Murder Most Queer
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Introduction

*Beyond Queer Villainy*

The villainous homosexual has a long and terrible history in America. Colonial authorities criminalized same-sex relations, which were—along with treason, murder, and witchcraft—punishable by death.¹ Every state in the United States adopted sodomy laws that made same-sex sexual relations a felony, and in some states the maximum punishment was life imprisonment. In 1962 Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality, and many other states followed, while some kept sodomy laws on the books into the twenty-first century. Even when such laws were not enforced, they were used as justification for discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, limiting civil rights and stigmatizing queer people as criminal. The link between sexual difference and criminal deviance created the “homosexual villain” as an archetype in our social discourse that persists to this day. Significant changes in the legal status of LGBT people—including the Supreme Court’s 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, which decriminalized homosexuality in every state, and the 2013 *United States v. Windsor* decision, which dismantled the discriminatory Defense of Marriage Act—have not eliminated the social forces and ideologies that insist on the inherent criminality of the queer.² Opponents of LGBT equality, including politicians, pundits, and certain religious leaders, continue to raise the specter of the villainous queer who threatens families, social institutions, and national security. This antigay rhetoric imagines LGBT citizens as sinister threats who must be combated and defeated.

The representation of the villainous homosexual also has a long history within American entertainment. Our popular culture has often depicted queer characters who are threatening, murderous, and, in some cases, cat-
egorically evil. Cultural scholars have explored the queerness—sometimes covert and sometimes overt—of the vampire, the Nazi, and the serial killer in Hollywood films. Even Disney’s cartoon villains are often marked by gender nonconformity, instilling a fear of the masculine woman and feminine man as a deadly threat. It should come as no surprise that the political realities surrounding same-sex relations influence the depiction of queer people within our cultural narratives. Such representations have long served to reaffirm the ideologies that criminalize the queer in the American imagination.

One of the ways in which a stigmatized minority fights against its oppression in American society is by attempting to control or influence the representation of members of that minority within cultural discourse. Following the path established by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) was formed in 1985 to encourage fair representation and actively combat representations that the organization considers demeaning or derogatory, particularly within mass-produced popular culture such as mainstream cinema, television, and popular music. If GLAAD deems a representation of a queer person to be detrimental to LGBT people, the organization can put pressure on creators, sponsors, and consumers to recognize and hopefully eliminate the defamatory representation. A standard narrative of the quest for positive gay representation is the journey from invisibility to villainy to humanity. Representations of “normal” and even exemplary LGBT people are lauded and affirmed, and negative representations are thus positioned as hindrances to the goals of acceptance and assimilation.

In the rogues’ gallery of negative representations, the homicidal homosexual is a key culprit. As the ne plus ultra of homophobia, the homicidal homosexual represents the sexual aggressor, duplicitous traitor, diseased corruptor, and evil destroyer of all that is good. In most narratives, these moral monsters exist in order to be eradicated, thus affirming the strength of traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, the family, and conservative values. The rhetoric of positive versus negative representation also calls for the eradication of these monstrous characters, supposedly because they impugn the goodness of all queer people and stand in the way of LGBT people achieving full acceptance and citizenship within our society. When gay and lesbian activists demonstrated against films with queer killers, such as Cruising (1980) and Basic Instinct (1992), they made national headlines and raised awareness about derogatory stereotypes.
Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, part of the argument of the gay rights movement against those homicidal characters is that they seemed to stand alone in the field of representation. When there were so few representations of any queer people in the media, the negative examples seemed all the more universal and therefore defamatory. Also significant was the function of the queer villain within these narratives, usually pitted against a heteronormative hero. Both of these dynamics were examined in Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet*, first published in 1981 and revised in 1987, which offered a powerful critique of Hollywood’s construction of queer villainy.\(^8\) Years later Russo’s analysis is still influential, as evidenced in this entry on a popular blog about gay male culture, written by Brent Hartinger.

Literally all the big-budget Hollywood movies until, perhaps, *Philadelphia* in 1993 that featured major gay male characters portrayed them as insane villains and serial killers. Worse, these movies often played on the audience’s fears of gay people and discomfort with behaviors that violate gender norms, using people’s prejudice to make them hate the villain more, and make the audience feel better when the hero finally vanquishes them (usually violently killing them).\(^9\)

Yet Hollywood cinema is not the only cultural venue, and this particular scenario for the homicidal homosexual is not the only script.

