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The Rape of the Author:
How Charles Mee (re)defines authorship
and its manifestation in his play *Big Love*

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In 1996, playwright Charles Mee's website, "the (re)making project," appeared on the Internet, featuring all of his plays free to download along with an invitation to his readers to do as they pleased with the texts published there. As the name of the website suggests, Charles Mee wants his readers to take his plays and make them over again, whether that means cutting, editing, or completely rewriting them. This invitation, in fact, serves as a testament of the playwright's composition techniques and the liberties he has taken with the writings of other authors. Mee's plays are not only inspired by other writer's work, but he also appropriates from their texts and incorporates them into his own writing. As a result of this apparent plagiarism, Mee's plays have a distinct fragmented structure that often combines both Greek and Shakespearean forms and themes with elements of pop culture and contemporary America. Thanks to the continuous (re)making process that defines his work, his plays are influenced by our cultural heritage while they incessantly reinvent that same culture.

Four years after launching this website, Charles Mee premiered his play *Big Love* on the stage of the 2000 Humana Festival. The play, his most produced one to date,¹ effectively embodies the nature and essence that define his work. Based on Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women*, which was long believed to be the earliest of the surviving Greek plays,² *Big Love* remakes this tragedy and addresses it to a contemporary American audience. Although he preserves the storyline of the original play, Mee integrates contemporary songs, references, and themes into his adaptation. Hence, the sisters that lead the play appear on stage to the tune of "You Don't Own Me", afterwards request L'Oreal products from their host, and complain about their American cousins who take

¹ Cummings, Appendix C.

² Thanks to the publication of a papyrus fragment in 1952, the dating of *The Suppliant Women* changed and now it places *The Persians*, another Aeschylus play, as the earliest existing Greek play (Conacher, 75).

whatever they want. Framing it within this pop culture context, *Big Love* appropriates Aeschylus' play and by reinventing its story, it claims it as its own. Ultimately, Mee's most popular play serves as a true testament of how he seizes a text and after (re)making it, he invites others to subject his work to the same process.

Besides the writings of the Greeks, Shakespeare, and other authors whose work belongs to the public domain, Mee also takes passages and plots from plays by Brecht, Beckett, and other contemporary playwrights whose work is in fact copyrighted.³ This blatant plagiarism forces us to read Mee's work as a violation: he disregards copyright laws and treats all works as if they were free for him to do with as he pleased. His shameless appropriation of these works encourages us to consider how new and significant literature might be produced if there were a cultural and creative exchange among writers, one that would give them the liberty to use each other's work with no restrictions or limitations. Charles Mee's contention that it is impossible for us to exist separate from culture, and that we should therefore embrace its influence on our writing, further encourages such speculation.⁴ If we eliminated all copyright laws and included

³ For instance, in the case of Mee's *First Love*, he opens the play with Harold sleeping on a bench and with Edith yelling at him to "Shove up!", a scene that is taken from Samuel Beckett's short story of the same title. Yet, Mee does not acknowledge or cite his source for this, despite the fact that his play was visibly inspired by the writing of another playwright. Similarly, Mee incorporates passages from Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" into the dialogue of his play. "Ah, Carl Solomon!/I'm with you in Rockland/where you're madder than I am/Do you know this poem?" (*First Love*), asks Edith to Harold before they both start reciting alternating passages from "Howl". Other than Edith's fleeting suggestion that this may in fact be a poem written by someone else, *First Love* does not acknowledge Ginsberg for being the author of that text either. In fact, in his note at the end of the play, Mee does not clarify that he did not write such passages. Although Mee may have secured rights to reproduce this poem without specifying it in the play, the fact remains that by not crediting Ginsberg, Mee appears to claim a certain authorship over "Howl".

⁴ In an interview with his daughter, Charles Mee explains: "culture speaks through us without our even knowing it" ("Shattered", 89). Since we are bound to be a part of culture, even if we are unaware of it, Mee decides to take advantage of culture: "I use the culture unedited at the front end, and then at the back end I complete what I did at the front end...it's an open system of participating in the culture that's bigger than you are, that you sort of give yourself to, and that you understand you don't control" (92).

all texts into the public domain, we would then approach the kind of relationship that Mee believes there should exist among writers.

Mee's plagiaristic tendencies, however, violate our most basic sense of what a responsible author is and help us do away with the restrictive structures of copyright and authorship, which have prevented us from producing a free exchange of texts. Some form of violence, then, seems necessary to liberate writing from the preconceived notions that our society has imposed on it. *Big Love* reflects a similar concern surrounding its discussion of the subject of rape and provides a working analogy useful to our understanding of Mee's writing techniques. By suggesting that rape, if interpreted from a figurative point of view, is not necessarily the evil that our society has made it out to be, the play opens the possibility that Mee's violation of other writers' texts is not the crime our laws have turned it into. In fact, as *Big Love* suggests how this figurative rape can have some cultural value, we learn to appreciate Mee's plagiaristic tendencies not as a hindrance to writing, but as a useful tool for the production of literature. Ultimately, our perception of Mee's work as a violation and the rape analogy present in *Big Love* promote the idea of a free exchange among writers and consequently allows them to benefit from the role of culture in the writing process. At the same time, this exchange produces a sense of fragmentation and assemblage in the work of the playwright.

