

“It’s Queer, It’s like Fate”¹:
Tracking Queer in O’Neill’s Mourning Becomes Electra

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Set in New England just after the American Civil War, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (henceforth *MBE*) rewrites the *Oresteia* while strongly recalling the *Oedipus Rex* at the same time. In 1930, in a diary he kept during the writing process and one year before the premiere, Eugene O’Neill called the trilogy “a ‘psychological drama of lust’” and wondered whether it would be possible to achieve “a ‘modern psychological approximation of [the] Greek sense of fate’” when writing for an audience that had little belief in divine punishment for wrong-doers (Bogard 1972, 335–6 [cf. Alexander 1992, 149–50]). This questioning stance was certainly rhetorical as O’Neill already had something in mind: desire, both obvious and occluded, is a strong representative of fate in the trilogy. It is desire that leads inexorably to two murders, two suicides, and permanent self-imposed isolation from society for a fifth character.² Indeed, and this is where the connection to the *Oedipus Rex* is abundantly in evidence, one might say that the trilogy evokes and stages in its plot the sexualized stages of maturation that Freud identifies through the spectacularized and heteronormative failures O’Neill puts on stage; the subjectivity of Orin (and, to a lesser extent, that of Lavinia) has failed to develop according to the popularized (and often misunderstood) notions of Freud³ and Jung.⁴ And it is not for lack of trying: both Orin (the Orestes figure) and Lavinia (the Electra figure) have ‘proper’ sexual attitudes toward their parents which they fail to give up as they should. The Oedipal rages against his father Ezra and love for his mother Christine on the part of Orin, and Lavinia’s hatred of her mother and love for her father, concretize the Oedipus and Electra complexes most handily.

O’Neill certainly saw the drama in ‘psychological terms and even though it is set in the previous century, the words themselves and the concepts that will make the dramatic action meaningful were to be those of the present day:

[T]he dialogue is colloquial of today. The house, the period costumes, the Civil War surface stuff, these are masks for what is really a modern

psychological drama with no true connection with that period at all. (O'Neill in a letter to the Theatre Guild [7 April 1931], in Bogard 1972, 343 [cf. Pfister 1995, 93])

In O'Neill's hands, the ever pliable story of the house of Atreus embodies on this occasion an externalization of the travails of early modern persons as they grope (unsuccessfully in this case) to come to terms with the demands of civilized personhood. The trilogy breathes the air pervaded by Freud's recent theorizations and converses in Freud's language metaphorically (i.e., through the plot itself) and, of course, with less sophistication. But such presentation and mirroring of intellectual ideas of the day have been the staple of the Western stage since its very beginnings. O'Neill stands squarely in this tradition of serious drama with this trilogy.⁵

Within this oppressively heteronormative milieu, it is intriguing—and this is the subject of this paper—that the word 'queer' occurs 31 times. It is odd that amid so much dreary misdirected and tragically staged heterosexuality this word plays a prominent role. It is my belief that given O'Neill's emphasis on up-to-date language this frequency allows us to consider anything these characters utter as potentially meaningful in the American context of the 1920s and 1930s—what queer might be doing in the trilogy especially should attract our attention, for it was rapidly acquiring a sexualized aura at this time. And even if O'Neill was not alert to all the valences that queer had acquired, they would have been known to at least some of his cosmopolitan Eastern seaboard audience (to say nothing of later audiences down to the present day). Furthermore, laying emphasis on the contemporary meaning of 'queer' would constitute a legitimate reading practice on the testimony of O'Neill himself. What I will be arguing *in nuce* is that we can connect the frequently seen queer to developments in sexuality outside of the play, and this in turn is revelatory of the characters of the men in the play and especially of Orin; through his use of the word queer in the play, O'Neill has created the possibility for a queer reading of Orin's subjectivity. Also of interest is the way in which queer designates the inexplicable both in the nature of subjectivity and in the creation and maintenance of patriarchal authority in the Mannon men as they come to wisdom through suffering.⁶

First, however, we must establish the parameters of meaning for queer at the time of the premiere of *MBE*. As an analysis of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) reveals, at the time O'Neill was writing queer possessed older meanings but at the same time was coming to pos-

sess the reference to sexual and/or gender transgression so familiar now. Both are perceptible in the trilogy, and the passage of time has only made questions raised by queer's newer sexualized meanings more urgent.