One of the key venues in which LGBT people have played a major role is on the stages of the American theater. More than many other venues over the past century, the theater has offered representations of queer lives that are diverse and complex—and it has offered them frequently and to popular and critical acclaim.\(^10\) While gay and lesbian activists staged protests against queer killers in American cinema, the American stage has been home to dozens of homicidal homosexuals, many of them created by queer theater artists, who have enlisted this archetype in the fight against homophobia. In the American theater, the homicidal homosexual has played a very different role, going beyond queer villainy.

*Murder Most Queer* reclaims the homicidal homosexual as a figure that must be interrogated rather than simply condemned. By more fully analyzing key examples of murderous queer characters who have populated the American theater for nearly a century, this book has two major goals. One is to expose the forces that create the homophobic paradigm that imagines sexual and gender nonconformity as dangerous and destructive. The second is to explore the ways in which theater artists—and, for the
most part, *queer* theater artists—have rewritten and radically altered the significance of the homicidal homosexual. Far from being simple reiterations of a homophobic archetype, these homicidal homosexuals are complex and challenging characters who enact trenchant fantasies of empowerment, replacing the shame and stigma of the abject with the defiance and freedom of the outlaw, giving voice to rage and resistance, even to vengeance. These bold characters also probe the darker anxieties and fears that can affect queer lives and relationships, including victimization from homophobia, the oppression of the closet, and the devastation of AIDS. In doing so, these dramatic characters, even in their most fantastic or outrageous instances, also illuminate very real emotional, social, and political circumstances. Instead of sentencing these characters to the prison of negative representation, *Murder Most Queer* analyzes the meanings in their acts of murder, confronting the real fears and desires condensed in those dramatic acts and recognizing the potential value—and even pleasure—of violence in the theater.

“Monstrous and Marvelous”: An Approach to Representation, Interpretation, and Violence

A discussion of plays that wrestle with murder, sexuality, and murderous sexuality raises intriguing challenges regarding the nature of identity, violence, and interpretation in the theater. Throughout this book, my goal in analyzing works of theater is not to expose the single true meaning “hidden” in these plays but to explore a variety of competing interpretations and reactions. The potential meaning of a dramatic text in performance can vary wildly depending on the artistic choices made by directors, actors, designers, and other members of the production team. A play, then, does not have a single secured meaning determined by the author, but rather is a site of many potential meanings.  

Additionally, while performances may address spectators as a group, individual audience members can view the same performance but find different ideas, emotions, and meanings. Authorial intentions and social conventions may urge the audience member toward a dominant reading, that is, a reading based on the assumption of shared social values and acceptance of dominant ideology as expressed through narrative conventions. Yet resistant readings can run rampant in the theater, especially among queer audience members who refuse to submit to “normal” social structures and interpretive practices.
Thus my task here is not to determine the “correct” reaction to a play but to explore, through a close analysis of texts and contexts, possible reactions, interpretations, and experiences that I hope will make the plays more interesting, exciting, and challenging. My goal is not to reduce these plays but to enlarge them.

Beyond this fundamental method of interpretation, theatrical acts of murder raise more complex ethical and aesthetic questions. How can I argue that audiences should find value or take pleasure in murder on the stage, when in real life such violence is unambiguously abhorrent? Why should a group that is often accused of villainy in real life take pleasure in watching a fictional character enact that villainy onstage? Plato condemned the ancient Greek theater because he distrusted the unruly emotions stirred by spectacles of violence and suffering, while Aristotle defended theatrical representation with his notion of *catharsis*: the purgation of pity and fear experienced by the audience when viewing tragedy. More recently the philosopher Stanley Cavell has argued that in our modern era the purpose of tragedy “is not to purge us of pity and terror, but to make us capable of feeling them again.”

When it comes to spectacles of violence, the aesthetic qualities of the theater—beauty, eloquence, magnitude, and so on—can engage and provoke an audience, both intellectually and emotionally. Theatrical violence, then, allows us to confront and wrestle with the causes, effects, and significance of violence.

