pain caused by conformity to traditional masculinity and instead more concerned with the pain caused by those who have the power to manipulate others.

Despite LaBute's alternative focus with *The Shape of Things*, the overall thread of LaBute's plays and films indicate that he does not approve of traditional masculinity. In showing the complex factors that cause men to behave so destructively, LaBute clearly does not endorse their behavior or the restricting aspects of masculinity. Instead of propagating unrealistic images of strong, infallible men like Hollywood continues to do with its westerns and action flicks, LaBute creates most of his men as humans struggling

with the masculine ideals that have been imposed upon them and which they feel they must perpetuate. But why does he so consistently focus on only the negative aspects of traditional masculinity? It is because LaBute believes that showing us bad behavior will motivate us to be better people. He once commented,

I've never felt that showing something negative—a negative lifestyle, a negative character—was a bad thing to do. I've never felt that I was reveling in the behavior of any of the characters I've written. That's closer to what one might consider pornography to be: there's nothing to gain from watching their behavior except to be titillated by them undressing, them shooting someone in the face. It's really just there to provide a kind of stimulation or entertainment. I've always taken the work a bit more seriously than that—although never *too* seriously! I still think of it as work; I still think of it as trying to create entertainment; it's still just made up. But I do think that have you quite a forum on the stage and screen: you're concentrating people on looking at something, and you can influence them in a certain way. You're being instructive, hopefully. You're saying, "Don't look at just what they do, but look at what's behind it." (qtd. in Welch)

What's behind so many of the actions of his male characters is their traditional masculinity. By showing us the negative outcomes which living by this masculine code can lead, LaBute is trying to incite change. Hopefully the men in his audience who live this way will recognize their own injurious actions and will then begin trying to change.

And perhaps the rest of us can take more steps to make sure that masculinity is no longer defined in terms of power and superiority. Overall, LaBute is critiquing such negative behavior in the hope that we can create a better society or at least learn to treat one another better.

LaBute's intentions are therefore optimistic, despite the fact that he can sometimes be regarded as a pessimist. But the question still needs to be asked: how is LaBute unique in dealing with this social concern? In *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity is Contemporary American Drama*, Carla J. McDonough's examination of masculinity in the works of male playwrights shows David Mamet's work to bear a striking resemblance to LaBute's. Mamet has a similar tendency to expose his characters' struggles with their male identities. And like LaBute, his central characters are usually middle-class, white, heterosexual men who define themselves against femininity, close themselves off emotionally, and have difficulty connecting with other people. They are also vulgar and/or violent men who participate in male camaraderie but also intensely compete with one another for power. Moreover, their masculinity often leads to the destruction of themselves and of others (McDonough 78). Furthermore, Mamet presents his audience with negative characters as part of his social concerns about the unethical and immoral ways in which men and women treat one another (Kane 316; Hudgins 6-7). Because Mamet is one of LaBute's largest influences, it is little wonder that the works of these playwrights bear so many similarities. But what may set them apart, though, is that Mamet wrote mostly male-cast plays in his early works whereas LaBute has generally retained women's presence onstage and onscreen since his auspicious beginning with *In*

*the Company of Men*. By giving women a physical presence and a voice in his works, LaBute has, therefore, made it easier for audiences to visually recognize the pain that his men's masculine performance cause women. However, a study of Mamet's presentation of women in his more recent plays and a more in-depth comparison of the way in which the two playwrights portray women throughout their works is necessary to more clearly differentiate their portraits of masculinity and of gender overall.

While the subject of gender has been brought up in many reviews and scholarly works about LaBute, it has not been treated with any depth. The only published study on the topic in current circulation is Becky Becker's article "No Simple Misogyny," but in her analysis of socially constructed gender and LaBute's use of dramatic realism she restricts herself to only three of the plays. Until my thesis, then, there has been no thorough treatment of masculinity across LaBute's works. Hopefully my contribution will open the doors for future discourse on this rich and intriguing topic in LaBute's canon and will encourage a comparative analysis with Mamet and other playwrights who are writing about masculinities.

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