A meaning of "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character, suspicious, dubious"⁷ remains historically available in literature and also in current use. Here are a few examples from the *OED* with the year of their occurrence preceding the quotation:

- 1598 "Show thy queere substance, worthless, most obsurd." (J. Marston, *Metamorph. Pigmaliions Image* 30)
- 1621 "The emperor is in that quer case, that he is not able to bid battle." (W. Yonge, *Diary* 27 Aug. [1848] 43)
- 1793 "Crossing and jostling came queer men of G-d, In [sic] rusty brown coats, and waistcoats of plaid." (T. Pennant, *Lit. Life* 20)
- 1841 "It was a queer fancy . . . but he was a queer subject altogether." (C. Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* xxxix. 162)
- 1870 "In the queer old room with its still queerer attempts at decoration." (H. Smart, *Race for Wife* i)
- 1885 "It is queer, at this distance, to see the methods of Scott and Coleridge applied to the Indian legendary of Maine." (*Cent. Mag.* May 43/2)
- 1930 "He don't say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk." (W. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* xxxi. 81)

As these examples show, queer can refer to ingrained characteristics of incongruity and oddness with the occasional gesture toward something more transient.

Queer can also designate decidedly transient physiological states ("out of sorts; unwell; faint, giddy" and the slang obsolete meaning of "intoxicated")⁸:

- 1750 "All on a sudden, my Wife complained she was sick, and both myself and Sir Thomas found ourselves very queer and qualmish." (E. Kimber, *Life* [sic] *Joe Thompson* II. 1. 182)
- 1781 "I have been very queer for some time, sleepless and indigestion." (S. Crisp, *Let.* 1 Mar. in W. H. Hutton, *Burford Papers* [1905] 60)
- 1800 "We feel ourselves a little queer." (W. B. Rhodes, *Bombastes Furioso* [1830] i. 8)

- 1826 "Galloping . . . with a rummish team, and himself queer." (*Sporting Mag.* 18, 285)
- 1837 "Legs shaky—head queer—round and round—earthquaky sort of feeling—very." (C. Dickens, *Pickwick Papers* xliv. 486)
- 1889 "So I set my face against the sea trip. Not, as I explained, upon my own account. I was never queer. But I was afraid for George." (J. K. Jerome, *Three Men in Boat* i. 14)
- 1904 "I suppose people at the court of the Borgias may have watched each other begin to look queer after having had the honour of taking wine with the heads of the family." (H. James, *Golden Bowl* I. xi. 197)
- 1922 "'I jus'—jus' came over queer,' he ended, remembering a phrase he had heard used recently by the charwoman." (R. Crompton, *Just-William* xi. 213)

Indeed, in one of O'Neill's earlier plays, *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), queer quite directly refers to alcoholic intoxication. Surveying the results of a drunken melee, the First-Mate remarks as follows: "Rum, by God! So that's the trouble! I thought their breaths smelled damn queer" (O'Neill 1955, 473).

As said above and as we have just seen, queer still possessed its older meaning at the time of the writing and premiere of *MBE*. Yet also at this time, queer was starting to designate transgressive gender and sexual behavior (and in particular male homosexual behavior). Of relevance to the present argument is the fact that the United States in the early twentieth century is regarded as the place of origin for this new semantic dimension for queer (Partridge 1984, 947b). Here are some examples:

- 1914 "He said that the Ninety-six Club was the best; that it was composed of the 'queer' people . . . He said that the members sometimes spent hundreds of dollars on silk gowns, hosiery, etc. . . . At these 'drags' the 'queer' people have a good time." (*Los Angeles Times* 19 Nov. II. 10/5)⁹
- 1915 "An immense reunion of art students, painters, and queer people. Girls in fancy male costume, queer dancing, etc." (In A. Bennet, *Jrnl.* 26 Mar. [1933] 550)¹⁰
- 1919 "Half the world is queer and the other half trade." (In M. Duberman et al., *Hidden from Hist.* [1991] 304)¹¹
- 1922 "A young man, easily ascertainable to be unusually fine in other characteristics is probably 'queer' in sex tendency." (Children's

Bureau, U.S. Dept. of Labor, *Pract. Value of Scientific Study of Juvenile Delinquents* 8)¹²

1931 "Queer, crooked; criminal. Also applied to effeminate or degenerate men, or boys..." (G. Irwin, *American Tramp & Underworld Slang* 153)¹³