Oscar Wilde, as a chief proponent of the Aesthetic Movement, celebrated extraordinary fictional characters who expressed extremes of sorrow, joy, and rage, “who had monstrous and marvelous sins, monstrous and marvelous virtues.” Wilde recognized that in the realm of art, one can see the monstrous and the marvelous in the same instance, both in the good and in the bad. Wilde embraces these contradictions when he claims that “the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty.”

The French psychoanalytic philosopher Georges Bataille also identifies the audience’s desire to witness the monstrous and the marvelous when he writes that “men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination.” Furthermore, Bataille cites the novels of the Marquis de Sade when he argues that “sexual activity is a form of violence,” a form of physical violation “bordering on murder,” which is why our society’s strongest taboos are against murder and certain sexual activities. Sex and murder, then, are twin taboos that are often interchanged, both in the subconscious and in works of fiction, and eroticized as acts of transgression.
Both murder and eroticism are highly dramatic subjects, involving physical and emotional tensions and confrontations. Plays with queer killers can be especially powerful because they confront both social taboos with the fantasy of transgression, and these fantasies can speak to the difficult realities faced by LGBT people in a society that vacillates between acceptance and rejection. Even the most well-adjusted gay person may struggle with the stigma connected to same-sex desire in a homophobic culture. And even the gentlest person may imagine the possibility of committing murder, recognizing the potential for destruction that all human beings possess. In reality, of course, most people do not commit murder, but we are fascinated by those who do, perhaps because they allow us to recognize, exercise, and potentially exorcise, the part of ourselves that has the ability to commit monstrous acts. The homicidal homosexual is not the villain among us but the potential villain within us.

The function of drama is not necessarily to reflect our dark capacities realistically but to express them beautifully, shockingly, and trenchantly as only artistic creations can. There is pleasure to be found in plays that cause us to experience our emotional capacity as humans, especially if that capacity is rarely exercised in our daily lives. The artistic representation of violence, coupled with a sensitive imagination, creates a situation in which ordinary people can have the pleasure of experiencing the magnificent potential, including the magnificently monstrous potential, of our own lives. We may be fascinated by our own capacity for destruction, even our potential for evil—especially if one happens to inhabit an identity often accused of being destructive or evil—and these fictional representations allow us to indulge in that fascination in a way that is thrilling, challenging, and ultimately enriching.

Transgressive characters (as opposed to happy, well-adjusted, moral people who live in harmony) make for great drama because their actions speak to our fears and fantasies surrounding taboos. Many of the “great plays” of western culture feature characters who have the ability to fascinate us with their breaking of taboos: Oedipus, Medea, Lucifer, Richard III, Shylock, Othello, Don Juan, Phaedra, Mack the Knife, and Sweeney Todd. These villain-heroes reject social norms, discarding repression and boldly pursuing their goals and their own satisfaction. Such characters are often, in a word, sexy—attractive to us because they embody the fantasy of our own forbidden desires and potentials. The character who is monstrous and marvelous makes for good drama, and the homicidal homosexual participates in this esteemed tradition.
The homicidal homosexual, however, is more than the inevitable by-product of standard dramatic plotting and the abundance of murderous acts in the theater. The murderous queer character occupies a distinctive position among theatrical representations due to four related factors: (1) the construction of “the homosexual” and “the murderer” in medical and legal discourse as parallel, and sometimes twinned, identities; (2) the stigma and abject social status shared by both the murderer and the homosexual as criminals and “moral monsters”; (3) the homophobic rhetoric that imagines homosexuality as a murderous “death style,” especially in the era of AIDS, that threatens individual lives, as well as the social order; and (4) the importance of secrecy, deception, and revelation (i.e., the closet) in structuring narratives about murderers and homosexuals. All these factors contribute to the prevalence and relevance of the homicidal homosexual, beyond the usual appearance of murderers in dramatic plots.

A current argument against the representation of violence is that it causes those who view it to act violently themselves. Generally, those who speak out against a culture of violence are concerned with video games and Hollywood films, not with Sophocles, Shakespeare, or the plays under discussion in the following chapters. Yet the point usually missing in arguments against violence in mass-produced media is helpful to remember when discussing theater as well: the effect of violence on an audience does not depend only on what we view but on how we view it. The danger lies not in the representations themselves but in what we as viewers make of them—or in how we passively neglect to make anything of them at all. Granted, in our modern culture we generally assume that theatergoers are more sophisticated and engaged than the audience for Saw VI, but one can easily sit passively and wallow in the sensational gore of Titus Andronicus, just as one can interrogate Saw VI with intellectual rigor. Like all works of entertainment, the plays under discussion in this book are sites filled with potential meanings, and my goal is to provide analyses that will make them more emotionally and intellectually interesting to the reader or audience member—not despite their violence but because of it.

