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FROM QUEER TO DESTABILIZATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY: FEMALE IDENTITY REVISITED IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S *BERNICE AND THE VERGE*

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out a study of Glaspell's representation of female identities by setting them in the context of post-structural feminism which is delineated by Butler's theories. Referring to Butler's theories of gender performativity, citational practices and queer theory, this article focuses on the ways in which Glaspell's theater interrogates the discursive female identities, releasing a potential for creative constructions of female subjects. Representing female characters who abandon their conventional roles and violating theatrical conventions, Glaspell reinforces Butlerian thought that gendered identities are mere constructs which are normalized through the repetitive citation of hegemonic discourses. Drawing on Butler's theories of gender construction, the writer has attempted to shed new light on Glaspell's dramaturgy, exploring the ways through which Glaspell deconstructs the ontological essence of woman. Through her queer theater, Glaspell has displayed identity as a construct that transcends clear conventional boundaries, provoking a view of gender identity as heterogeneous and multiple. In fact, this study has suggested that theatrical performance can work as an invitation to the audience to review their gender development and share in the possibility of a different world with different subject positions.

Keywords: female identity, performativity, queer theory

1. INTRODUCTION

It was in 2005 that Cheryl Black called Glaspell's dramaturgy "queer theater" for the first time. At first sight, there seem to be no possible link between Glaspell and queer theory, yet Black proves her queerness in broad terms. However, what is meant by queer requires further clarification since the recent term of "queer" has been so controversial that resists any fixed definition and has been consequently reissued in several aspects. Regarding the adopted approach in the present study, queer is used in its deconstructive contexts drawing on Butler's and other poststructuralists' theories. In this study, queer is taken as any treatment outside the bounds of normative structures. According to David Halperin, the contemporary gender theorist, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence." (62) Furthermore, Halperin's notion of queer seems to be the closest to Glaspell's. Glaspell uses the term of "queer" several times in some of her plays all of which refer to nonconformity and abnormality. Ben-Zvi also confirms that Glaspell used queer "to describe female protagonists who break with convention" (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 36). Thus, the concept of queer under discussion is not exclusively of sexual identities; it involves the transgression of any fixed category. In other words, when it is claimed that Glaspell's theater is queer, it means it is different from traditional forms of drama in terms of content, form, and techniques. Laurence Senelick describes a queer theater as the one "grounded in and expressive of unorthodox sexuality or gender identity, antiestablishment and confrontational in tone, experimental and unconventional in format..." (qtd. in Black, "Making Queer New Things" 51). In the same way, Glaspell's dramas including *Bernice* and *The Verge* have been considered queer not only owing to her queer female protagonists who are mostly absent too, but also due to her professional skill in destabilizing the fixity in gender identities and hegemonies. As with Butler's emphasis on performativity, Black believes that the recent queer theory discusses the queerness of performative acts rather than being as an essence. In this respect, Jill Dolan contends that "To be queer is not who you are, it's what you do, it's your relation to dominant power, and your relation to marginality, as a place of empowerment" (qtd. in Black, "Making Queer New Things" 50). Glaspell's female protagonists also act queerly in order to prove the superficiality of gender identities imposed by dominant ideologies. As Butler theorized that we can construct and reconstruct identities through performance, Glaspell indicates the potentiality of her dramaturgy to lay gender identities open to reconstructions. It is not only the content of her plays through which she queerizes gender identities; her innovation with language and the employment of offstage as the

protagonists' position also intensify the notion of queer in the plays. The analysis of queerness in Glaspell's *Bernice* and *The Verge* falls into two main categories of "Queer Acts" and "Queer Form" due to the fact that the characters' nonconventional actions, queer presentations, and the innovations with language all fit into the category of "Queer".