1936 "He's not queer, or something, is he?" 'Lord no! Worse than that. He's a convert.'" (J. G. Cozzens, *Men & Brethren* i. 24)¹⁴

1937 "Queer", in a specifically sexual sense—a word imported from America." (*Listener* 10 Mar. [Suppl.] p. vii/2)¹⁵

As we see, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, queer is turning into a word that designates gender transgressive behavior and also, in particular, men who are homosexual in their sexual tastes. Furthermore—and this has bearing quite particularly on meaning current on the northeastern seaboard of the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century—George Chauncey (1994, 101) draws attention to the existence in the large cities of men who self-identified as queer:

By the 1910s and 1920s, men who identified themselves as different from other men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves "queer." "Queer wasn't derogatory," one man active in New York's gay world in the 1920s recalled. "It wasn't like kike or nigger... It just meant you were different."¹⁶

These men, designating themselves as queer, were to be contrasted with fairies whose gender presentation was marked by effeminate mannerisms and often with drag (see, e.g., Chauncey 1994, 102). Queer men were exclusively homosexual and would have relations with each other and with men who maintained relations with women. There was also, frequently, a cross-class relation whereby white-collar queer men would take up with blue-collar men whose more usual sexual partners were women.

My point, then, is that a semantic broadening of this word was underway, one that was part of the broader situation in which O'Neill was working and his audience was living. As they sat in their seats ready to take in the action on the stage, the North American audience (of the northeastern seaboard) at the premiere of the trilogy plausibly would have perceived queer as multivalent or polysemous. And when this word, fitted out with strongly emergent sexualized meanings, is sighted in the thick of this sexualized "psychological drama of lust," the sexualized

meanings become quite available and it becomes even perverse to deny them, especially in light of the fact that desire has taken the place of fate as the determiner of destiny.

As noted above, queer occurs 31 times in the trilogy. It is used with its older and still current meanings perceptible, but it also seemingly means rather more at crucial moments. When we consider all the instances of the word, we will note that it is used 26 times of the five main characters. Of the remaining five, queer is twice used to criticize in rapid succession the gossiping ways of the townspeople (*The Haunted* 1/381); it describes the chantyman who provides comic relief at the opening of act 4 of *The Hunted* (354); one of the minor characters feels that the Mannon house has something queer about it in act 1 of *The Haunted* (384); had there been a proper inquest after Ezra's death, another minor character feels certain that "there'd have been queer doin's come out!" (*The Haunted* 1/381). It is significant, however, that this adjective is substantially the preserve of the Mannon family. They are personally queer and, as is sometimes the case with Orin, their perceptions of the world are queer.¹⁷ The frequency of occurrence according to gender is also significant. Christine and Lavinia have between them eight instances. Brant has three, Ezra five, and Orin, most revealingly, has 10 instances applicable to him. I will begin discussion with the women, and then consider, in succession, Brant, Ezra, and finally Orin.

Queer describes both Christine and Lavinia Mannon. A townswoman calls Christine "furrin lookin' and queer" (*Homecoming* 1/265) and soon after notes Lavinia's resemblance to her mother: "She looks like her mother in face—queer lookin'" (*Homecoming* 1/268). Another minor character observes of Christine that "there's something queer about her" (*The Hunted* 1/322). In these cases the chief referent is the Dutch/French ancestry of Christine (naturally passed down to Lavinia), which is different from that of the townspeople, and so this is an instance of queer being used with its nineteenth-century (and earlier) meaning of "odd, peculiar, suspicious." The older meaning for this word arguably continues when one of the townspeople, disturbed by the difference in affect between Christine and Lavinia at Ezra's wake, judges this difference as "queer" (*The Hunted* 1/322). Ezra terms Lavinia's tears of joy at his return as "queer tokens of happiness" (*Homecoming* 3/302), and Christine, once when speaking to a minor character and then to Orin, tries to turn them against Lavinia by noting the oddness of her behavior, terming it queer (*The Hunted* 1/326 and 2/339). As noted, these instances of queer are all interpretable as being in accord with the earlier meanings for this word.

There is, however, a significant use of queer in relation to Christine (and indeed to all the women who marry into the Mannon clan) which we can connect to the more recent developments of this word. Here is an exchange among the townspeople when they catch sight of Christine (*Homecoming* 1/266):

MINNIE (*in an awed whisper*): My! She's awful handsome, ain't she?

LOUISA: Too furrin lookin' fur my taste.

MINNIE: Ayeh. There's something queer lookin' about her face.