While emphasizing audience reception and multiple potential meanings, it is also worth addressing the question of motive in the creation of art. Murder Most Queer does not render verdicts on those who create plays with homicidal homosexuals, judging them to be homophobic if they are straight, or “self-hating” if they are queer. Such dismissals cut short the conversation and diminish the potential meaning of these rich plays. In Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression (1994), Lynda
Hart cites Freud’s analysis of “people who are paradoxically guilty before a misdeed occurs, and thus commit crimes in order to assuage their guilt.” Perhaps this dynamic applies to the LGBT artist, who feels the stigma of being queer in a homophobic society and therefore “enacts” the crimes of queer villainy on the stage to achieve a sort of catharsis. Yet the artist’s motive might be more conscious, based on a desire to wrest the homicidal homosexual out of the hands of the homophobes and to rewrite him or her according to the artist’s own desires. By reclaiming and reforming a homophobic archetype, the artist might destabilize the homicidal homosexual’s significance and redirect him or her within a new script. Finally, the prevalence of violent bias crimes against LGBT people can burden queer people with the fearful passivity of victimization. By romanticizing criminal transgression, LGBT artists can exchange the role of victim for the empowering fantasy of the queer killer, combating violent persecution with violent action and replacing shame with a defiant pride. Even if these motives play some role in the creation of these plays, however, the plays themselves remain complex and contradictory works, and it is not always so easy to disentangle victim and perpetrator, power and abjection, shame and pride.

Even as I argue for the multiple, unstable, and even contradictory meanings to be found in various homicidal homosexuals, Murder Most Queer does not detach these dramatic representations from any foundation in reality. My readings are grounded in three elements that I consider crucial to an understanding of these dramatic works: LGBT history, theater history, and genre. The history of LGBT people in America includes the ideologies that constructed queer identity and experience, the forces that implemented and resisted queer oppression, and the events and movements that helped change the status of queer people. Plays, which exist before an audience in time, cannot separate themselves from the social context in which they are created and performed, whether that context is the emergence and suppression of a gay subculture in the 1920s, the Cold War paranoia of the 1950s, the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, or the devastation and rage surrounding the AIDS crisis. Just as history is an important lens through which to view a play, so a play can shed light on its historical moment, reflecting the social and political perspectives of its time while, in some cases, resisting the dominant discourse. The social and political status of queer people has changed radically over the past hundred years, and these plays must be understood in relation to that history.
In addition to queer history, theater history also provides an important basis for interpreting plays with homicidal homosexuals. Engaging with this history illuminates how different systems of production operate in creating theater, attracting different audiences and occupying different positions on the cultural and ideological landscape. Plays in this study are performed in different theaters, including commercial Broadway, not for profit off-Broadway and regional theaters, off-off-Broadway and “fringe” theaters, and gay theaters that exist to produce gay plays for predominantly gay audiences. Differences among these theaters include the size of the venue, ticket prices, the social identity (including class, race, gender, and sexual orientation) of most audience members, wages for the artists, celebrity of the actors, number of performances, degree of censorship, critical reception, and place in theater history. Often an individual play is performed in more than one realm of production, and when possible I take these variations, including revivals and film adaptations, into account. This study includes information on theaters, producers, playwrights, directors, actors, critics, and audiences since all of these participants play a role in constructing the meaning of a play in performance.

Third, genre plays an important role in my interpretations, since genre conventions inform both the creation and reception of any given performance. Just as a play does not exist outside its historical context, so a character like the homicidal homosexual does not exist outside his or her particular theatrical genre. The dramatic function of the murderer and the significance of the act of murder can vary widely, depending on whether that act occurs in a play that is (or borrows the conventions of) a melodrama, opera, thriller, romance, courtroom drama, musical, comedy, or satire. Dramatic structure and performance style also inform the creation and interpretation of any given work, ranging from linear realism to fragmented surrealism, from stark minimalism to grand spectacles of camp. Of course, these three elements—queer history, theater history, and genre—are usually intertwined: particular genres rise and fall in particular theatrical venues in tandem with (or in opposition to) the ideologies surrounding sexuality and sexual identity at a particular moment. History, ideology, and theatricality thus illuminate our understanding of the plays, at the same time that the plays illuminate our understanding of history, ideology, and theatricality.