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. QUEER ACTS

As to Dolan's theorization of queer theory which suggests action is the pivot of queer studies, it is through the queer acts of Glaspell's protagonists that the ontology of gender is disputed. However, due to the fact that Glaspell's protagonists are female characters, the ontological definitions of female identity are called into question by their unwomanly acts. Considering *The Verge*, its protagonist, Claire, is trying to create a new plant, a far cry from the familiar realm of botany, in her queer greenhouse. Harry considers her wife's job as a proper womanly act much the same as Elizabeth who thinks her mother is growing "useful beautiful thing" like "beautiful roses"; however, Claire is "not doing any useful beautiful thing" (75). What she regards beautiful is the crazy brave explosion of their species. What matters to her is queerness as she tells Tom "Perhaps they [her creations] are less beautiful--less sound--than the plants from which they diverged. But they have found--otherness, If you know--what I mean" (76). She only yearns for being queer in order to be free of repressive systems, and that is why she responds to Tom's conformist offer, affirming that she would rather "be the steam rising from the manure than be a thing called beautiful!" longing for breaking things from their form and creating strange new things, she seems to be an early queer theorist who knows the emancipation from restrictive systems of thought lies in acting queer and displaying the artificiality of dominant norms. Therefore, her career is not a simple experimentation with plants, it is "cultivating her own growth" to achieve an independent identity (Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 31). Regardless of whether it is a scientific experimentation or an ideological defiance, the other characters, still stuck inside the normative structures, call her job queer:

HARRY: ... But there's something about this—changing things into other things--putting things together and making **queer** new things--this—[...] So, I'd like to get him to tell her to quit this **queer** business of making things grow that never grew before.[...] you're doing Claire no good--encouraging her in these **queer** ways.

To the conventional Harry, "making new things" is queer enough, yet if it is done by a woman, it would be so queer that dissolves into madness. Claire's madness is another queer theme in *The Verge* fuelling a raging controversy. Firstly, madness ought to be clarified since there is no single interpretation of it throughout the play. To Claire, insanity is something good; it is a transgression of discursive bounds and as a result, a means of her freedom from the restrictive definitions. In her conversation with Harry, she expresses her ideas about sanity and insanity:

CLAIRE: [...]you've gone dead in the form in which you found yourself, you think that's all there is to the whole adventure? And that is called sanity. And made a virtue--to lock one in. You never worked with things that grow! Things that take a sporting chance--go mad--that sanity mayn't lock them in--from life untouched--from life--that waits... (65)

She regards sanity equal to death since she believes sanity is remaining inside the normative structures. As soon as subjects "break up" and "smash" the patterns, they come alive as if they are born. The boundaries between sanity and insanity are blurred in a scene where she calls her violent attack on Elizabeth "too sane". This is the only moment of the play in which she shares the others' belief of madness. However, later in the play when Adelaide describes her career as a "sober business of growing plants", she opposes her replying "Not sober--it's mad". This time she holds her main belief that "madness [...] is the only chance for sanity" (82). She finds it vital to be queer and flout conventions, so she encourages Tom, as the only one who comprehends her experimentation, to do so:

CLAIRE: [...] But let us do it--the great sacrilege! Yes! (_excited, she rises; she has his hands, and bring him up beside her_) Let us take the mad chance! Perhaps it's the only way to save--what's there. How do we know? How can we know? Risk. Risk everything. From all that flows into us, let it rise! All that we never thought to use to make a moment—let it flow into what could be! (89)

Claire's persistent entreaties to the violation of repressive regulations roughly correspond to Butler's insistence on breaking down the limiting constructions of gender identities. She even mentions the existing power

structures in which subjects are granted with certain identities which are naturalized through the iteration of performative acts:

CLAIRE: You have been brought in. A thousand years from now, when you are but a form too long repeated, Perhaps the madness that gave you birth will burst again, And from the prison that is you will leap pent queernesses .To make a form that hasn't been--To make a person new. And this we call creation, (_very low, her head not coming up_) Go away! (96)