AMES: Secret lookin'—'s if it was a mask she'd put on. That's the Mannon look. They all has it. They grow it on their wives. Seth's growed it on too, didn't you notice—from bein' with 'em all his life. They don't want folks to guess their secrets.

In this passage, the queerness of Christine is chalked up to both her foreignness and, this time, to the fact that she has married into the Mannon clan. The male line molds its women (and its retainers: Seth, the figure similar to the Watchman in the *Orchestra*, is the Mannons' "gardener and man of all work" [*Homecoming* 1/264]). It is of interest that the sexual objects of the Mannon men come to possess a surface aspect or mask that declares that they are of the Mannon clan.¹⁸ The mark of masculine assertion creates a narcissistic circuit whereby a Mannon woman functions as a mirror reflecting back to a Mannon man his own image. The reference to narcissism describing the relationships that the Mannon men have with their wives suggests that their sexuality has something in common with homosexual desire, for it was popularly thought to be narcissistic.¹⁹ We now pass from the women to the three Mannon men.

Seth calls Adam Brant's last name queer toward the end of act 1 of *Homecoming* (276). Although this is by way of prelude to his (correct) suggestion that Adam's last name is short for Brantôme, which was the last name of Brant's mother (and his father was David Mannon, the brother to Abe Mannon, Ezra's father), Seth's use of the word here arguably accesses both the older and newer meanings of queer: the abbreviation, apparently, is odd and Adam's birth came about through an illicit sexual affair. In act 2 of *Homecoming*, two more instances of queer are associated with Brant (both on p. 292). Speaking with Christine, he first imagines that it would be "damned queer" if she loved him because he reminded her of Ezra. Not liking this, Christine assures him it was the case that he reminded her of Orin and not of Ezra. Brant takes no notice of this shocking remark and continues:

I remember that night we were introduced and I heard the name Mrs. Ezra Mannon! By God, how I hated you then for being his! I thought, by God, I'll take her from him and that'll be part of my revenge! And out of that hatred my love came! It's damned queer, isn't it?

And he *should* think it queer: his obsession with Ezra, another man, leads him into sexual expression with the man's wife. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), we can see a metaphoric relationship between the hostile bond between the men and its expression in an adulterous bond between the man and the other man's wife. He presents his heterosexual expression as having its foundation in a relation with another man—a situation that does not lack queer aspects.²⁰

In Ezra's case, two of the uses of queer appear consonant with its older suites of meanings. At the beginning of the first act of *The Hunted* (381) one of the townsmen remarks "that [it] was durned queer" that Ezra died on his first night back from the war, and earlier in the trilogy another townsman pronounces Ezra Mannon's death as being "queer . . . like fate" (*The Hunted* 1/323). While some in the audience are probably going to perceive some irony when his death is described this way because the word by this point in the trilogy has gotten quite a workout in connection with Orin (to be discussed presently), the primary semantic force will probably be "odd" or "suspicious." There are three other uses closely connected to Ezra, however, which can be associated with the emergent meanings of queer. All three come in rapid succession in act 3 of *Homecoming*.

In this act, Ezra is laying open his heart to Christine in the hopes that they can start over now that he is back from the war. He remarks that the omnipresence of death on the battlefield "freed [him] to think of life" (*Homecoming* 3/308) and, continuing immediately, he remarks as follows: "Queer, isn't it? Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death" (308). Christine is puzzled by his pursuing the discussion in this way and asks: "Why are you talking of death?" He answers:

That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was a starting to die. Death was being born. (*shaking his head with dogged bewilderment*) How in hell people ever got such notions! That white meeting-house. It stuck in my mind—clean-scrubbed and whitewashed—a temple of death. (308)

These words anticipate what Orin will have to say to Ezra's corpse at the wake:

Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like the statue of an eminent dead man—sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square—looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition—cutting it dead for the impropriety of living! (*The Hunted* 3/345)

A constant refrain in the trilogy, to which Orin makes reference here, is the importance that the Mannons place on social position and public service. When Ezra is on the battlefield, with death so close, he begins to question the assumptions under which he has lived his life up to this point. One of these assumptions has been an investment in monumentality that he has come to recognize as inimical to life. Embodying their roles and leading lives that are more symbolized, as it were, the Mannon men cultivate and project a mask at the expense of interior life. They mark their women with it too, as we saw above, creating a narcissistic circuit with their own wives.²¹