While exploring plays for their historical, ideological, and aesthetic underpinnings, I also consider resistant readings, hypothesizing why a queer or queer-friendly audience may still find interest and even pleasure
in a play that is ostensibly homophobic. Similarly, I investigate what may be disturbing or upsetting in a play that is ostensibly not homophobic. In order to do so, I resist the temptation to judge whether a particular play is “good for the gays” or “bad for the gays.” Such debates, which dominate much recent critical discourse around culture, especially on blogs where fans argue the political merit or efficacy of everything from gay advertising to gay zoology, certainly can be an engaging and productive exercise. My project here, however, is to explore complex works of art that generate contradictions and elude a simple good/bad dichotomy. This study does not argue against or demand change from theater artists or producers who present homicidal homosexuals. Rather, I am arguing for a change in how we interpret this particular archetype, and I hope that Murder Most Queer contributes to a more intricate and nuanced understanding of precisely how works of theatrical art explore our fantasies and nightmares of violence and criminality, rage and despair.

How to Capture a Homicidal Homosexual

Any book dealing with representations of sexual identity must address its use of categories and labels, since words like homosexual, gay, lesbian, and queer have particular histories and implications within the discourse. Homosexual has a clinical connotation, based in nineteenth-century sexology, and is now often used by antigay forces to pathologize gay people and emphasize their sexual difference. Gay and lesbian are labels of self-identification that became more widely used during the gay liberation era of the late 1960s and 1970s and thus connote a conscious identity based on same-sex desire, as well as cultural and political affiliation with a minority community. Queer, which was popularized in part by the radicalized sexual politics and academic discourse of the late 1980s and 1990s, is often used to encompass all differences from the norm of monogamous heterosexuality. In response to a predominantly white and middle-class gay culture, scholars and activists have used queer to articulate and celebrate differences in gender, race, and class among LGBT people. I use all these terms throughout this book, since they are useful in expressing the different understandings of identity that have existed over a century of American culture. For example, I employ the rather clinical homicidal homosexual in order to emphasize the legal, medical, and social construction of this archetype—while also taking advantage of the alliterative echo
to acknowledge, with no small amount of critical irony, the twinning of these identities in the homophobic imagination.

The various identities often grouped under the rubric of *queer*—including not only gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender but also many other instances of gender and sexual nonconformity—may be collectively vilified as threats to the “normal,” but each identity also bears a vilification uniquely its own. While gay men and lesbians, for example, may share certain villainous traits in the homophobic imagination, feminist scholars have shown how the murderous lesbian is the unique product of both sexism and homophobia. Gay men, on the other hand, are potentially the most empowered subgroup among those comprising the queer collective, but they may be uniquely vilified because that very empowerment can also render them more threatening to social structures of masculinity and patriarchy. The strategy of this book, then, is to discern how different kinds of vilification coincide and intersect, not just in terms of sexuality but also in terms of gender, race, class, and other markers of identity.

Even when using terms that acknowledge the significance of collective social and political identities, it is important to recognize that these terms do not describe universal experiences. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, often considered one of the founders of queer theory, has argued eloquently and persuasively against a singular notion of “homosexuality as we conceive of it today” but rather for a “plural, multi-capillaried, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished” understanding of queer existence. In discussing plays, then, I do not attempt to apply a single understanding of “what it means to be queer” but rather to appreciate the particular existence of each individual character. At the same time, characters do not exist outside social and cultural realities, and these contexts inevitably inform our understanding of identities, relationships, and communities.