Charles Mee writes like a collage artist. He takes full advantage of his notions of appropriation to write plays that are often a compilation of existing plays as well as a collection of texts found in our popular culture, such as "letters of Simone de Beauvoir, *The National Inquirer*, transcripts of the trial of the Menendez brothers, *Warren Buffet Speaks...Vogue...SCUM Manifesto*, and *Soap Opera Digest*" ("Shattered", 87). In

effect, what results is an assemblage, a visual and three-dimensional collage, of both lowbrow and highbrow elements that blend together to create a Charles Mee production. In an interview with his daughter, Erin Mee, he discusses the particular influences of painters who experimented with collage-making techniques:

What Ernst did, in effect, is what I'm saying I'd like to do: he took scissors and he cut texts out of daily newspapers and catalogues of other things, and then he rearranged them on a page and glued them down and did a little drawing and painting around them to make them into his view of something. So, in effect, he took the unedited material of the real world and rendered it as hallucination. And that's what I think I'm doing all the time. I think Max Ernst is my dramaturg. ("Shattered", 87)

Rather than producing a work that is completely his own (an impossibility, according to Mee), he composes his plays by assembling the pieces of life and culture that seem relevant to a particular work and then writing a few finishing touches on top of that cut-and-pasted structure.

This collage-like writing technique produces in turn a sense of fragmentation in Mee's plays. Upon examining any of the plays published on his website, one experiences the centrifugal effects that have distinguished many other postmodern texts. In his memoir, *A Nearly Norma Life*, Charles Mee explains his rationale for this aesthetic:

I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My own plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. (214)

Mee's plays can be considered "broken" or full of "sharp edges" because he does not polish the transitions between scenes, his characters are not as fully developed as one would expect, and his plots do not always follow traditional trajectories. That this kind of fragmentation "feels good" signals that Mee purposely seeks to create that unfinished

look for his plays as an artistic statement that separates his writing from the more presentable works we are used to seeing and reading.⁵

Despite Mee's apparent originality, the playwright argues that "there is no such thing as an original play" ("about the project"). Rather than inventing something new, we are constantly (re)inventing elements already present in our culture. He adds, however, that in that (re)invention we are simultaneously creating new culture.⁶ As he clarifies in his website: "whether we mean to or not, the work we do is both received and created, both an adaptation and an original, at the same time. We re-make things as we go" ("about the project"). Since according to him we are constantly remaking, adapting, and then creating, it is impossible for us to disregard the influence that culture has over our artistic and creative work. In a profile on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, Mee defends "the notion of a cultural commons, a part of the culture everyone shares". Embracing and contributing to the creation of this "cultural commons" offers one path toward freedom from the pressure and impossibility of being completely original in our work.

Mee takes the first step in the creation of this "cultural commons" when he offers his plays to his readers for them to freely use in the composition of their own work. In his website, he extends the following invitation to other playwrights: "Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work [...]"

⁵ Charles Mee has also suggested that suffering from polio has also influenced his artistic vision given that he wants the jaggedness of his plays to reflect the brokenness of his body. In his *Notes towards a Manifesto*, he writes: "Most of the plays I grew up didn't feel like my life. They were such well-made things...And my life hadn't been like that. When I had polio as a boy, my life changed in an instant forever...And it was no longer well made...And so, in my own work I've stepped somewhat outside the traditions of American theatre in which I grew up to find a kind of dramaturgy that feels like my life" ("Shattered", 93). For more on his life with polio, please consult Mee's memoir, *A Nearly Normal Life*.

⁶ In the interview with his daughter, Charles Mee says of the figure of an author: "the culture creates these individuals, and the individuals create culture" ("Shattered", 88). Hence, an author's work is created by the influence of culture and out of that influence it is able to create new culture.

I hope those who read the plays published here will feel free to treat the texts I've made in the same way I've treated the texts of others" ("about the project"). By allowing others to appropriate his work too, Mee resolves the tension produced by his initial stealing from other writers. Since all texts are then subject to the same kind of appropriation, Mee effectively opens the doors to the creation of a "cultural commons".

Mee's invitation to reinvent and remake his plays presents us with the problematic of an open text. By encouraging those rebuilding his plays to choose the final form that any given one of these plays will take, Mee diminishes the role of the author in the production of a text. In his interview with his daughter, he establishes that he wants others to choose the final form of the open texts he has offered us since this will inevitably happen to his work after his death. He explains:

Eventually we all die and we lose control over our work. If the stuff you left is worth anything at all, then people will take it and mess with it ... I'm eager to see what will be done after I'm dead and gone and no longer have any control over what people do ... I've always thought the playwrights who get the best productions are the dead playwrights, so I thought it might be best to behave like one. ("Shattered", 93)

This notion of the writer playing dead directly recalls Roland Barthes' essay *Death of the Author*, in which the French literary critic suggests that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text" (121). By playing dead, Mee guarantees that those who want to (re)make his plays are not limited in the possibilities of what they can do to the text.