To Claire, madness means nonconformity, queerness, and revolt which is her only way to freedom and independence, but by the same token she is treated as an outcast. What other characters call her is more of a label since she has tried to “subvert patriarchal artistic forms” and is consequently “ostracized and labeled “mad”” (qtd. in Ozieblo and Dickey 80). Thus, not only does Claire regard any deviation from normative constructions as mad, but others also consider any resistance as such. As a result, Adelaide urges to “quiet” and “stop” her since they take comfort from “unity”, sanity and conformity. Anything which disturbs this easefulness is considered as mad, queer and frightening in the manner of a reviewer censuring Claire for being a “fraudulent female . . . an erotic, neurotic ill-tempered hussy” who “affrights so many.” (qtd. in Black, *The Women of Provincetown* 66). Regarding Glaspell’s use of Freudian theories, Ben-Zvi believes that Glaspell uses “hysteria” as a sign of “rebellion in a society that does not allow other channels of expression for women”, while Freud totally ignored such potentiality (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 244). Much like Claire and Butler celebrating insanity and queerness, Stephen Rathburn states “Three cheers for Claire! If she is insane let us have more insanity! Freedom is the greatest of all words . . . Claire made her own great charter, and we should pray for strength to follow her example.” (qtd. in Murphy 203).

Another queer element of Claire lies in her family relationships as a wife and mother. She is married to Harry who is blissfully ignorant of her wife’s affair with Dick and her true love for Tom. Moreover, it is her second marriage which fails implying she has found nothing in marriage. Claire’s bold violation of family conventions has been considered queer by many critics particularly in the context of 1921. When the audience encounters Claire’s audacious neglect of her gender roles, the nonfixity of such attributions manifests giving way to potential subversions and deconstructions. Furthermore, she is violating the heteronormative social constitution of marriage which is one of the basics of queer study, although there is no sign of homosexuality in *The Verge*. Biographically speaking, Glaspell herself had a low opinion of marriage as she stated “One can surely be amused by one’s own marriage. Be it beautiful or ugly one thing is certain it “isn’t what you thought it was going to be” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 241). Probably that is why in her most plays she represents marriage as failure. The representation of a troubled marriage is well connected to queer studies since heterosexual marriage is an emblem of imposed heteronormativity. However, it is a different story as to *Bernice*. Bernice’s marriage is a loveless, unhappy one, yet there is no other men for Bernice like Claire. It was in 2004 when J. Ellen Gainor claimed that there is a sexual desire between Bernice and Margaret stating the cliché love triangle is queerized by Glaspell since both Margaret and Craig love Bernice (110). Referring to Gainor, there are clear signs of this relationship throughout the play. As inferred from her father’s conversations, there has been a close affinity between Bernice and Margaret:

MR.ALLEN: Yes, Margaret will get here the quickest way. She always came to Bernice when Bernice needed her.... She needs someone to be here to do what she can't go on doing. Margaret will see that -- when she knows. Margaret sees everything.

ABBIE :You think so, sir?

MR. ALLEN :Oh, yes, she does. Bernice knew that. "Margaret sees things," I've heard Bernice say. (10)

Declaring the love between them, Margaret holds that “It’s been the beauty in my life. In my busy practical life, Bernice -- what she was -- like a breath that blew over my life and -- made it something” (25). Their close friendship has been opposed to the cold relationship between Craig Norris and Bernice. Oddly enough, Bernice preferred Margaret to Craig even at the time of her death. Besides, it was Margaret name which “She breathed it” as her last word as if it was coming from “her whole life” (50). Being aware of the existing sense of kinship between them, Craig keeps quarreling with Margaret as love rivals:

NORRIS: you think I didn't make Bernice happy, Margaret?

PIERCE: Oh, I don't think you had the power to make her very unhappy. (16)

And their wrecked marriage becomes evident as Craig confirms that he “never had Bernice” and “there was something in her that had almost nothing to do with [their] love”. Mr. Allen also affirms their failed relation stating that “Craig didn't dominate Bernice. I don't know whose fault it was. I don't know that it was anyone's fault. Just the way things were. He -- I say it in all kindness, he just didn't -- have it in him”. In fact, Bernice was too independent to need a man to protect her, in particular an “inferior writer” like Craig (Ozieblo, “The First Lady of American Drama” 156).