In this study, I focus on theatrical characters who experience romantic or sexual desire for a person of the same sex. When establishing criteria for the inclusion of plays in this study, I took characters and plots at face value. In almost every case, the homicidal homosexuals are presented to the audience as *homosexual characters*, known as such because they express or act on their romantic or sexual feelings for a person of the same sex as themselves. Of course, different characters are drawn with different degrees of explicitness when it comes to sexuality, so this study will also examine a few instances of coded queerness, particularly since the closet is often a crucial link in the conflation of the queer and the killer. Similarly, murder is just that: the deliberate killing of another human being, usually
through violence. I have avoided wildly metaphorical readings that allow almost any character to be read as “queer” and any dramatic action to be read as “murder.” For example, it might be interesting to entertain the notion of Stanley Kowalski as the embodiment of homoerotic masculinity who “murders” Blanche DuBois in the final act of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by destroying her illusions about her identity. But such an interpretation will have no place in this study. I do not intend to “out” any characters or make accusations of murder heretofore unknown to the general audience.

*Murder Most Queer* focuses on American plays, since the United States has its own history and culture of queer vilification and representation and the American theater has played a unique role in that struggle. But national borders are not impermeable, and the American theater is deeply influenced by plays from other countries; American theatergoers regularly attend plays imported from abroad, especially from Britain, France, and Canada. In this study, then, I have included certain foreign plays that have had significant productions in the United States and influenced the American theater. It would be impossible, for example, to discuss the history of plays representing Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb (lovers who became infamous for the murder they committed in Chicago in 1924) without discussing *Rope*, a play written by an Englishman but successfully produced on Broadway and frequently revived in the American theater. Similarly, an examination of the American thriller *Deathtrap* would be incomplete without citing the influence of English thrillers by Agatha Christie and Anthony Shaffer, as well as the French film *Diabolique*. In some cases, ascribing any single nationality to a play can be tricky: Chay Yew was born in Singapore, wrote *Porcelain* while a student in Boston, and now lives and works primarily in the United States. The play, set in London and commissioned and first produced by a British theater company, has had many productions in the United States and is one of the most prominent plays to examine the intersection of sexual and racial difference in the representation of the queer killer. Therefore, even though its characters exist in a very different cultural milieu, *Porcelain* is an important and unique play in the United States.

Plays and performances have their own systems of production, genres, and positions on the cultural landscape. Nevertheless, theater artists and audiences do not exist in a vacuum, and I believe that the theater has reciprocal (rather than strictly competitive) relationships with other media, particularly film. Therefore, when it is relevant, this study will consider
movies that have a direct relationship with theatrical representations. Plays with well-known cinematic versions, such as *Rope* and *Deathtrap*, influence later revivals of those plays and potentially influence the way audiences view the theatrical experience. A theatrical parody of a famous film, such as *Carrie*, can queer the meanings of the original and is best read in relation to the original. In some cases, similar trends influence theater and cinema, so it can be helpful to consider, for example, the camp creations of Charles Ludlam in relation to the films of his contemporary, John Waters. In all these cases, however, my primary goal is to examine theatrical representation, with cinema as part of the larger cultural context for that examination.

I have tended to focus on plays that I judge to be significant in terms of their impact on other theater artists or their popularity with theater audiences. Therefore most of the plays in this study have been published, and many are regularly revived and occupy a position of relative prominence on the cultural landscape. The American theater, however, does not escape the sexism and racism that exist in the larger culture, and the result is a system of production in which representations of lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and people of color are not on an equal footing with representations of white gay men, which have dominated the American theater when it comes to the field of queer representation. Plays with white gay male characters who commit murder are more numerous and more often produced than plays with lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer people of color who commit murder. Despite this lack of equal representation in the theater, this book, while acknowledging the dominance of gay white male representation in this field, includes key examples of plays with killers who are lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and people of color. By recognizing the full diversity of the queer killer archetype, one can achieve a better understanding of how race, gender, and sexuality intersect in the construction of various kinds of queer villainy.

*Murder Most Queer* shows how representations of the homicidal homosexual have changed radically over the past century, so the book is arranged, for the most part, in chronological order, from the 1920s to the present, although some chapters stretch over more than one era as I trace the changes in a particular genre, contrasting performances in different decades. Chapter 1, “I Killed Him Because I Loved Him,” examines the play many scholars consider to be America’s first “gay play,” which, not coincidentally, is also America’s first play with a homicidal homosexual. I read *The Drag* (1927) by Mae West in relation to the history of gay cul-
tured in New York, the “homosexual types” delineated by the 1920s, and the forces of oppression that led to the censorship of the play. The homicidal homosexual plays a crucial function in this play, which, while billed as a “homosexual comedy,” is in fact a romantic melodrama that aims to educate a female audience about the dangers of remaining ignorant of the existence of male homosexuality.