It is therefore curious that all of Mee's plays are copyrighted. Following his invitation to readers, Mee warns us in his website:

don't just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or re-arrange them or put in a few texts that you like better ... if you would like to perform the plays essentially or substantially as I have composed them, they are protected by copyright in the versions you read here, and you need to clear performance rights ("about the project")

His use of copyright, however, does not appear to be a mark of ownership, but instead an attempt to identify and distinguish his version of the play from further rewrites. His insistence that to remake a play one cannot “just make some cuts” suggests that his interest in marking his version of the play is “less proprietary than it is personal” (Cummings, 85). If his interest were proprietary, he would want to be credited or acknowledged as a contributor, collaborator, or inspiration for the work someone else has created out of his texts. Instead, in the description of the project, Mee encourages those who are remaking his plays to “put your own name to the work that results” (“about the project”) and to forget about him.⁷ Therefore, Mee’s copyright over his plays serves rather as a kind of labeling system that identifies who wrote which version of the play. He attaches his name to the plays in his website not to preserve them in their published form, but as a reference to who composed that version of the play. Ultimately, having his plays copyrighted forces readers to fully commit to the idea of remaking one of his plays instead of just cutting a few parts and calling it their own.

Mee argues that this appropriating and remaking process is, in fact, how many writers like Shakespeare and Aeschylus composed many of their masterpieces,⁸ suggesting that “some of history’s greatest playwrights were what today’s critics might call plagiarists” (NPR). Their ability to write such meaningful texts, moreover, Mee links

⁷ Although Mee collects some royalties from his plays, this invitation to other writers to bypass copyright laws also frees them from securing performance rights. In order to make a living, Mee has a patron. Erin Mee explains: “Richard B. Fisher and Jeanne Donovan Fisher give my father a yearly stipend to write plays. He has offered to give them the royalties from productions, which, so far, they have refused to take” (“Shattered”, 104).

⁸ In his website, Mee provides us with the following examples: “None of the classical Greek plays were original: they were all based on earlier plays or poems or myths. And none of Shakespeare's plays are original: they are all taken from earlier work [...] Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is taken from a play by Klabund, on which Brecht served as dramaturg in 1926; and Klabund had taken his play from an early Chinese play” (“about the project”).

to their capacity to freely appropriate what they found in their culture and reinvent it. As he suggests in his NPR profile, the repressive force of copyright laws is thwarting the possibility of creating literature the same way in which these masterpieces were composed: “It certainly has to give you pause to wonder if you’re not choking off the possibility of producing work as great as the Greeks and Shakespeare produced”. The prospect of writing new literary masterpieces through the same technique of appropriation that these classic dramatists used emphasizes the importance of the creation of a “cultural commons,” which alone offers the same freedom that Shakespeare and the Greeks had when appropriating the texts and stories they found in their culture.

Mee’s defense of this “cultural commons” is most clearly illustrated by his appropriation of Greek texts. Since these plays belong to the general domain, Mee is able to use them and take away from them as he pleases without being accused of plagiarism or copyright infringement. Therefore, Mee, as well as any other playwright, is able to engage in a free textual exchange with any of these classic dramatists, as their works are a part of our culture everyone can share. In six of his plays,⁹ Mee freely appropriates the story of Greek plays and, following the plot traced by the original text, produces a work featuring his own trademarks. Mee explains this process in further detail in his memoir when he writes:

I have come again and again to take the text of a classic Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then atop its ruined structure of plot and character, write a new play, with all-new language, characters of today speaking like people of today, set in the America of my time—so that America today lies as it were, in a bed of ancient ruins. (*A Nearly Normal Life*, 214)

⁹ *Big Love*, *True Love*, *Orestes 2.0*, *The Trojan Women: A Love Story*, *The Bacchae 2.1*, and *Agamemnon 2.0*. The first four of these rank among his most produced plays (Cummings, Appendix C).

By destroying their classical form, Mee can rewrite Greek texts according to his own principles of fragmentation and assemblage. The result is a new text that preserves the “original” story, but embellished with the chaos and jaggedness typical of Mee’s work.

These classical plays are suitable for Mee’s (re)making project given that our need to translate them from their original language, forces us to (re)write them. In her essay “Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy”, critic Helene P. Foley suggests that writers and theater artists working on Greek plays often find the necessity of translation a spur to further adaptation. Foley explains:

Every contemporary performance of a Greek tragedy must be an adaptation of sorts, since it involves translation of the language of the original and confronts a profound ignorance of the music, dance, and theatrical context that conditions its first presentation. This impediment removes the barrier of language and theatrical convention ... and thus invites experimentation”. (4)

The fact that no contemporary production of a classical text will fully mirror its original presentation effectively liberates artists, offering them a great level of creative freedom that they do not necessarily enjoy when working on more contemporary texts.