As Ezra continues, he shares with Christine an epiphany that he had about their marriage while he was on the battlefield:

In the middle of battle I'd think maybe in a minute I'll be dead. But my life as just me ending, that didn't appear worth a thought one way or another. But listen, me as your husband being killed that seemed queer and wrong—like something dying that had never lived. Then all the years we've been man and wife would rise up in my mind and I would try to look at them. But nothing was clear except that there'd always been some barrier between us—a wall hiding us from each other! I would try to make up my mind what that wall was but I never could discover. (*with a clumsy appealing gesture*) Do you know? (*Homecoming* 3/308)

Ezra has now twice had occasion to mention queer. In the first instance he called his devotion to masculine patriarchal values a queer something that has led to the odd result of valuing death. Here, in the second instance, queerness appears in the register of the sexual. He understands that there is and has been a sort of barrier between him and Christine. His pursuit of both position in the town and rank in the army has led to the interruption of his heterosexual interests. As he continues (and

mentioning queer for the third time), Ezra sees something queer inside of himself that has kept him from truly revealing himself to his own wife:

MANNON (*drawing himself up with a stern pride and dignity and surrendering himself like a commander against hopeless odds*): All right, then. I came home to surrender to you—what's inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now.

CHRISTINE (*distractedly*): Ezra! Please!

MANNON: I want that said! Maybe you have forgotten it. I wouldn't blame you. I guess I haven't said it or showed it much—ever. Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say—keeps me hiding the things I'd like to show. Something keeps me sitting numb in my own heart—like a statue of a dead man in a town square. (*Homecoming* 3/309)

Ezra perceives a barrier between himself and Christine that has been caused by an additional barrier interior to himself. On his own testimony—and queerness explains it—his masculine drive to monumentality and military endeavor is ultimately the author of an interruption to his heterosexuality. Indeed, his narcissism (and that of the Mannons before him) regards society and those around him as things to be molded and drained of their vitality in order to serve the needs of the Mannon name. Whether a “mask” on a wife or a statue in the park, the Mannon men want to see an image of themselves. This is their queer desire, and it was likely to imply homosexuality from the early twentieth century onward. Amid suffering on the battlefield and at home (Christine is unreachable), Ezra is coming to wisdom or self-knowledge about the inexplicable paradoxes brought about by the masculine ideals that have guided his life. Ezra's moment of self-awareness is similar to that of Brant when he reflects on the queerness of the genesis of his desire for Christine in homosocial rivalry.

As mentioned above, queer designates Orin 10 times. Orin has, to all intents and purposes, a third of the references. This proportion all by itself in this “psychological drama of lust” that features “dialogue . . . colloquial of today,” arguably will make an audience member think about Orin's sexual proclivities—were he to act on them; unlike his father and Adam, there is no evidence of sexual behavior on Orin's part with anyone. Suggesting that he is not fully matured, the stage directions stress his slowness of build (*The Hunted* 1/327) and tellingly continue: “But when he smiles naturally his face has a gentle boyish charm which makes

women immediately want to mother him" (the classicists in the audience would perhaps think of *paiderastia*). His excessive and oedipal interest in his mother (e.g., *The Hunted* 2/338), the disproportionate role she takes in his life (e.g., *Homecoming* 3/303²²)—activating the notion that an overly powerful mother will cause homosexuality in a son—, and his seeming failure at making any moves toward heterosexual expression make questions about his sexual interests all the more urgent. Looking at the 10 instances, we are able to divide them into those in which Orin is describing his perceptions of the world on the one hand and descriptions of the way he is behaving on the other.

Brought to maturity under the tutelage of his father in the army,²³ and in a crucible of experiences that arguably has produced in him a sort of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,²⁴ Orin remarks on a number of occasions that the world seems to have been rendered odd and queer. In act I of *The Hunted*, Orin speaks about how his head has been off since his injury in a very brave (or very foolhardy) charge²⁵ against the Confederate line:

But the house [*sc.* the Mannon mansion] looks strange. Or is it something in me? I was out of my head so long; everything has seemed queer since I came back to earth [*i.e.*, ostensibly recovered from the injury sustained in the charge]. Did the house always look so ghostly and dead? (327)

Speaking to one of the minor characters about his wartime experiences, he mentions that he used to think he could hear her "singing at the queerest times—so sweet and clear and pure! It would rise above the screams of the dying—" (*The Hunted* 2/335). And while gazing upon the body of Ezra at the wake, Orin has the following to say to his mother:

(*strangely*) Everything is changed—in some queer way—the house, Vinnie, you, I—everything but Father. He's the same and always will be—here—the same! Don't you feel that, Mother? (*The Hunted* 2/334)

Estranged from the world after his enmeshment in the (supposedly) Mannon-friendly discipline of the warrior, the world seems queer to Orin. Pursuit of manly virtues renders the world uncanny and queer.