Besides Gainor, Black is another critic who found traces of homosexuality in *Bernice*. Proving such kind of relationship, she associates Bernice's heedlessness of Craig's infidelities to the want of her love for him. She also regards "Bernice's bizarre, postmortem sacrifice [as] a compensatory gesture, a sign that she had little to give him in life" ("Making Queer New Things" 56). Drawing on the queer context of Greenwich Village, Black attempts to prove her point. In the years between 1910 and 1930, Greenwich Village was the locus of "the earliest middle class American lesbian subculture". In terms of people with whom Glaspell was in communication, Black mentions that she has been surrounded by lesbian women and playwrights in feminist organizations. In her article, she also discusses that Glaspell was probably familiar with the association of queer term with homosexuality while she was writing *The Verge*. Therefore, she should have had a purpose as she repeated the word twenty times throughout the play. She probably aimed at doing the groundwork for the future queer studies. The fact that some lesbian producers embraced Glaspell's theater and produced them is another factor which intensifies the queerness of her dramaturgy ("Making Queer New Things" 57). Regarding the additional contextual information, the queerness of Glaspell's theater will extend to encompass homosexual identities too. However, she does not seem to overtly represent homosexuality; what her queer theater does is flouting gender conventions which seems more of a preparation than expression. Glaspell's subversions, violations and manipulations are all conducive to regard her dramaturgy queer.

Keeping to *Bernice*, there is some queerness about its protagonist in a similar way to Claire. At first site, it is implied that Bernice has killed herself to rescue Craig's life in the manner of a true conventional woman; however, this image is shattered as it is revealed that she had told a lie. It resembles the parody of Butler which provokes destabilization of identities as if Bernice parodied the notion of self-sacrifice for the sake of love. Ben-Zvi also mentions this parody but as a distinctive subversive technique of Glaspell which is employed in her *Trifles* and *Woman's Honor* too. She concludes from this strategy that men call for "female self-destruction to abet masculine aggrandizement" ("Making Queer New Things" 211). However, the deconstructive queer impact of this parody is of greater import in the present study. As Ozieblo maintains, Bernice "successfully manipulates her husband's ego" (Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell 22). Manipulating Craig, Bernice destabilizes the fixed notions of gender relations affirming men's supremacy. Thus, it is the female character who is dominating the male one in the play, and the queerer thing is that she exercises her power over him from the grave as if the dead character is superior to the living one (Ozieblo "The First Lady of American Drama" 156). On the subject of female coalition, Glaspell queerizes the idea of woman as the other or "the outside", as Black puts it. The unity among Bernice, Margaret and Abbie renders Craig as an outcast since he is the one not only out of their established society but also the one who is manipulated (Black, "Making Queer New Things" 56).

Returning to the subject of family conventions, maternity is another issue which renders Glaspell's theater queer. Bernice is a childless queer woman like Minnie and Mrs. Patrick in *Trifles* and *The Outside*. A childless woman is queer to Halperin's eye since she is not a true woman according to gender conventions. On the other hand, there is Claire who is not childless, but a queer mother still. She is not even taking care of her own daughter so that she is living with her aunt Adelaide. Claire is so obsessed by her struggles for emancipation that she even repels her daughter for being conventional. Describing Elizabeth character, Glaspell herself confirms her conventionality stating that "she is the creditable young American—well built, poised, 'cultivated', so sound an expression of the usual as to be able to meet the world with assurance--assurance which training", just unlike her mother (73). Accordingly, the conventional Harry approves of her manners telling her "your manners are better than your mother's" (73). Elizabeth herself is aware of the fact that not doing "anything interesting" stands for "good manners", yet what distances her from her mother is that to Elizabeth, "there is a certain superiority in not doing anything interesting" and being normal (74). She studies "The things one studies", and she does "the things one does"; there is nothing new and novel about her. Most of her conversation is loaded with sentences about others like "All the girls...", "we should..." and "Miss Lane says..." which are later employed by Claire to describe her conformist creation which should be destroyed:

CLAIRE: I should destroy the Edge Vine. It isn't--over the edge. It's running, back to-- 'all the girls'. It's a little afraid of Miss Lane, (_looking somberly at it_) You are out, but you are not alive. (77)

Later in the play, as Elizabeth wants to speak, Claire mocks her stating "the hymn-singing ancestors are tuning up" since she is only keeping to the conventions she has been taught (77). Elizabeth likes to help her mother with "do[ing] some useful beautiful thing" as her teacher advised them whereas Claire replied that she is not doing anything of this kind and called her teacher "stung" (75). Claire cannot let Elizabeth help her since it is an intrusion to her. What Elizabeth has in her mind is to make something useful and better to "add to the wealth of the world", which is a far cry from Claire's intention to create something "new" and "different" (75).