Charles Mee does not hesitate in taking full advantage of this sort of liberty when adapting Aeschylus’ *The Suppliant Women*. The play that results out of this process is *Big Love*, a text that preserves the plot of the original but that differs radically in nearly every other respect. Both plays tell the story of fifty sisters who flee from their home country looking for asylum after their fifty cousins threaten to impose an old marriage contract. Fearing this prearranged marriage, the sisters desperately seek refuge, but soon enough their cousins discover their whereabouts and demand that they wed immediately. Although the similarities between the two plays end there, Mee’s play continues further. As it turns out, *The Suppliant Women* is actually a part of a larger trilogy of which the

last two plays, *The Egyptians* and *The Danaids*, no longer survive. Charles Mee, however, pieces together what we know about the plot of these two later plays from the fragments that we have inherited.¹⁰ In turn, *Big Love* appears to be not only a reworking of *The Suppliant Women*, but a reconstruction of what has become known as the Danaid trilogy.

Although Mee took many liberties when (re)constructing Aeschylus' trilogy,¹¹ *Big Love* shares similar concerns with it about the sister's marriage to their cousins. At first, it appears that the women should oppose this arranged marriage because it consists of an incestuous union, but as it turns out, the plays never make any reference to the issue of incest. Instead, these two groups of sisters object so adamantly to the marriage because it represents a violation of their wills. As Gilbert Murray remarks, regarding the cousins in *The Suppliant Women*, "the one conclusive and damning objection to them is the fact that the Maidens dislike them [...] the fact turns their suit into a persecution and the marriage into a violation" (16). The cousins' insistence that the women should marry

¹⁰ Further examination of *Big Love* in light of our knowledge about Aeschylus' trilogy reveals many more similarities in their respective plots. In the second play, the sisters, also known as the Danaids, are subjected to the will of their cousins and are ultimately forced to marry them. The same happens towards the latter part of *Big Love*, and the sisters' response in both plays is to murder their cousins on their wedding night. In each play, however, one sister breaks the pact: in *The Suppliant Women*, Hypermnestra pardons Lynkeus' life just as Lydia forgives Nikos in *Big Love*, both because they have fallen in love with their new husband. Towards the conclusion of Mee's play and in the last play in Aeschylus' trilogy, Lydia and Hypermnestra are put on trial, respectively, for their betrayal of their sisters, but in the end, they are both acquitted of their charges.

¹¹ Among the differences between the work of the two playwrights, we first notice that Mee changes the location of the play: in Aeschylus' play, the sisters flee from Egypt to Argos, while in Mee's adaptation they go from Greece to Italy. Furthermore, there is no large chorus as the one in *The Suppliant Women*, but instead *Big Love* represents the sisters through three women with archetypal personalities: Lydia, the hopeful romantic; Thyona, the man-bashing feminist; and Olympia, the superficial bombshell. On the other hand, the figure of the father of the Danaids completely disappears in Mee's play. Moreover, unlike the Argive leader, Piero, his equivalent in *Big Love*, offers housing for the weekend to the sisters, but warns them that he cannot protect them any further from their cousins. In fact, when the cousins arrive in Italy, he tries to negotiate with them rather than instantly chasing them away as the Argive leader does in the original play. Finally, although Hypermnestra and Lynkeus do not end up together at the end of the play since she had previously helped him escape, Mee writes a happier ending for *Big Love* as Lydia and Nikos leave the stage together, to the sound of a wedding march.

them presents us with the issue of one group imposing its will over another. This is the case in *Big Love* also, as Olympia says: “This is no different than it would be/if we were lying in our beds/and soldiers came through the door/and took whoever it was they wanted.” Olympia’s analogy establishes how the sisters’ wills are being flagrantly violated as their cousins force their wishes onto them.

Ultimately, as the sisters continue to perceive this arranged marriage as a violation, they end up labeling their cousins’ insistence as rape. Rather than a physical or sexual violation, the sisters’ reference to rape alludes to the forcible and unsolicited nature of their cousins’ intentions. This suggestion is first presented in the opening scene of the play when Giuliano asks Lydia what they are seeking refuge from and she answers, “kidnapping. Or rape” (*Big Love*). The equivalency implied by her response points towards the association between rape and a violation that is not explicitly sexual. Lydia thus suggests that rape is the act of taking anything by force,¹² rather than only a sexual assault. Giuliano, however, fails to understand how a prearranged marriage can truly be an act of rape and limits himself to answering Lydia: “Well, marriage really” (*Big Love*). This is the same attitude that the sisters struggle with throughout Mee’s play as others fail to understand how rape and a non-sexual violation can be parallel terms. A similar kind of equivalency occurs when the sisters protest: “these men are leeches/these men are parasites/these rapists” (*Big Love*). This equivalency between rapists and parasites builds on the earlier ambiguity between rape and kidnapping; together these passages suggest that the concept of rape can be defined to embody many kinds of violation.

¹² This is how the Oxford English Dictionary principally defines rape. It also defines it as the “violation or ravishing of a woman”, but this meaning appears to be derived from the definition cited above.