But it is not merely Orin's perceptual faculties that have been rendered queer; he is meant to be perceived as acting in a queer way. The

stage directions, for example, twice direct him to act queerly.²⁶ At the end of the trilogy, other characters judge his behavior queer on two occasions. Seth thinks it queer that he killed himself while "cleanin' his gun" (*The Haunted* 4/416), and one of the minor characters is distressed that Orin insinuated that Lavinia had sexual relations with a native while she and Orin were in the south Pacific (*The Haunted* 4/422: "He acted so queer about—what happened to you on the Islands"). Orin also speaks most revealingly about his battlefield experiences. There, as we know, he became his own man. But on his own testimony, his time in the war was a decidedly queer experience, a spiral of suicidal and narcissistic heroism:

ORIN: Before I'd gotten back [from scouting the enemy lines] I had to kill another [rebel soldier] in the same way. It was like murdering the same man twice. I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself! Their faces keep coming back in dreams—and they change to Father's face—or to mine—what does that mean, Vinnie?

LAVINIA: I don't know! I've got to talk to you! For heaven's sake, forget the war! It's over now!

ORIN: Not inside us who killed! (*then quickly—with a bitter, joking tone*) The rest is all a joke! The next morning I was in the trenches. This was at Petersberg. I hadn't slept. My head was queer. I thought what a joke it would be on the stupid Generals like Father if everyone on both sides suddenly saw the joke war was on them and laughed and shook hands. So I began to laugh and walked toward their lines with my hand out. Of course, the joke was on me and I got this wound in the head for my pains. I went mad, wanted to kill, and ran on, yelling. Then a lot of our fools went crazy, too, and followed me and we captured a part of their line we hadn't dared tackle before. I had acted without orders, of course—but Father decided it was better policy to overlook that and let me be a hero! So do you wonder I laugh! (*The*

Haunted 3/347)

Orin is correct in asserting that his head was queer. Rather than play the deadly warrior, he decided it was time to make friends. The joke was on him, as he says: the rules of this homosocial space want camaraderie only so far as it enables the destruction of other men (and as such, these rules are metaphorical with the norms and practices that incite and yet police homosexual urges and feelings).

Furthermore, when he looks upon the face of Brant, just after he has shot him, Orin sees this murder in terms similar to the narcissistic dynamic he remembers from the dreams he would have after the battlefield. He asks Lavinia:

Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed into Father's face and finally became my own? (*He smiles grimly*) He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide! (*The Hunted* 4/366)

And as Lavinia tries to hustle him away before someone comes, Orin remarks: "It's queer! It's a rotten dirty joke on someone!" (*The Hunted* 4/366). These words are recognition of the desire for Christine that he (scandalously) shared with Brant: he kills Brant for doing what he wanted to do and he perceives the murder he just committed in narcissistic terms. These words could also describe the situation that has come about through his embrace of the warrior ethos. In thrall to the father (the soldier putting his body on the line) and yet disobedient at the same time (not following orders), he and the world (in his perceptions of it) have been rendered queer. Obeying orders (to the point of bodily sacrifice) leads to a concomitant disobedience.

When Orin perceives the queerness in his soldierly career, the suicidal narcissism that marks it, the fact that this occurs within this "psychological drama of lust" with language meant to communicate in up-to-date language means that sexual meanings of this word become available. The audience member can rightly wonder about the contents of the queerness of Orin and in particular see in this dynamic of disobedience in obedience an allegory of masculine and patriarchal values producing the queerness to which they are opposed. Orin should either be arrested as disobedient or be declared a hero. The trilogy proposes Orin as the perfect embodiment of this masculine ethos and therefore the most prey to pathologies to which this ethos gives birth.