Claire is not even willing to interrupt her work for her own daughter. To her, lice are much more important than her daughter as she does not mind hurting Elizabeth's feelings, while she believes "we mustn't upset the lice". Elizabeth is the very convention from which she is distancing; she resembles Claire's created "Edge Vine" which she destroys only for its conformity. This analogy is skillfully represented in a scene where Claire is terribly disappointed with her both creations, Edge Vine and Elizabeth:

CLAIRE:[...]Do you know it is you--world of which you're so true a flower--makes me have to leave? You're there to hold the door shut! [...] will not stay with you! (_buries her hands in the earth around the Edge Vine. But suddenly steps back from it as she had from_ ELIZABETH) And I will not stay with _you! (grasps it as we grasp what we would kill, is trying to pull it up. They all step forward in horror. ANTHONY is drawn in by this harm to the plant_)

ANTHONY: Miss Claire! Miss Claire! The work of years!

CLAIRE: May only make a prison! (_struggling with_ HARRY, _who is trying to stop her_) You think I too will die on the edge? (_she has thrown him away, is now struggling with the vine_) Why did I make you? To get past you! (_as she twists it_) [...] (_with a long tremendous pull for deep roots, she has it up. As she holds the torn roots_) Oh, I have loved you so! You took me where I hadn't been.

ELIZABETH: (_who has been looking on with a certain practical horror_) Well, I'd say it would be better not to go there!

CLAIRE: Now I know what you are for! (_flings her arm back to strike_ ELIZABETH _with the Edge Vine_)

HARRY: (_wresting it from her_) Claire! Are you mad?

CLAIRE: No, I'm not mad. I'm--too sane! (_pointing to_ ELIZABETH--_and the words come from mighty roots_) To think that object ever moved my belly and sucked my breast! (ELIZABETH _hides her face as if struck_)(77)

Claire's words attribute to both Edge Vine and Elizabeth who frustrated her with their conformity to normative systems, either scientific or ideological one. To Claire, Elizabeth is "just like one of her father's portraits [which] never interested [her]", while conventional Adelaide believes "a mother cannot cast off her own child simply because she does not interest her" (79). Telling Claire "I want you to take Elizabeth, forget yourself, and--", Adelaide is informing Claire and the audience of another constructed female identity which is maternal self-sacrifice (82). On the contrary, Claire thinks along very different lines; she has brushed aside her imposed social roles like motherhood, regardless of how Elizabeth is; however, her conventionality intensified their distance from each other. The idea of being forced to spend time with her daughter is so distasteful that she screams out to Tom for help "Tom! _Tom!_ Quick! Up here! I'm in trouble!" (83) The only time she expresses maternal desire is when she thinks about the loss of her son, and that is probably because he is dead. According to *Border*, Claire can only adore "an idealized, absent child" that cannot conform to the existing givens and disappoint her (151). Conversing with Tom, Claire mentions why she has loved him so much. Her son's love for flying parallels Claire's desire to get free from bounds and move away. According to Wolff, Claire loved David due to the fact that "he displayed mobility", in contrast to Elizabeth, who is described as "a tower" by Claire (qtd. in Hernando-Real 255). Therefore, she is "glad" that he is dead since he is not alive to be imprisoned within restrictive frameworks and suffer from the repressive regulations of society, as Claire does. In fact, Claire is defying any restrictive social expectation like the very mentioned one that mothers cannot be indifferent to their children, and that is why she seems queer. Claire's unmotherly behavior towards Elizabeth has queerized her as a mother and labeled her as a mad one, yet it has raised the possibility of stepping out of the compulsory maternity. Drawing on Butler, subjects are embedded in a discursive system of power relations of which they are unaware due to the process of iteration and naturalization. Therefore, she insists on the necessity of survival-based violations in order to grasp the point that there is no fixity in such constructions. As to Claire, exploring such violating possibilities deconstructs the fixed identities attributed to women and offers much hope for transgression. Describing her experimentation with plants, Claire affirms such thought:

CLAIRE: They have been shocked out of what they were--into something they were not; they've broken from the forms in which they found themselves. They are alien. Outside. That's it, outside; if you--know what I mean[...]Back here--the old pattern, done again, again and again. So long done it doesn't even know itself for a pattern--in immensity. But this—has invaded. Crept a little way into--what wasn't. Strange lines in life unused. And when you make a pattern new you know a pattern's made with life. And then you know that anything may be--if only you know how to reach it. (76)

"Making queer new things", breaking beyond her social roles and being mad cannot slake Claire's desire for "outside" and "otherness." When Tom is outside the greenhouse, she does not let him in since he is outside and free to her eyes. Even in terms of hospitability, she is looking forward to "outside", whether outside the walls of the house or discourse. Unlike Glaspell's *Close the Book*, *The Verge* deals with the fear of being inside and the wish for being outside (Ben-Zvi, "The Political as Personal" 285). In this manner, Claire's obsession with movement and fluidity is well connected to multiplicity and transitivity at the core of queer theory. As a mother, wife, lover, host and botanist, Claire is queer due to the fact that she does not keep to the imposed definitions on her. In this regard, Marcia Noe

calls Claire “the antithesis of the True Woman” (158). Violating all the norms of femininity, she provokes the desired multiplicity of queer theory in which there no place for fixity ad stability of conventional female identities. Including subversive features, *The Verge* deconstructs not only the imposed female identities but also Glaspell’s identity constructed by critics who regarded her “a sensitive woman with “fine feminine perceptions” to balance so nicely O’Neill’s rugged masculinity” (Black, *The Women of Provincetown* 67).

As discussed, it is not much different in *Bernice*. Both female protagonists defy the normative expectations to gain their desired identity instead of being objects of patriarchal desire. They actually open up new alternations for women. Corresponding to queer theory, Glaspell’s queer protagonists deconstruct the notion of woman as a natural construct through their unwomanly acts as a result of deconstructions during the play.

2.2. QUEER FORM

It has been already discussed how Female protagonists of *The Verge* and *Bernice* deconstruct the idea of female identity as an essence through their queer acts. Still, the queerness of Glaspell’s theater is not restricted to its burning acts; it is through her queerization of form and language that Glaspell puts the finishing touches to the early queer dramaturgy. Along the same lines as the preceding section on queer acts, *The Verge* is formally of a queerer quality than *Bernice* so that the centerpiece of this part would be on the first play. Alluding to Ozieblo, the play has marked “the culmination of [Glaspell’s] theatrical development” since it has broken beyond the familiar theatrical patterns (*Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* 71). Similarly, Clark considered *The Verge* as a play through which Glaspell has stretched theatrical limits, so it turned out to be “the most difficult play that any American and perhaps any European has ever written” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 248-9). The contemporary audience was unaccustomed to the German expressionistic form of the play owing to the fact that it was totally unknown to the American. This novel complexity of the play has baffled many critics who disdained the play; however, there were some other critics, mostly women, who were brave enough to approve of the play even if they did not fully grasp it (Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* 71). Ben-Zvi regards Glaspell’s “expressionistic uses of lighting, scenic design, and dramatic language” as her most successful experimentation through which she has flouted theatrical conventions (*Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 244). On the other hand, some critics have found the play so expressionistic that the message of the play was lost in its complexity. Glaspell’s unfamiliar use of lighting is one of her theatrical innovations in *The Verge*. The first sense felt in the initial representation of a strange plant in a deep darkness is nothing but mystery and obscurity. It is both mysterious and queer like Claire’s world which is queer to others since it is unknown to them. Moreover, darkness and obscurity suggests an open realm of multiple possibilities which is exemplified in the fluidity and diversity of Claire’s life. Openness and multiplicity have been the prime focus of Glaspell’s plays and queer studies. As to queer theory, it is only through unfixeness and alteration that different identities can be constructed and that is what queer theorists like Butler yearn for. As the play progresses, it is revealed that the play is set in a strange greenhouse in which Claire attempts to develop an independent identity of her own through her symbolic experimentations with plants. The queer content of the play is reflected in its expressionistic setting, scenic design, and lighting. Ozieblo also asserts that “*The Verge* is an example of the assimilation of European trends in using characteristically expressionistic settings to reveal the mind of the protagonist” (“The First Lady of American Drama” 154). As Claire cannot totally brush aside the normative power structures and survive the identity crisis, the play oddly shifts from realism to expressionism. Coupled with such oscillations, Levin finds the characters “neither realistic nor ... allegoric” and the language “abstract and vague”, indicating its “highly feminist expressionistic form” (181). In fact, Glaspell has blended domestic issues with symbolic, expressionistic elements to escape the restrictive patterns of thought, much the same as Claire. In this regard, Gainor states “the play appears at times to be on the brink of farce; at other moments it mirrors a Strindbergian development from problem play to expressionism and symbolism.” (Gainor 144) Ben-Zvi compares Claire’s defiance of “old forms” to Glaspell’s transgression of theatrical conventions (“The Political as Personal” 292). Both have tried to achieve their desired identity, both as an artist and a woman.