To a certain extent, the women's insistence that their cousins' violation of their will is rape validates their decision to forcibly resist marriage. While contemplating murdering their soon-to-be husbands, for example, Thyona asks her sisters: "Would you kill them if they were soldiers/coming through your bedroom door?" (*Big Love*). Nevertheless, the subject of rape appears to play a bigger role in the play than to emphasize the women's right of self-defense against such a deplorable crime. Other than condemning the literal rape of a woman, the play also tries to demonstrate how the concept of rape should be broadened beyond its principal meaning of sexual violence and suggests that in these other guises, it may prove beneficial. In his book *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company*, Scott Cummings introduces the idea that "*Big Love* generates its own quirky, troubling symposium that pushes beyond the reflexive presumption that rape is evil and wrong and prompts consideration of what rape is (and is not) and how it operates on a cultural level" (80). Parting from this premise, Mee's plays and his writing technique appear to encourage us to think of rape as a useful model for how we should approach culture itself. If we are able to get rid of our preconceived notions of rape, we can then see the violence of rape, as represented in *Big Love*, as an analogy for the dramatist's notions about how writing should appropriate the work of others in an effort to create what he defines as a "cultural commons".

Big Love begins to shed our presumptions about rape by presenting it as an ordinary and everyday event. This is most clearly seen in Constantine's initial rant about how life itself constantly takes everyone by force:

People are taken against their will every day.
Do you want tomorrow to come?

Do you want to live in the future?
Never mind. You can't stop the clock.
Tomorrow will take today by force
whether you like it or not.
Time itself is an act of rape.
Life is rape.
No one asks to be born.
No one asks to die.
We are all taken by force, all the time. (*Big Love*)

Like the sisters (though to very different effect), Constantine here broadens the term rape, using it to refer not to sexual assault but to the everyday violations of time. For Constantine, rape is an intrinsic part of being alive that we have to come to terms with, rather than trying to fight against it. Despite its largely negative portrayal of Constantine, *Big Love* does not undermine his idea that “life is rape”. By suggesting that “people are taken against their will everyday” and by exemplifying it with the case of the sisters, the play offers us with a broader understanding of the role of power, violence, and (again, metaphorically) rape itself in our everyday life. This passage, therefore, invites us to reflect on how a violation against our wills is not necessarily the evil we have labeled it to be, but perhaps a daily occurrence that we must learn to accept.

Furthermore, Constantine suggests that violence and the abuse of power are intrinsic for our survival given that rape is commonplace. He contends that we should not only accept the daily rape life subjects us to, but that we should embrace it too and see the violence intrinsic to it as a model for how we should lead our lives. While ranting in the company of his brothers, Constantine argues:

of course I think everyone should be civilized
men and women both
but when push comes to shove
say you have some bad people
who are invading your country
raping your own wives and daughters [...]

then they want a man who can fuck someone up (*Big Love*)

Despite his antagonistic perspectives on rape, this passage shows that Constantine does not approve of the literal sexual rape of a woman as he contends that we need men in our society to protect us from such heinous crimes. Since rape and violation exist in our world, however, Constantine argues that we need to return their violence in order not only to defend ourselves from them, but also to claim our place in the world. Unless we want to remain raped and violated by life itself, Constantine appears to say, we need to emulate its violence in order to make something of ourselves.

Constantine advances this notion of violation as a means of survival when he presents us with the troubling idea that rape “is a gift a man can give a woman” (*Big Love*). He argues that the same way that a man learns to embrace the violent nature of rape after being violated by life, he can also teach this to a woman by subjecting her to that same violence. He contends:

and so it may be that when a man turns this violence on a woman
in her bedroom
or in the midst of war
slamming her down, hitting her,
he should be esteemed for this
for informing her
about what it is that civilization really contains [...]
he is showing her a different sort of civilized behavior really
that she should know and feel intimately
as he does
to know the truth of how it is to live on earth (*Big Love*)

Constantine suggests that after being raped by a man, both sexually and metaphorically, a woman then understands the violence inherent to our so-called civilization. She can then free herself from the domination of a superior force by violating this oppressor. In other

words, according to Constantine, rape can be a gift as it can teach us to defend our own will by victimizing those who have already victimized us.

The women apparently learn their lesson, as they end up returning the violence that their cousins have thrust upon them. As Cummings points out, “as the action of the play proceeds, this turns out to be ‘a gift’ that the women choose to give in return” (82). Needless to say, when the sisters murder their husbands, they are not raping their husbands in the sexually charged connotation of the term. Instead, that the sisters return the gift of rape alludes to the fact that just as their will was violated, they have learned to force their will on their cousins. This is seen most clearly when, while convincing her sisters to kill their cousins, Thyona states: “What choice did they give you/but to stop them/the only way they ever will be stopped./All these men understand is force” (*Big Love*). This passage serves as a true testament that the women have received the “gift” of rape. Men and women alike seem to embrace the role that rape plays in their world. Within the context of the play, the “gift” of rape does not appear as “a gift a man can give a woman”, as Constantine tries to argue, but as a gift from life and society that an individual can receive, not as a man or a woman, but as a human being.

This gift is particularly important in our understanding of Mee’s playwriting. Just as rape is a gift for the characters in *Big Love* because it frees them from being subjected to the will of a superior force, so too Mee’s figurative rape of texts by other writers is his gift to us as it liberates us from our presumptions about appropriation, plagiarism, and copyright infringement. By forcing his own creative impulses onto the work of other authors, Mee compels his readers to consider how a writer can create new materials by violating the texts of others. The appropriation of a text against its author’s will is not

only an acceptable writing technique, but in a larger sense frees writing and literature from the repressive force of authorship.