In conclusion, if we track queer in *MBE*, we discover its presence repeatedly in the places where manhood is turned in on itself. One might say that queer designates an occluded force that sets up barriers between the sexes and thereby contours the desire that is the prime mover in the trilogy. With eighteen of the 31 mentions in the play connecting directly to the Mannon men, the deployment of this word in the trilogy gives the reader/audience member particular information about them. For Brant, queer marks an oddness attending the onset of desire he has for Christine:

his desire emerges from passionate investment in a contest with another man. In the case of Ezra, his enculturation to and embrace of an almost paradoxically restricting ideal for masculine subjectivity has rendered him inexplicably incapable of relating to his own wife. Furthermore, he is only the latest in a long line of Mannon men who regard their women narcissistically: their women have the Mannon mark on them. Ezra's masculine striving and modeling himself on his male forebears has led to these queer outcomes, namely, blocked heterosexuality and narcissism. But for all of that, both Brant and Ezra at least perform heterosexually (even as they do not completely escape the reach of queerness that appears to be the wages of masculine enculturation).²⁷ Orin surpasses them. Seemingly incapable of functioning sexually, he is utterly beholden to his Mannon father. He can only desire a woman who has the mark of the father on her, and all of his passionate attachments therefore are male-directed and narcissistic, which then suggests that an early twentieth-century reception (to say nothing of a current one) of the trilogy will feature a perception of homosexual inclination in the word queer. When one of the townsmen remarks of the untimely demise of Ezra that "it's queer, it's like fate" (*The Hunted* 1/323), he says something significant, as far as the analysis of the problematic masculinity in the play is concerned. Desire between men and women, certainly a major topic of the play, has an inexplicable (as far as the characters are concerned) relationship to queerness that is the paradoxical outcome of masculine enculturation. The replacement of fate with desire as the driver of destiny has led O'Neill into a depiction that is cannier than some of his critics have allowed.²⁸ I see the trilogy as reflective of the times in which it was written and as a poetic and searching (and purposefully hyperbolic) imagining of why it is that we wind up in the places that we do.²⁹

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Notes

1. *The Hunted* 1/323. In this paper, references to *Mourning Become Electra* will be according to name of the play, which means either *Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, or *The Haunted*, followed by a number designating the act and, after the forward slash, the page from the Vintage edition (1995) of the trilogy. All translations in this paper are my own.
2. Readers of this essay may find the following list of characters from *MBE*, their correlates from the *Oresteia*, and their ultimate fate in O'Neill's trilogy helpful in following the arguments to come:

Ezra Mannon	Agamemnon [murdered]
Christine	Clytemnestra [suicide]
Orin	Orestes [suicide]
Lavinia/Vinnie (Adam) Brant	Electra [survival in self-imposed isolation] Aegisthus [murdered]

For further reference, here are the minor characters (the last three, only mentioned, do not appear in the trilogy):

Seth	the watchman (perhaps, too, the <i>paedagogus</i> in Sophocles, <i>Electra</i>)
Peter	Pylades

Hazel	Hermione
Abe Mannon	Atreus
David Mannon	Thyestes
Marie Brantôme	Aerope

3. While O'Neill took pains to deny that he was *directly* influenced by Freud, present-day understandings of O'Neill appear to be unanimous in assuming that he was surely *indirectly* affected by Freudian ideas through a course of analysis, a subsequent friendship with his analyst, and the bastardizing popularization of Freud's ideas in the early decades of the twentieth century. For more see Alexander 1953; Bogard 1972, 344–50; Nugent 1991; Pfister 1995, 53–104.

4. Doris Alexander (1992, 162–3) notes O'Neill's familiarity with Jung, especially in the frequent characterization of women by the Mannon men as island refuges.

5. For more on O'Neill's use of psychological concepts that were being popularized in the early decades of the twentieth century, see Joel Pfister's detailed discussion (1995, 53–104; also Alexander 1953 and Nugent 1991). In a book of much interest, Pfister sees the oeuvre of O'Neill as reflective and to some extent constitutive of the American bourgeoisie's sense of itself as understandable through psychological concepts.

6. I note here Georgia Nugent's (1991) discussion of the erasure of active feminine sexuality (and the creation of another zone of inexplicability) in the course of O'Neill's drafting of the trilogy. I hope that my discussion will complement hers. Also, an argument could be made that major thematics in O'Neill's trilogy (wisdom through suffering, patriarchy, and inexplicability) all appear prefigured in the "Hymn to Zeus" (lines 160–83) from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*.

7. *OED* (draft revision, September 2009): queer, *adj.* ¹ 1.a (<http://dictionary.oed.com> [accessed 1 May 2011]).