Considering Glaspell’s innovative scenic design which relied on German expressionism, the play is set in two locations which are both queerly symbolic. The first is an “overheated greenhouse” which Ozieblo associates it to Claire’s imprisonment in the socially imposed systems of thought (*Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* 185). As mentioned earlier, it is not a normal greenhouse in which “beautiful useful” flowers are grown. It is more of a laboratory where Claire tries to create something “different” in order to break beyond the “long repeated” patterns and “meet the outside” after the fashion of Allie and Mrs. Patrick in *The Outside*. The second represented location in the play is Claire’s “thwarted tower” which seems to be her private place. As Glaspell herself states, it is as queer as the greenhouse, it is not a normal circular tower which goes around; it is a “thwarted”, “irregular” tower which “lacks form”, as Adelaide later puts it. In addition to the physical queerness of theses scenic designs, they are of a particular concern since they parallel the deconstructive theme of the play. The tower seems as if there is “something wrong” with it, much like Claire who is labeled as “mad” since the others, namely Adelaide, think there is something wrong with her. To the conventional eyes of Adelaide, both tower and Claire are imperfect as she describes its architect as “a tiresome person too incompetent to make a perfect tower” (79). The fact that the tower is not complete and circular also corresponds to Claire’s interest in remaining free in the outside. On this account, queerness is not only attributed

to Claire, who embraces fluidity and multiplicity, it also applies to setting of the play which is an incomplete tower. Semiotically speaking, circle is associated with unity and completeness in which a sense of fixity and stability is embedded too. However, throughout the play, the protagonist does her utmost to challenge such notions of completion and uniformity to liberate herself from their oppressive impositions. As Claire has nothing to do with hegemony and order, her work place is neither ordered nor coherent. Circularity can also connote entrapment and imprisonment from which Claire has tried to escape in terms of her career, family, and love life. Claire herself compares the restrictive forms of discourse to “the circle we are in” which can be holed by “shoot[ing] little darts through the circle” (82). In this respect, Hernando-Real associates Claire’s surname, Archer, to her “will to shoot arrows to enable her to breath within the suffocating circle she is enclosed in” (171). However, circle signifies shelter and security for the conformists like Adelaide. Reminding Claire of her state of an outcast, Adelaide also compares the normative social framework to a circle where Claire cannot enter since she does not have “the poise of people who are held--well, within the circle” (82). In fact, Claire expresses no interest in being in the circle in view of the fact that she believes “We need not be held in forms moulded for us. There is outness--and otherness” (64). Claire’s hatred of circle shape is also evident in a scene where she smashes the egg for breakfast.