The violence implicit in rape as a model for Mee's work is reminiscent of the aggression present in the playwright's description of his treatment of Greek plays: "I have come again and again to take the text of a classic Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then atop its ruined structure of plot and character, write a new play" (*A Nearly Normal Life*, 214). The violent language employed in his description of how he ruins a Greek play draws a parallel to his figurative rape of a text. By violating the tragedies of these classic dramatists, Mee is able then to appropriate the work of the Greeks and compose texts similarly to how they composed their own.¹³ As a result, through the violence of the rape analogy, Mee reclaims the "cultural commons" that enabled the Greeks to produce their masterpieces.

To a certain extent, Mee's work proposes that our loss of this "cultural commons" that the Greeks enjoyed is produced by the failure of our so-called civilization. After destroying the classical structure of these plays, Mee sets the plays "in the America of my time—so that America today lies as it were, in a bed of ancient ruins" (*A Nearly Normal Life*, 214). Through his adaptation of the Greek tragedies in a contemporary setting, Mee's plays suggest that today's America has not advanced since ancient times. By describing America as lying on top of "a bed of ancient ruins", the playwright implies that in the construction of our apparent civilization, we have lost valuable practices from years past. As Critic Helene Foley suggests, the plots of Greek plays are still relevant today because of parallels between ancient society and our own: "Contemporary

¹³ Mee argues that the Greeks, as well as other classic playwrights, wrote their texts by appropriating elements from their culture. For a more detailed discussion, please consult footnote 8 and the pertaining paragraph.

playwrights also turn to Greek tragic plots to reflect on the relation between twentieth-century reality and an irrecoverable past, on a failed aspiration to civilization” (7). The failure of our civilization is principally manifested in Mee’s work in its concern with the loss of a “cultural commons”. By transferring these Greek tragedies into contemporary times, as he does with *Big Love*, Mee’s plays draw our attention to how we have lost a free cultural exchange due to our supposedly civilized notions of copyright and authorship.

Mee’s work uses the violence implicit in the rape analogy to combat our “failed aspiration to civilization” through the production of a new “cultural commons”. The figurative rape of a text is necessary for us to break away from our presumptions about copyright and authorship and to subject the writings by other authors to our own will. It is only through this figurative rape, Mee appears to argue, that we will move towards a “cultural commons”, which will permit us to generate valuable works of writing, the same way that many of the classical authors that preceded us did. As part of this “cultural commons”, writers would be able to freely share their work with one another, with no regard to authorship and/or copyright issues. Therefore, the purpose of this metaphor is not to generate a perpetual raping and illicit appropriation of other writer’s texts. Instead, it should ultimately promote writers to willingly give up their texts for others to do as they please with them. Through this submissive offering, a text can then become a part of culture and anyone’s use of it or its influences would cease to be considered plagiarism.

This appears to be the case of *Big Love*, as Mee appropriates Aeschylus’ Danaid trilogy, without raping this ancient playwright’s work. In the note at the end of the play,

however, Mee only acknowledges the first play of the trilogy: “This play is inspired by what some believe to be the earliest surviving play of the western world, *The Suppliant Women* by Aeschylus” (*Big Love*). Given that Aeschylus’ plays belong to the public domain, as we have seen, Mee is free to take away from them as he pleases, with no concern about being accused of copyright infringement or intellectual dishonesty. Therefore, rather than breaking any copyright laws, by choosing not to acknowledge the last two in the trilogy, Mee exemplifies his idea of a “cultural commons”. For him, it does not matter from where he obtains the story of *Big Love* because his play is a product of our culture the same way that the original text was in its time.

This cultural exchange exemplified between *Big Love* and the Danaid trilogy is precisely what Mee’s work is hoping to produce. As the violence of his rape analogy liberates us from the repression of copyright and authorship issues, a kind of textual submission is generated. Just as *The Suppliant Women* is submissively offered to readers given that it is part of the public domain, *Big Love* plays a similarly submissive role thanks to Mee’s invitation to his readers to rewrite his texts. At the same time, this invitation suggests that Mee’s plays have joined the same “cultural commons” that Aeschylus’ plays are already a part of. Through this seemingly self-aggrandizing gesture, Mee’s plays are therefore promoted to the same status as the work of the Greeks, Shakespeare, and other playwrights whose work belongs to the public domain. Yet, what is important about Mee’s invitation to his readers is that he submissively offers his work to the will of another. Through this submission his work takes the next necessary step towards the building of a “cultural commons”.

Just as it did with the notion of rape, *Big Love* attempts to rid us of all our presumptions about submission so we can appreciate its importance in the exchange of texts between authors. As Giuliano suggests in his speech about his Barbie collection, submission may be desirable:

Some people like to be taken forcibly.
If that's what they like, then that's okay.
And if not, then not.
I myself happen to like it.
To have somebody grab me.
Hold me down.
To know they have to have me
no matter what.
It's not everyone's cup of tea.
Everyone should be free to choose for themselves. (*Big Love*)

Cummings argues that Giuliano's speech "introduces the paradoxical notion that for some people rape is a choice" (81). Nonetheless, given that rape is defined as an unwanted assault or violation, Giuliano's desire to be dominated lacks the violence inherent to rape. Despite his account of being "taken forcibly", Giuliano is therefore not introducing the paradox of rape as a choice, but rather that of submission as pleasurable. Instead of depicting rape, an act characterized as forceful and unsolicited, Giuliano portrays what appears to be a sadomasochistic sexual relationship, which is both voluntary and desired.