Chapter 2, “Queer Justice,” looks at multiple plays based on the real murder committed by Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, beginning in the 1920s with Patrick Hamilton’s Rope, and continuing through the 1950s (Meyer Levin’s Compulsion), the 1990s (John Logan’s Never the Sinner), and up to the current day (Stephen Dolginoff’s Thrill Me and others). In this chapter, I show how differences in historical context, systems of theatrical production, and genre radically alter the construction and meaning of the homicidal homosexual, enacting different fantasies of justice.

Chapter 3, “The Closet Is a Deathtrap,” focuses on thrillers, a Broadway genre that reached its height of popularity in the 1970s. I argue that Ira Levin’s enormously successful Deathtrap (1978) uses the conventions of the thriller to wrestle with issues of the closet relevant to the gay liberation era and to exploit the decade’s fascination with (and fear of) bisexuality.

Gaining prominence around this same time are queer theater companies that often existed in opposition to the commercial mainstream of Broadway, in terms of both aesthetics and ideology. Chapter 4, “Rage and Revelry,” examines the bloody “excesses” and use of camp in the creation of homicidal homosexuals by queer theater artists from the gay liberation era to the present day. Examining the plays of Charles Ludlam, Charles Busch, Holly Hughes, the Five Lesbian Brothers, and others, I argue that these queer theater artists were instrumental in wresting homicidal homosexuals out of the hands of homophobes and giving them new, subversive, and provocative meanings.

Chapter 5, “Arias of Love and Death,” contrasts two plays, The Lisbon Traviata (1985) by Terrence McNally and Porcelain (1992) by Chay Yew, both of which appropriate the conventions of tragic opera but employ very different theatrical styles to depict characters who occupy very different positions in terms of race and class. In particular, the struggles over McNally’s play, which has at least three different published versions (with a murder, without a murder, and then with a murder again), reflect how gay playwrights and characters began to find homes in not for profit theaters during the 1980s, but the homicidal homosexual tested the limits of what was acceptable in mainstream theater.
Chapter 6, “Queer Evil,” examines plays by Nicky Silver (Pterodactyls), George C. Wolfe (“The Gospel According to Miss Roj” from The Colored Museum), and Craig Lucas (The Dying Gaul), which depart from realism in order to confront the metaphysical implications of the rhetoric of “evil” surrounding queer subjects in contemporary discourse, as well as to express the cosmic rage engendered by the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 7, “Serial Killers,” discusses theatrical performances from the 1990s and the new millennium that interrogate America’s fascination with queer serial killers—a persistent Hollywood stereotype that frames our understanding of real murderers like Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos. Theater artists have wrestled with and given new meaning to this notorious character in plays such as The Law of Remains (1992) by Reza Abdoh, Self Defense (2002) by Carson Kreitzer, and Fascination (2003) by Jim Grimsley, as well as solo performances adapted from Zombie (2008) by Joyce Carol Oates and Jerk (2010) by Dennis Cooper. This chapter, borrowing the tradition of the ancient Greeks, who always performed a brief comedy after a full day of tragedy, concludes with Christopher Durang’s satirical portrait of a homicidal homosexual in Betty’s Summer Vacation (1999).

In examining these plays, I do not seek to give a full pardon or excuse these dramatic killers in their fictional worlds, any more than my analysis of these characters should be misconstrued as somehow justifying actual acts of violence. Rather, my goal is to exonerate the plays themselves. Theater is one of the few venues in which it is both good and, for the most part, safe to express strong ideas, emotions, and actions—even when they may be unpleasant, threatening, or horrifying. My contention is that plays with homicidal homosexuals should not be dismissed simply as negative representations, and even plays that may be homophobic demand closer analysis for the ways in which they construct queer villany and for the ways in which a resistant reading might combat such constructions. Rather than locking them up and throwing away the keys, the American theater has reclaimed these homicidal homosexuals through plays that wrestle with our fears and fantasies. By looking at them more closely, we can see the ways in which the darkness illuminates.