8. *Ibid.*: queer, *adj.* ¹ 2.

9. *Ibid.*: queer, *adj.* ¹ 3.

10. *Ibid.*: queer, *adj.* ¹ 3.

11. *Ibid.*: queer, *adj.* ¹ 3.

12. *OED* (1989): queer, *adj.* ¹ 1.b.

13. *Ibid.*: queer, *adj.* ¹ 1.b.

14. *OED* (draft revision, September 2009): queer, *adj.* ¹ 3 (<http://dictionary.oed.com> [accessed 1 May 2011]).

15. *OED* (1989): queer, *adj.* ¹ 1.b.

16. Cf. Jagose 1996, 73–4.

17. Indeed, if we add the remarks about the "queer doin's," and the Mannon house, the tally for the Mannons goes to 28 of the 31 occurrences.

18. Given the correlative position on the basis of this masking of both the Mannon women and Seth, the secretiveness of Seth perhaps does not miss a sexual charge. This, however, is not developed in the trilogy. Also, this masking, as indicative of an acquisitive male marking, may be sensitive to the affectionate words of the watchman for his master in the *Agamemnon*: γένουτο δ' οὐν μολόντος εὐφραδίῃ / ἀνακτορὸς οὐκ ὄντων τῆδε βασιλεύσας καὶ (May it be possible to touch with this hand the well-loved hand of him, the master of the house, who has returned [Ag. 34–5]).

19. Early on Freud associated homosexuality with narcissism (Warner 1990, 191–3,

204) and this particular association, bastardized quite thoroughly, continued throughout the twentieth century (Warner 1990, *passim*, esp. 199–200).

20. Sedgwick (1985) discusses the centuries-long dynamic of men's passionate involvement with one another through the medium of a woman. Her remarks, although in reference to Wycherly's *The Country Wife*, nonetheless have validity here:

"To cuckold" is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man . . . The bond of cuckoldry differs from at least some social conformations of homosexuality in being *necessarily* hierarchical in structure, with an "active" participant who is clearly in the ascendancy over the "passive" one. Most characteristically, the difference of power occurs in the form of a difference of knowledge: the cuckold is not even supposed to know that he is in such a relationship. Thus, cuckoldry inscribes and institutionalizes what is only contingently a feature of male homosexual bonds—an impoverishment of horizontal or mutual ties in favor of an asymmetrical relation of cognitive transcendence. (49–50)

Brant's desire for Christine is, in the first instance, fired by the notion that he will have something over on Ezra; cuckoldry accomplished, he has realized cognitive superiority to Ezra that has transcended its physical basis.

21. In the stage directions, O'Neill describes all the characters (male and female, which has a differential effect according to gender and status, of course) as having facial expressions that are mask-like: Seth, *Homecoming* 1/264; Christine, *Homecoming* 1/266; Lavinia, *Homecoming* 1/267; Brant, *Homecoming* 1/277; Ezra, *Homecoming* 3/301; Orin, *The Hunted* 1/327.

22. EZRA: "I don't want you to baby him when he comes home, Christine. It would be bad for him to get tied to your apron strings again."

23. Orin says that serving as a soldier with Ezra as general made him hard: "I hardened myself to expect my own death and everyone else's . . . it was part of my training as a soldier under him . . . he was the war to me" (*The Hunted* 1/328).

24. See Shay 1994 for a good discussion of PTSD from a classicist's standpoint.

25. Ezra speaks approvingly of this act: "He's no baby now. I've made a man of him. He did one of the bravest things I've seen in the war" (*Homecoming* 3/303).

26. *The Hunted* 3/345–6 ("He chuckles to himself with a queer affectionate amusement") and *The Hunted* 4/366 ("[H]e still remains stooping over the body and stares into Brant's face, a queer fascinated expression in his eyes").

27. Mannheim 1982, 86: "The Mannons have lost the ability to love women deeply . . . though Adam Brant (from the Brantôme line) retains a trace of that ability."

28. A substantial (but not overwhelming) number of O'Neill's critics fault the plays for being melodramatic; see Mannheim 1998, esp. 240. For evaluations that find much of intellectual interest in O'Neill, see, e.g., Eisen 1994 and Pfister 1995.

29. I would like to acknowledge here Eva Stehle, organizer of the original 2007 CAMP panel; Kirk Ormand, the respondent for the panel; Gesine Manuwald, for organizing the publication of these papers in *Helios*; and Tim (and Nelson).