Giuliano's discussion of submission is distinguished by a humorous tone that largely contrasts with Constantine's antagonism when arguing about rape. In fact, this humor emanates precisely from the contrast between Giuliano's comfort when talking about submission and the aggression that typifies others characters' descriptions of rape. Giuliano's appearance after the sister's rant on how their cousins are rapists illustrates

this contrast most clearly. Referring to the wedding gifts he is bringing to the sisters, he says:

I wouldn't mind having the ribbon
I haven't taken any yet
I was going to ask you
if you don't want it
because I have a collection of Barbies and Kens
and this ribbon would go with the whole ensemble
so perfectly (*Big Love*)

After the violence of the sisters' preceding complaints about their cousins, during which they even throw themselves on the ground, Giuliano's casualness when asking for the ribbon to use with his collection of dolls appears as comedic. The humor of this contrast encourages us to look past our preconceived ideas about submission while Giuliano discusses this topic. Since the humorous tone lightens the social restrictions that have been attached to submission, we are more willing to see such submission as a useful tool for the construction of a "cultural commons".

Echoing Giuliano's notion of submission as an enjoyable and desirable experience, Olympia admits that she also finds pleasure in being dominated:

submission is giving up your body,
and your mind and your emotions
and everything
to a someone who can accept all the responsibilities that go with that.
And I myself enjoy the freedom that submission gives me.
I like to be tickled and tortured
and I like to scream and scream
and feel helpless
and be totally controlled
and see how good that makes someone else feel. (*Big Love*)

As in Giuliano's speech, the humor here allows us to look past the troubling images of being "tortured" and "totally controlled" and to understand how this sadomasochistic behavior can be appealing to some people. In this case, the humor of the speech comes

from Olympia's reputation as a superficial individual whose main concerns are L'Oreal products and days at the beach. Due to her comedic portrayal as a shallow person, we are less likely to be outraged by the unconventional sexual practices she describes. This does not mean that she is not taken seriously, but that thanks to the humor produced by her characterization as superficial, the connotations of her speech are lessened. Consequently, regardless of how deplorable are the acts of submission described by Olympia, torture and domination appear to us as more acceptable concepts because of the comedic aspects surrounding her account of her willingness to engage in them.

Most remarkable about Olympia's speech, however, is her discussion of "the freedom that submission gives me". This paradox of domination as a liberating agent approaches the essence of Mee's perspective that for writing to be free it must be subjected to the will of another. Olympia's insistence that submission should occur only with "someone who can accept all the responsibilities that go with that" implies that for us to obtain freedom from domination, there needs to be a certain level of trust between sexual partners or authors. The same way that submission consists of "giving up your body...and everything", for writers it should mean that they confide so much in each other that they do not hold back any of their texts. Therefore, domination can be liberating as much as we are willing to offer our bodies and writings for another to use freely. Ultimately, the goal of submission should be to "see how good that makes someone else feel", as Olympia says referring to how much pleasure a partner can derive from a sadomasochistic relationship. In terms of submission as a model for writing, pleasure can be derived when we see how much a writer's work can benefit after freely appropriating another's text.

By alleviating the stigmas attached to submission, these two speeches offer us a working metaphor for how Mee presents his texts to his readers. Just as Olympia wants to “enjoy the freedom that submission gives [her]”, Mee frees his plays from all the restrictions imposed by copyright and subjects them to the scrutiny of his readers. By allowing readers to do as they please with his texts and to perform the role of writers, Mee sets up his plays to be “taken forcibly” and to be “totally controlled”. In other words, Mee forces his plays to act submissively so they can be easily raped and dominated. Furthermore, just as *Big Love* argues past our presumptions about submission and rape, Mee attempts to purge his readers from their conjectures about plagiarism. By suggesting that the appropriation of other artists’ work enables us to create our own, and by offering his plays in such a submissive fashion to readers, Mee guarantees that his work become a part of and a instrument for the creation of the “cultural commons”.

This metaphor of rape to describe the act of writing, however, is not Mee’s own. In fact, his use of this rape analogy actually narrativizes and literalizes a long-standing theoretical concept. The parallel between Mee’s writing techniques and rape is evocative of what critic Carolyn Dinshaw calls “the obvious and age-old association of the pen with the phallus” (7). By allowing us to identify the writer as male, this metaphor helps us think of the page as female and appreciate writing in terms of a sexual relationship. Critic J. Hillis Miller complicates this notion when he discusses the violence intrinsic to writing: “in any writing somewhere there is an act of violence, a blow, a cut, cleaving, or stamping” (10). As he presents it, writing is a violent act as it scratches the words on the surface of the page. As a result, this metaphor proposes that writing itself can be an act of rape. He explains:

If writing is initially a form of scratching or engraving, the cutting of a line, penetration of some hard substance with a marking tool, it may also, after the invention of pencils and pens, be thought of as the pouring out of a flat surface of a long line or filament, lead or ink making a cursive line of characters tamping, cutting, contaminating, or deflowering the virgin paper. (7)

By equating it with a contamination, Miller suggests that the deflowering he is describing is unwanted. In fact, what seems more characteristic about paper is not that it is virginal, but that it has no other option but to subject itself to the “cutting” of the pen. His use of such unsolicited and violent terms to describe writing produces an association between the penning of a text and rape. Similarly, by reflecting on these two issues through the violence of the same metaphor, *Big Love* introduces the notion that writing and appropriation are not completely different and/or separate practices. If writing is ultimately a violation on its own, it is not a stretch to literalize that analogy and then rape already written texts as Mee does. Appropriation can therefore be understood as a manifestation of writing, rather than as an assault on it.

Mee’s work, however, complicates the notion of writing as rape because he simultaneously acts as both rapist and victim. As we have seen, he decides to rape the sources at his disposal to create his own text while he encourages his readers to rape his own writings the same way he has violated the work of others. Apparently for Mee, the pleasure of writing comes from both torture and submission. Given this sadomasochistic approach to writing, it seems particularly suitable for us to think of Mee’s plays and writing process as a never-ending act of mutual rape. Therefore, when Mee plays the role of the victim, those of his readers who appropriate his text carry out the part of the rapists.

This idea of Mee as the victim and his readers as the victimizers is a development of a particular notion within the metaphor of writing as a violation. Dinshaw proposes that the model of the page as female allows us to think not only of the author, but also of the reader as male. She explains:

literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine. (9)

According to this discussion, the association of the page with the text that is written on it suggests that we can think of both as being female, as they represent the surfaces on which the acts of writing and signifying are performed. The male reader, acting as the signifier and following this gendered model, then penetrates the text with his own interpretation. Yet, the vulnerability of the female text to the understanding of the reader suggests that there is still some violence present in this interpretative penetration. Dinshaw here distinguishes a kind of figurative rape in which “the text as woman’s body [is] violated by the interpretations of literary and exegetical tradition” (11). Dinshaw proposes that a reader’s understanding of a text can be a violation too, given that it imposes an interpretation of the work that is potentially counter to the author’s intentions. Consequently, reading becomes a similar act of rape as writing and appropriation have already been identified.

Nonetheless, the violence of this relationship between the author/reader and the page/text appears to be diminished in Mee’s work once his invitation to readers to rewrite his plays is taken into consideration. The rape analogy does help us break away from the repressive influence of authorship, but it does not provide us with a comprehensive model

for Mee's submissive relationship with his readers. The metaphor, however, is still necessary to approach Mee's work given that for us to fully take him up on his invitation, we need to dispose of his authority over the text. Regardless of how much liberty Mee gives us over his plays, we will never commit to the idea of rewriting them as long as we are still influenced by our culture's notion that the author owns his work.¹⁴ Only if we allow a figurative rape to free us from the dominant culture's definition of the author will we be able to engage with Mee in this sadomasochistic relationship that his work hopes to establish between the playwright and his readers.

Dinshaw, however, warns us about the dangers of the rape analogy: "To equate reading with rape would be to underestimate drastically the transgressive reality of rape, on the one hand, and to slight the potentially positive value of literary interpretation, on the other" (11). This is true not only of reading, but also of the equation of such a deplorable act with writing and appropriation. To speak of the violence of rape as necessary for us to promote a "cultural commons" and free writing from any social restraints can potentially desensitize us from the sexual assault that is evoked in the process. Yet, the suggestion that rape offers a useful analogy for us to think of the work of a writer like Charles Mee does not undermine the horror of "real rape", as Dinshaw labels it (11). Despite the play's discussion of how it can figuratively be a gift, throughout all of *Big Love* the possibility of the sisters being raped by their cousins is constantly presented as a deplorable and appalling fate. Since rape as a sexual assault will forever remain the horror that it is, we do not have to fear that the figurative use of

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, most of the productions of Mee's plays stage his work as it appears online, rather than adapting it or rewriting it. In the same vein, it is rarely seen that an artist rewriting one of Mee's plays attaches his own name to the new work that has been created as the playwrights indicate we should do.

the term will desensitize us. Therefore, to examine how rape operates at a cultural level does not necessarily diminish the atrocity that is “*real* rape”.

We can then see that the use of the rape analogy does not dismiss the “potentially positive value of literary interpretation”, as Dinshaw suggests, or of the acts of writing and appropriating. Instead, their literary value is emphasized as the concept of rape proves that they are necessary tools towards the building of a “cultural commons”. Rather than attributing the negative connotations of rape to writing and appropriation, this analogy demonstrates how through the violence of both acts we can produce important works of literature. In fact, as Charles Mee reminds us, what we today consider to be plagiarism enabled Shakespeare and the Greeks to write works that we now consider masterpieces. Ultimately, the metaphor of rape as present in Mee’s work illustrates how appropriation offers a means to create texts like these classic writers did, if our culture can let go of an unrealistic attachment to authorial control.

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