To Claire, the oval-shaped egg stands for the enclosing impositions against which she is rebelling by acting unwomanly. Aside from the queer scenic designs, Glaspell’s fusion of various theatrical genres has made *The Verge* the best example of queer dramaturgy. Ozieblo holds the play to be a perfect combination of “varied theatrical genres— comedy, melodrama, social criticism, tragedy – and European “-isms” that American theater was making its own” (*Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell* 73). Glaspell has fused the serious theme of the play with her playful parodies and innovations such as the symbolism of plants which Levin finds “cartoonish” (181). Stephen J. Bottoms, one of the few producers who dared to direct *The Verge*, describes the play “as a ‘queer,’ hybrid play that refuses to settle into a single pattern as adamantly as Claire refuses to settle for a fixed gender identity”. Consequently, he regarded the play as “one of the most challenging and personally rewarding plays [he has] ever worked on” since it was Glaspell’s “most radical and exciting writing experiment”. Glaspell maintains the sense of multiplicity non-closure through the end of the play and ends the play enigmatically, refusing a “traditional narrative closure” to keep up with Claire’s longing for being “outside” (Dickey and Gainor 42). Politically speaking, Glaspell does not provide her audiences with any ready answer, possibly in order to make them engage in a critical reformulation of their own position in discourse.

Glaspell’s innovation with language is another contributing factor in proving her queer theater. The employment of a vague and abstract language, particularly in *The Verge*, has worked both ways for Glaspell. Some have attributed it to the deepness and multiplicity of meaning which corresponds to her plays’ theme, while others have deemed that it has baffled so many people. In this regard, *The Verge* has aroused considerable controversy. However, Glaspell’s use of silence in *Bernice* has also rendered the play open to the later discussions of queerness.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, the most evident contravention of established theatrical patterns is probably Glaspell’s employment of female protagonist, regardless of whether she is onstage or offstage. Referring to Castellun, “Miss Glaspell has left the conventions of the stage behind. . . . [She] has chosen a woman instead of a man to incarnate the restless audacious, creative spirit that goes beyond the verge of human experience and social conventions” (qtd. in Black, “Making Queer New Things” 67). Here, Castellun refers to the female protagonist who is present in the play such as Claire who is “a larger-than-life woman with great charm, wit, gaiety, and a finely nuanced irony, able to cut through the banality around her” (Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* 240). However, the employment of absent protagonist in *Bernice* is also queer which contributes to the play’s openness and fluidity corresponding to poststructuralists’ areas of interest. The created openness also extends the realm of the play so that it can refer to more women besides Bernice. As the problem turns out to attribute to more women, the concept of collective identity and the necessity of collectivity are underlined.

3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the queerness of both plays is studied in respect of their content and form. Following the recent remarks of queer theorists that any unconventionality is queer, protagonists’ nonconformities have been regarded as queer acts which revolt against the defined gestures imposed on women under the title of womanly acts. Due to the fact that Glaspell’s queerness is extended to the form of her plays, the contribution of her formal queerness has been also illustrated. Her queer fusion of symbolism, realism and expressionism in *The Verge* which is reflected in the broken language of the play has been considered as a threat to the hegemony of gender constructions. Coupled with the queer theme of the play, Glaspell employs an innovative scenic design and lighting which renders the audience aware of the fluidity of gender constructs. Regarding *Bernice*, her renowned technique of absent protagonist and its succeeding silence and openness have been studied in terms of queer theory. On the whole, such queer acts and formal features have been compared to Brecht’s alienation effect working with the audiences’ minds rather than hearts. As a result, audience gets aware of the constructedness of identities and the possibility of their transgression. Indicating the deconstructive aspect of performance, the discussion has extended further under the second main heading of this chapter. The second section has dealt with another level of performance which is the construction of certain identities. Drawing on Butler’s theory of performative constructions, the potentiality of Glaspell’s dramaturgy to

represent new figurations of female identity is reviewed. As discussed, Glaspell's created fluidity has offered an open realm of possibilities for varied female identities. Thus, Glaspell has made a call for rethinking identities as strategic and political paving the way for socio-symbolic changes.

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